

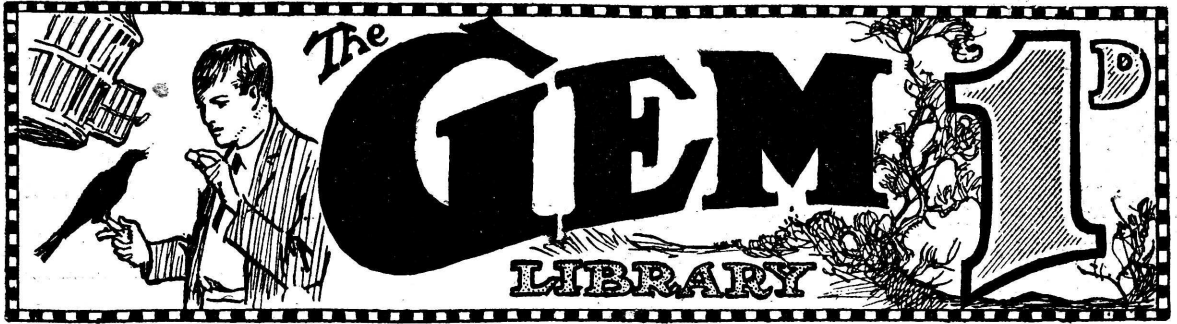
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By **REGINALD WRAY,**
Starts on page 21.




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CHAPTER 1.

Tom Merry is Surprised.

WHAT—what do you want? How dare you spy on me?"

Tom Merry started back in astonishment.

He had tapped at the door of Gerald Blane's study in the Shell passage, and opened it. It would have been rather too much ceremony in the Shell to wait for a formal "Come in!"

Blane, of the Shell, was seated at his table, with a letter in his hand, his eyes fixed upon it. He had not heard the tap at the door, apparently, and he had not seen the door open, as his head was turned from it. Tom Merry saw his profile as he came in, and he saw that Blane's cheek was strangely pale.

Tom Merry looked at Blane for a moment in surprise, and

in that moment the Shell fellow turned his head, and saw him, and sprang up with that unexpected exclamation:

"How dare you spy on me?"

He had leapt to his feet, his hands clenched, the letter crumpled in one of them, and his eyes blazing.

Tom Merry could only stare.

"What on earth's the matter with you?" he exclaimed at last. "What are you babbling about, Blane?"

"You—you came here to—"

"I came here to tell you that if you don't come down to the cricket-field at once, we shall have to play somebody else," said Tom Merry coldly. Tom Merry was in cricketing flannels, and his cheeks were ruddy from the playing-fields, where the sun was scorching down. "I certainly hadn't any intention of spying on you. I knocked before I opened the door."

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"I—I didn't hear you."
 "That's not my fault; I knocked. Besides," went on Tom Merry warmly, "even if I had come in without knocking, how dare you accuse me of spying? Have you ever known me to do anything of the sort?"

Blane unclenched his hands. The look in his face showed that he was sorry for his hasty words, and yet not wholly so. A doubt lingered in his mind, evidently, as to whether he was not being watched.

"And besides," said Tom Merry, "what is there to spy upon, anyway? I suppose you're not smoking here, and afraid of being reported to a prefect?"

"No."
 "Then what would there be to spy upon, anyhow?"

Blane was silent.
 "You're talking out of your hat," said Tom Merry. "Blessed if I can make you out at all! I suppose you haven't any deadly secrets, have you, that you're afraid of people finding out?"

"I—I—"
 "Then what are you playing the giddy ox for, jumping up like a chap in a melodrama?" demanded Tom Merry.

"I—I was startled."
 "If I were a suspicious chap—as suspicious as you are—I should fancy that you had a secret of some sort," said Tom Merry sharply. "I should think that you had been up to something or other rotten."

Blane gave an uneasy laugh.
 "What rot!" he exclaimed. "How could I have a secret? What secret could I have?"

"I don't know. Some of the fellows have said—"

Blane made a quick movement.
 "What have they said? Tell me!"
 "That you have a secret of some sort on your mind," said Tom Merry abruptly. "You're so jolly mysterious, and get such black blues sometimes, that's its painful to look at you. Now I shouldn't wonder if there's something in it."

"Is that all they say?" asked Blane.
 "All that I know of. What else did you expect?"
 "Oh, it's all rot!" said the Shell fellow. "I was startled at seeing you in my study when I didn't hear you come in, that's all."

"That's no reason why you should think that I was spying."

"I—I'm sorry I said that."
 "Oh, all right!" said Tom Merry abruptly. "Let the matter drop. Only I should recommend you to be a little more careful how you speak to a fellow. It's not pleasant to be accused of spying."

"I've said that I'm sorry."
 "That's enough, then. I—"
 "Tommy!" bawled a voice up the staircase. "Tom Merry! Tom Merry, you ass! Are you coming?"

"I'm coming, Lowther."
 "Come on, then, you chump! You're keeping us waiting."

"Are you coming, Blane?"
 "Yes, certainly!"

"You're not in your flannels yet," exclaimed Tom Merry, exasperated. "It's too bad. You might have been ready, when we're playing the New House this afternoon."

"I'm sorry!" stammered Blane. "I won't keep you a few minutes."

"Follow me, then, as quick as you can!"
 "All right!"
 Tom Merry left the study. Blane whipped off his things and changed in the study; his flannels were ready for him there. The letter he had been reading when Tom Merry entered he laid upon the table while he changed.

There was a bump at the door. Monty Lowther, of the Shell, opened it, and looked in. Blane was fastening his belt.

"Buck up!" said Lowther. "Figgins & Co. are waiting."
 "Sha'n't be a minute."

"What have you been doing?" demanded Lowther.
 "N-nothing."
 "Why couldn't you be ready?"

"I—I'm sorry!"
 "Oh, rats!"
 Monty Lowther retired, and slammed the door. Half a minute later, Manners, of the Shell, kicked the door open, and glared in.

"Not ready yet?" he demanded.
 "In a tick or two."

"Tom Merry and Figgins have tossed for innings," growled Manners. "We lost. If we had batted first, we could have given you time to brush your back hair and scent your eyebrows, by putting you in last, if you think that would have given you time to titivate. But as we've got to field, we shall want you. Not that we want you, only we've got

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to have you. So you've got to come. Will you make a special effort not to keep the whole field waiting more than an hour or two?"

"I say—"
 Slam!

Manners was gone. Blane bolted into his blazer, and looked round for his cap. There was a bump on the door, and it flew open, and four Fourth-Formers tramped into the study. They were all School House boys, and all in cricketing flannels, and one of them, Jack Blake, had a bat under his arm. The other three were Herries, Digby, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, Blake's chums in Study No. 6.

"Bai Jove," ejaculated D'Arcy, "here's the boundah!"
 "Ain't you ready?" roared Blake.
 "Yes—almost."

"Come on, then!" said Herries. "We've come for you. Those Shell chaps didn't bring you, so we've come. You've got to be brung."

"Yaas, wathah!"
 "This way!" said Digby, seizing Blane by the arm.
 "This way!" said Blake, taking him by the other arm, and dragging him to the door.

"Hold on! My cap!"
 "Where is it?" asked Herries.
 "I laid it—"

"Oh, blow the cap!" said Blake. "Come on!"
 "Weally, Blake, be weasonable," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "You can't expect a chap to go without his cap."

"Rats! Come on, Blane!"
 "But—"
 "Oh, don't jaw! Bring him along!"

And in the powerful grasp of three pairs of hands, Gerald Blane was rushed out of the study, rushed along the passage, and rushed down the stairs, and rushed out of the quiet, shady School House into the sunny glare of the quad.

CHAPTER 2.

A Long Run.

TOM MERRY shaded his eyes with his hand, and looked from the cricket-field towards the distant School House, whose red roofs showed over the old elms.

"Where are those duffers?" he exclaimed.
 Figgins, the long-legged leader of the New House juniors, yawned. The New House fellows were all ready to play.

"Gone to sleep, perhaps," Figgins suggested. "It's a warm day, you know, and I dare say they felt a bit drowsy."

And Kerr and Fatty Wynn giggled.
 "Oh, rats!" said Tom Merry crossly. "One of you chaps had better cut off and tell them we're waiting. If Blane isn't ready, we'll play somebody else."

"Oh, don't hurry!" yawned Figgins. "We shall have heaps of time to beat you before dark."

"Rats!"
 "You buzz off, Levison!" said Tom Merry. "Tell them to buck up, and not to wait for Blane. Tell Blane he can't play!"

Levison, of the Fourth, grinned. "As a rule he was not willing to oblige anybody, being very far from good-natured. But to carry a message like that was a pleasure to him."

"Oh, all right!" he said.
 And he "buzzed" off.

"That's a bit rough on Blane, isn't it?" said Figgins, in his good-natured way. "I say, we really don't mind waiting, you know. I was only funning."

"Of course not," said Kerr.
 "In fact, I'd like to go and get a lemonade and a snack of something to eat before we begin," said Fatty Wynn.

"You jolly well won't!" said Figgins wrathfully. "No tarts for you till the match is over, Fatty, and no buns or dough-nuts, either."

"Now, look here, Figgy—"
 "We don't mind waiting, Tom Merry, really," said Figgins. "Don't let Levison tell Blane that. You know what a cad he is; he'll rub it in as hard as he can."

"Oh, all right!" said Tom Merry. "I— Ah, here they come, so it's all right."

Blake and Herries and Digby appeared in sight, marching Gerald Blane along among them. Blane was coming quietly enough, without his cap, but the chums of the Fourth did not let go him. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy followed at a more leisurely pace, as became the swell of St. Jim's.

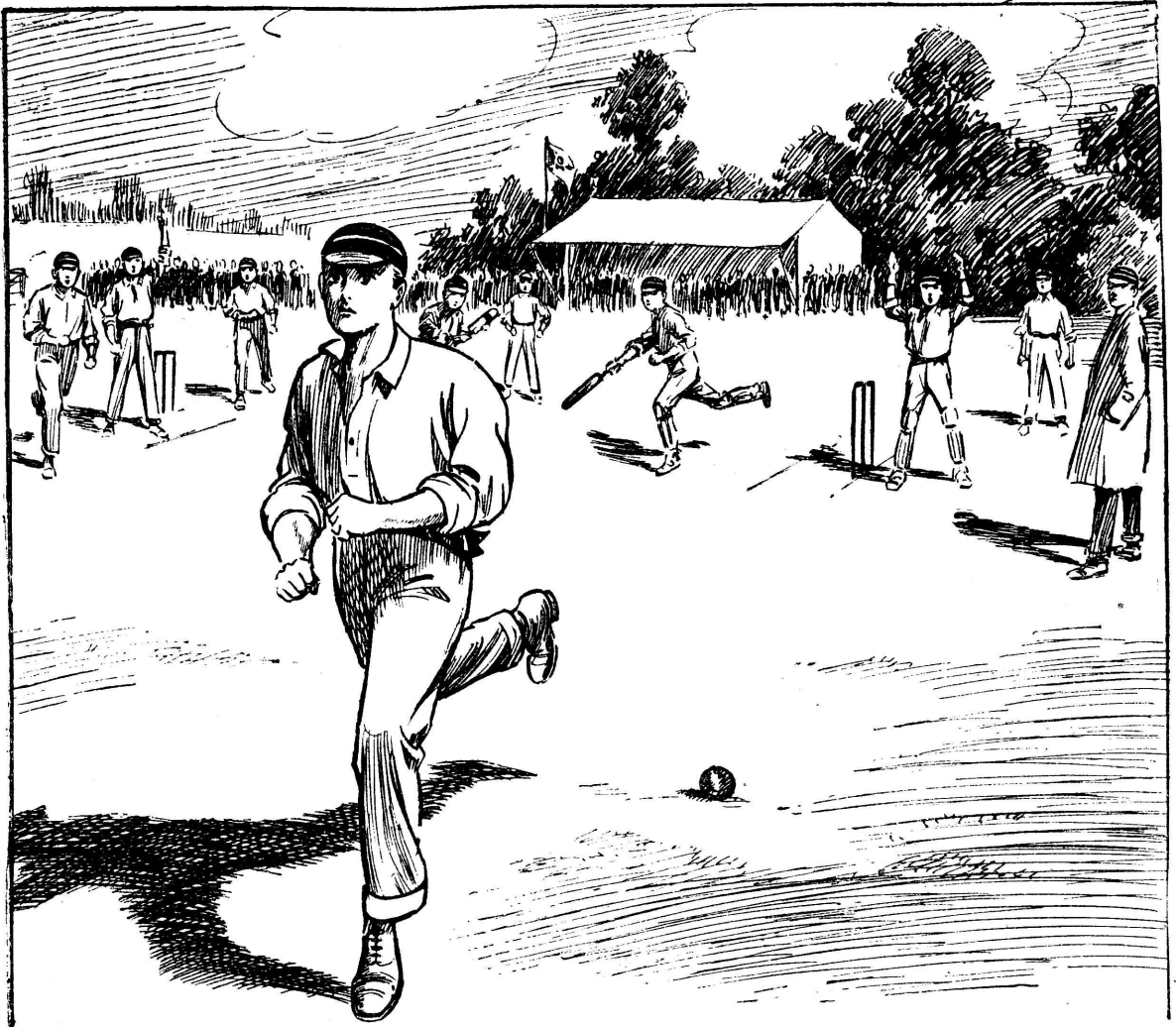
"Here he is!" gasped Blake. "We've got him!"
 Blane laughed awkwardly.

"I was just coming," he said. "I hope you fellows don't think I wanted to keep you waiting. I had to change—"

"That's all right!" said Tom Merry. "Get on the field now you're here!"
 "Right-ho!"

And the School House team went on to field. Figgins and

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Blane ran swiftly after the ball; but, to the surprise of the juniors, he overshot the mark, and instead of stopping where the ball lay in the grass, he ran right on. There was a yell from the whole field. "Stop!" (See this page.)

Fatty Wynn went to the wickets to open the New House innings. Tom Merry posted his men deep to face the batting of the mighty Figgins. Figgins was famous for his swiping. Monty Lowther tapped Tom Merry on the arm.

"What about Levison?"

"Levison?" said Tom Merry.

"Yes. He's gone with your message to Blane, and he must have missed him coming from the School House."

"Well, he's found out by this time that Blane isn't in his study," said Tom Merry. "He's not likely to waste time looking for him. Anyway, ask Mellish to go and tell him Blane's here."

"All serene!"

Mellish was Levison's chum in the Fourth. He nodded in response to Monty Lowther's request, and walked away towards the School House. The cricketers started at once. Figgins was batting, and he made the fur fly from the beginning.

It was hot weather—blazing hot. Leather-hunting was not the pleasantest occupation in that weather, but Figgins gave the School House fieldsmen plenty of it. They ran, and they ran—and the batsmen ran, too. In the third over Fatty Wynn was caught out, and Kerr took his place, and he backed up Figgy's batting well.

Blane was fielding at square-leg, and suddenly, as Figgins swiped away a ball past him, he was seen to give a start. The ball whizzed past him, and he ran, and two or three others ran, but Blane had the chance of fielding and returning it. He dashed after the ball, while Figgins and Kerr were making the running between the wickets.

The other fellows stood watching Blane anxiously. He was going swiftly. The ball had gone to the verge of the

field nearest the School House, and Blane was hot after it. To the surprise of the juniors, he over-shot the mark, and, instead of stopping where the ball lay in the grass, he ran right on. There was a yell from the whole field:

"Stop!"

"You've passed it!"

"Come back, you idiot!"

Blane did not stop.

He ran right on in the direction of the School House, leaving the cricket-field behind him.

The cricketers simply gasped.

The only explanation that could occur to their minds was that Gerald Blane had suddenly taken leave of his senses.

"Come back!" roared Tom Merry. "Where are you going?"

"Bai Jove! The uttah ass!"

"Come back!"

"You ass——"

"You fathead!"

"Come back!"

Kangaroo of the Shell fielded the ball and returned it to the wicket-keeper. Figgins got home just in time, after seven runs had been scored for that ball, owing to the astounding conduct of Gerald Blane.

"Well, my hat!" Figgins exclaimed. "If that doesn't beat everything! He must have a bee in his bonnet! He's gone right off the field!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Mad as a hatter!" said Manners. "He's gone!"

Gerald Blane had disappeared through the elms in the direction of the School House. He left the cricketers utterly amazed. Tom Merry, with a frowning face, asked Figgy's

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leave to play a substitute in Blane's place for the rest of the match, and Reilly was put in to field in his place. As for delaying the play to look for Blane, that was out of the question. If he chose to run off the field in that manner it was his own look-out—that was Tom Merry's opinion.

CHAPTER 3.

The Mysterious Letter.

LEIVISON of the Fourth had reached Blane's study only a couple of minutes after Blane had left it. Leivison had gone in by the side door through the Fourth Form class-room, and so missed the juniors who were going out by the big door of the hall. Blane's study was empty when Leivison looked in.

"You here, Blane?" Leivison exclaimed, entering.

There was no reply, and a glance showed Leivison that the room was empty. He scowled a little. He did not like Blane, and he had been anticipating with a great deal of pleasure delivering Tom Merry's hasty message to him and making it as unpleasant as possible in the delivery.

As he glanced round the study he caught sight of the letter on the table.

Blane had laid it there, intending to put it into the pocket of his blazer; but the chums of the Fourth had rushed him off so quickly that it had been driven out of his mind.

Leivison paused as he saw the letter. The cad of the Fourth had few scruples upon such a matter as looking at another fellow's correspondence, and curiosity was his ruling passion.

He glanced at the letter.

The next moment his features became fixed in utter astonishment, and he gasped.

"My word!"

He caught up the letter in his hand, and lifted it to read. As he did so there was a step in the passage.

Leivison gave a guilty start, and thrust the letter hastily into his pocket and turned to face the new-comer.

It was Mellish. Mellish looked in.

"It's all right, Leivison—Hallo!"

Mellish broke off, looking at Leivison's reddening and paling face in amazement.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Nothing!" stammered Leivison.

"Then what are you colouring about? Have you been looking into the desk?" asked Mellish. "Found anything?"

Leivison scowled.

"Of course not! What do you mean?"

"You're not turning as red as a beetroot for nothing, I suppose," grinned Mellish. "Come on, out with it! What's the little game?"

"I don't understand you."

"Oh, rats!"

"I've had enough of your rot," said Leivison. "The weather's too hot to stand and listen to your talking piffle. I'm off!"

"Look here——"

"Rats!"

Leivison strode from the study. Mellish looked round the room, and then followed him, with a very puzzled expression upon his face. He did not quite understand Leivison just then; but of one thing he was quite sure, and that was that there was something hidden in the matter. Leivison had not told the truth.

Leivison, with his hand crumpling the letter in his pocket, left the School House and strolled away across the quad. Mellish paused on the steps of the School House and looked after him.

It was useless his following Leivison and questioning him if Leivison did not choose to answer; but Mellish was intensely curious.

As he stood leaning on the old stone balustrade of the School House steps Gerald Blane came from the direction of the playing-fields, in flannels, running hard. His face was red with heat and exertion, and he was running straight on, without looking to the right or the left.

Mellish looked at him curiously. He had supposed Blane to be playing cricket in Tom Merry's team. Blane ran up the steps without even glancing at him, but Mellish put out a hand and touched him on the shoulder.

"Aren't you playing?" he asked.

Blane did not reply.

He shook Mellish's hand from his shoulder and ran into the House, leaving the cad of the Fourth in a state of considerable astonishment.

Mellish paused for a moment or two, and then followed Blane in. He knew that something unusual must have happened to bring the Shell fellow tearing back to the House on that blazing afternoon. Mellish would not willingly have run six paces in the scorching heat.

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Blane had dashed upstairs. As Mellish looked up after him he heard a shout from the Shell passage—a shout of rage.

"My word!" murmured Mellish. "What's the matter, I wonder?"

Two or three minutes elapsed. Mellish remained on the stairs, wondering, hesitating whether to follow Blane any further. There was a possibility that Blane might cut up rough if he found himself watched, and Mellish was not of the stuff of which heroes are made. Mellish carefully avoided rows with fags in the Third Form, and he was not likely to run up against a big Shell fellow if he could help it.

There was a sudden patter of feet above, and Mellish started and looked up. Blane, with a dead-white face and flaming eyes, came rushing down the staircase. Mellish, in alarm, drew aside for him to pass. But Blane did not intend to pass. He stopped when he reached Mellish and turned upon him and seized him by the throat.

"Oh!" gasped Mellish. "Let go! Oh!"

Blane did not let go. He backed Mellish up against the wall, shaking him savagely.

The cad of the Fourth panted for breath.

"Leggo!" he stuttered. "You're choking me!"

"Where is it?"

"Eh?"

"Where is it, you—you thief?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. Let go!" muttered Mellish thickly. "You're choking me, you fool! Let go!"

Blane loosened his grip a little, but he did not release his hold upon the cad of the Fourth. His eyes blazed into Mellish's.

"Will you tell me what you have done with it?" he exclaimed.

"With what?"

"The letter."

"The letter!" repeated Mellish. "What letter?"

"My letter!" Blane shook him again savagely. "You knew I had the letter. You were in the passage this morning when I opened it, and you tried to read the address as I took it—in your rotten, spying way!"

"Look here——"

"You've taken it!"

"I haven't!" gasped Mellish.

"You have! You must have! Look here, I left it in my study—Blane and the others rushed me off so quickly I left it there," said Blane. "I remembered it suddenly on the cricket-field, and ran off to get it—and it is gone!"

"Your letter's gone?" ejaculated Mellish, remembering Leivison's peculiar looks and actions in the Shell study.

"Yes. It has been taken off my table!"

"Well, I haven't seen anything of it," said Mellish. "I don't know anything at all about it, Blane. What should I want with your rotten letters?"

Blane gritted his teeth.

"The House is empty but for you," he said. "And you are cad enough to take it, too! Have you taken my letter?"

"No!" said Mellish savagely.

"I shall search you, then!"

"You can search me if you like," said the cad of the Fourth sullenly. "But you won't find the letter. I haven't even seen it."

Blane took him at his word. He searched through all the pockets of the cad of the Fourth Form.

But the letter was not forthcoming.

It was pretty clear that, whether Mellish had taken it or not, it was not about his person.

Blane desisted at last, white and angry.

"Who has taken it if you have not?" he exclaimed.

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"Perhaps it's blown away. You had your study window open," said Mellish.

Blane's grasp closed like iron on his shoulder again. "How do you know that if you have not been in my study?" Blane exclaimed.

Mellish bit his lip.

"I went there to look for you," he said.

"You saw the letter?"

"No."

"Did you see anybody else in the study?"

Mellish hesitated.

"No," he said finally.

Blane flung him back to the wall. He was so furious that he hardly seemed to know what he was doing.

"I must find it—I must find it!" he muttered. He hurried up the stairs again, and Mellish, seizing the opportunity, hurried downstairs and ran out into the quadrangle.

He crossed it in the direction Levison had taken. Levison was seated on a bench under the elm-trees. He crumpled a letter in his hand as Mellish approached, and looked up with a sneering smile upon his lips. The sneer was reflected upon Mellish's.

"You needn't put the letter out of sight," said Mellish.

"I have just seen Blane."

"Well?"

"That is his letter."

CHAPTER 4. Blane's Search.

"JUST licked!" said Tom Merry cheerfully.

The cricketers were coming in. The School House juniors had beaten Figgins & Co. by a single run, and narrow as the margin was, they had won, and that was enough for them.

At the last House match the New House had been the winners, and so Tom Merry & Co. were particularly pleased at having made matters even.

"And we should have been more ahead, but for that ass Blane," said Jack Blake. "He simply gave Figgy three runs."

"Yaas, wathah! I wegard him as an uttah ass!"

"He jolly well won't play in my team again," said Tom Merry, frowning. "I'm having bad luck with new recruits lately. There was Brooke chucked away our last match with Figgins & Co., and now there's Blane running off the field instead of fielding the ball. I can't guess, now, what he did it for; but one thing's a dead cert., he won't have the chance of doing it again."

"Wathah not!"

"I can't understand it, though," said Monty Lowther. "Blane has always been a quiet and level-headed chap—not the kind of fellow to play a mad prank like that. He's a bit secretive, but he always seemed level-headed. What on earth did he want to make a break like that for?"

"I guess he had thought of something suddenly, and had to get off and see about it," said Lumley-Lumley.

"But nothing's important enough to take a chap off the cricket-field when he ought to be fielding."

"No; but—"

"I shall talk to Blane pretty plainly, anyhow," said Tom Merry.

"Here he is!" exclaimed Herries.

"Faith, and he looks down in the mouth, too!" said Reilly.

Blane did indeed look down in the mouth.

He was just going into the School House from the quad., and the juniors overtook him on the steps. As he glanced at them they saw that his face was white, and his eyes seemed to burn from it. He looked as if some sudden and terrible worry had fallen upon him.

Tom Merry, as he looked at the haggard face, remembered the strange scene in the study—Blane, with the letter in his hand, springing to his feet and accusing him of spying. What was the mystery of Gerald Blane? He had always been reserved, secretive. In his most confidential moments he had never talked much about himself, never at all about his antecedents, or where he came from. Many of the fellows scented a mystery about him, but Tom Merry had never troubled his head about such matters. But he could not help thinking of it now.

Blane paused, as if to speak, and then went on. But Jack Blake tapped him on the shoulder and stopped him.

"Hold on!" he exclaimed. "We've got a bone to pick with you."

Blane stopped.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Go it, Tom Merry! It's your whack!"

"Pewwaps I had bettah put it to Blane—"

"Dry up, Gussy! It's Tom Merry's whack, I tell you."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Look here, Blane," said Tom Merry abruptly, "what

did you mean by bolting off the field in that manner? You know you had no right to do it."

Blane started.

"Bolting off the field!" he repeated. "I—I'm sorry! I—I'd forgotten!"

The cricketers stared at him.

They could not understand his having done it; but they could still less understand his having forgotten about it.

"Dotty?" asked Monty Lowther, in his bland way.

"I—I'm sorry! I remembered something, you see," Blane stammered. "It—it was something I left in my study. These chaps made me rush off in such a hurry."

"Oh, I see," said Tom Merry. "You mean you left something valuable lying about your study through being rushed off to the cricket."

"Ye-es."

"Well, you might have told us before you bolted, anyway. And why didn't you come back, then?" asked Tom Merry.

"I—I was looking for it, you see."

"Do you mean to say that it was missing when you got back?" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Well, yes."

"My hat! What was it?"

"It—it was something I left on the table."

"Look here," said Tom Merry, "this will have to be looked into. What you're saying amounts to this, that something was taken from your study while you were down at the cricket—stolen, in fact?"

"Yes."

"Is that the case?"

"Well, yes, it is."

"Bai Jove!"

"My word!" said Digby. "That's rotten! Was it money?"

"Oh, no."

"Valuables?"

"Not exactly."

"What was it, then?" asked Jack Blake. "If it wasn't money or valuables, what was it? I suppose nobody would break in and steal the waste-paper basket or the paper-knife?"

"It was a letter."

Tom Merry started.

He remembered the letter in Blane's hand that afternoon, and he thought he could guess what letter it was that had been stolen.

"A letter was taken from your table?" asked Monty Lowther.

"That's it."

"And you don't know who took it?"

"No. Mellish swears that he didn't, and he was the only chap who went to my study, so I understand. Somebody must have whipped in and taken it, but I don't know who it was," said Blane, with a haggard look.

"Was it an important letter?"

"Yes."

"Was it the one you were reading when I came in for you?" asked Tom Merry.

"Yes, it was."

"And you left it on the table?"

"Yes; while I was changing my clothes, you know. I changed in the study to save time. Then Blake and the others came and rushed me off, and the letter was left."

"I guess it's blown into some corner," said Lumley-Lumley. "I suppose you had your window open in this weather?"

"I've searched the study thoroughly."

"It might have blown out of window."

"It couldn't. But I've searched all round outside the house, up to fifty yards from the window."

"You think someone has taken it, then?" asked Tom Merry.

"I know someone has."

"But why should anybody take your letter?" Tom Merry asked, in perplexity. "A curious cad of a fellow might read it, but I don't see why he should take it away."

"Well, it has been taken."

"Beter ask Levison, then," said Blake.

"Levison! What could he know about it?"

"We sent him to fetch you," said Tom Merry. "He must have gone to your study."

"But Mellish—"

"Mellish was sent after him, to tell him you had come."

Blane drew a quick breath.

"Oh! I did not know Levison had been to my study! I never thought of him! Where is he? He has the letter, of course!"

"I haven't seen him lately," said Tom Merry. "You'd better ask him; but I shouldn't jump to conclusions too quickly."

Blane nodded, and went into the house. He left the

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By REGINALD WRAY.

chums of the School House in a state of considerable astonishment.

"Blessed if I make this out!" said Tom Merry.

Monty Lowther gave a shrug of his shoulders.

"He was always a mysterious sort of beggar," he said.

"I remember some chap saying that Blane hadn't any people, and his fees here were paid by a rich chap who took pity on him. That may be a letter on the subject, and naturally he wouldn't want anybody to see it."

"It's rotten if anybody's read his letter."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Blane had hurried upstairs to the Fourth-Form passage. He strode quickly along to Levison's study, and entered it without knocking. There was a light under the door, showing that Levison was at home.

There was a startled exclamation in the study as Blane strode in. Levison sprang to his feet, his hand going to his pocket. Blane understood the action. He sprang towards the cad of the Fourth.

"Give me my letter!" he exclaimed furiously.

CHAPTER 5.

Hard Hit.

LEVISON moved a little, so as to place the table between him and the angry Shell fellow. Mellish was in the study, and he rose to his feet, looking scared. Mellish was not a hero, neither was Levison; but the latter had a certain bulldog determination that took the place of courage. He did not mean to surrender the letter.

Blane was holding out his hand.

"My letter," he repeated—"my letter! Give it to me!"

"What letter?" yawned Levison.

"The letter you stole from my study!" Blane exclaimed fiercely.

"What are you talking about?" yawned Levison. "Do you know what he is jabbering about, Mellish, old man?"

"Not in the least," said Mellish

Blane gritted his teeth.

"You know perfectly well," he said. "Tom Merry sent you from the cricket-field to fetch me, Levison, and you saw the letter on my table, and took it. Give it me!"

"I see it's no good arguing with you," said Levison. "So there was a letter on your table, was there?"

"Yes."

"Was it in an envelope?"

"No. I laid it down just as I was reading it."

"Was your name on it?"

"No."

"Was it signed by somebody you know?"

Blane hesitated.

"No."

Levison grinned.

"Then I don't see how you're to identify the letter," he said.

"You took it from my study-table."

"Rats!"

"Do you deny that you have the letter?" asked Blane, speaking calmly, but with great difficulty. His hands seemed to be clawing in their eagerness to lay hold of the cad of the Fourth.

"I have a letter," said Levison drawlingly. "I found it in the quad. I'm looking for the owner."

"You found it?"

"Yes. It must have blown from a study-window," said Levison deliberately. "Don't you think that might have happened?"

"I'm perfectly willing to believe it might—if you give me the letter," said Blane, with an effort. "Give it to me. It is mine; and it is of no value to you."

"Hold on a minute. Did your letter begin 'Dear B.?'"

"Yes."

"It's rather a curious letter for a chap to have, isn't it—a chap at St. Jim's, I mean?" said Levison, with a cruel, cat-like smile. The cattish propensity of torturing a helpless victim was very strongly developed in Levison.

"You have read it, then?" Blane exclaimed furiously.

Levison looked surprised.

"Of course," he said, "when I pick up a letter, without address or signature, I naturally read it to see if I can discover the owner to return it to him."

"I am the owner. Return it to me."

"Wait a bit. I want it proved that you are the owner. It's a curious letter. Quite a literary curiosity," said Levison.

"A letter like that would be worth something to a collector of curious letters—worth five or ten pounds, I should think."

Blane snapped his teeth.

"If you think you are going to blackmail me—" he began.

Levison laughed.

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"THE SCHOOLBOY MILLIONAIRE"

"What an idea!" he exclaimed. "I was simply making a remark. If the remark doesn't appeal to you, let it pass."

"It might be worth a fiver," said Mellish.

Blane panted.

"I haven't a fiver," he said. "I would give five pounds for that letter, but I cannot. You know I am poor. I could give you five shillings—"

"Poor!" said Levison reflectively.

"Yes, very poor."

"What about the gentleman who pays your fees here?" said Levison. "Perhaps he would spring a fiver if you asked him."

"I couldn't ask him. But what do you know about that?" exclaimed Blane furiously. "Have you been spying into my letters before?"

Levison shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, lots of the fellows know it!" he said. "Secrets like that can't be kept at a public school, you know. Some chap saw a cheque for the fees once, and it was signed by somebody whose name wasn't Blane, you see."

"You saw it?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I happened to be in the Head's study, and I saw it," said Levison coolly. "Quite by chance, of course. The cheque was for Gerald Blane's fees, and it was signed by H. J. Frayne."

Blane changed colour.

"And how do you know that isn't a relation—an uncle, perhaps?" he demanded.

"Because I know it," said Levison. "I've heard of H. J. Frayne—his name's governor of a reformatory for boys in Middlesex. His name was in the papers the other day, in connection with some philanthropic scheme for young criminals, I remember. His name is often in the papers, in fact. If he'd been a relation of yours you'd have mentioned it. I purposely brought his name up in talking before you once to see. But you never let on. You acted as if you'd never heard the name."

Mellish chuckled. Levison's astuteness appealed to him very much. Blane gritted his teeth hard.

"You ought to be a detective," he said. "I dare say you will be one when you grow up, or a criminal. But I didn't come here to listen to your cleverness. I came for my letter. Give me my letter."

"If it's your letter, you can have it, of course," said Levison, with a yawn. "If it isn't, I'm going to keep it till I find the owner. The letter may be worth quids, as I said."

"I will give you five shillings for it," said Blane.

Levison chuckled.

"My dear chap, you are joking! If the letter is yours, you can have it for nothing. But you'll have to prove it before all the fellows."

"What do you mean?" demanded Blane, with a quick breath.

"Come down to the common-room, and I'll hand the letter over to a committee of half a dozen chaps to decide on your claim to it."

"You hound!"

"That seems to me a fair proposition," Levison said, with a grin. "I don't see anything to complain of in that, do you, Mellish?"

"Not in the least," said Mellish.

"You—you cur!" hissed Blane. "You want to make the letter public—you want to disgrace me, you coward!"

"If you've got any disgraceful secrets, the sooner you're shown up, the better for the school, I should say," replied Levison.

"Give me that letter!"

"Come down to the common-room, and you can have it if it is yours," said Levison.

"Give it me here!"

"Rats!"

Levison made a movement towards the door. With a bound, Blane was in his way. His fists were clenched, and his eyes were blazing.

"Give me that letter, you cad!"

"I won't!"

"Then I'll take it!"

Blane was upon the cad of the Fourth the next moment. Levison put up his hands; but he was swept backwards before the furious attack.

Blane's fists hammered upon his face, and Levison staggered half-blinded, gasping for breath.

"Mellish!" he panted. "Mellish!"

But Mellish was sidling to the door. Blane looked too dangerous for Mellish to want to tackle him.

"Oh!" gasped Levison, backing round the table, followed up by a merciless rain of blows. "Ow! Yaroooh! You beast! Oh! Oh! Help!"

"Give me the letter!" panted Blane.

"Oh! Ow!"

"What's the row here, you noisy young hounders?"

is the Title of the Splendid, Complete School Tale of Harry Wharton & Co. appearing in this week's "MAGNET" Library. Now on Sale. One Penny.

Tom Merry, still in his cricketing flannels, looked in, with Manners and Lowther. The Terrible Three were passing Levison's study to go to their own, and Mellish had run into them as he beat his hasty retreat.

"Help!" gasped Levison.

"Hold on, Blane!"

Hammer, hammer, hammer! Blane did not seem to hear. He was hammering Levison ferociously, his savage temper seeming to have lost all restraint. Levison's eyes were almost closed; his nose was swollen and bleeding, and his mouth looked crooked. In a few minutes he had received a terrible punishment.

Tom Merry looked startled as he saw the savage expression in Blane's face. The boy seemed to have lost his senses with rage.

The usually quiet, self-contained fellow had changed utterly. His self-control seemed to be completely gone.

"Blane! Stop!"

"Oh, help!" groaned Levison.

Tom Merry ran into the study and grasped Blane by the shoulders, and dragged him off his victim. Levison staggered back, and fell upon the carpet, groaning and gasping.

Blane turned savagely upon Tom Merry, his hand raised to strike. Tom Merry's clear, calm eyes met his furious glance, and he dropped his hand.

"Let me go!" he muttered.

"Are you going to behave yourself, then?" demanded Tom Merry sternly.

"Yes."

CHAPTER 6.

The Perfect Steps In!

TOM MERRY released Blane. The reaction seemed to have set in now; all Gerald Blane's hot rage was gone, and he seemed pale and weak, overcome by the stress of his own passionate temper. The Terrible Three watched him in curiosity, mingled with alarm and disgust. An ungovernable temper in a mere lad was not a pleasant thing; and to a well-trained lad, nothing was so shocking as a want of self-control.

The new phase in Gerald Blane's character came as a complete surprise to them. He had always been one of the quietest fellows in the Shell, and this was the first glimpse they had had of the volcano that lay under the quiet exterior.

Blane stood pale and panting, evidently uneasy and ashamed of the display he had given of savage temper. Levison lay on the carpet, completely exhausted, half-stunned, and blinking at Blane from his half-closed eyes in alarm and terror.

"Keep him off!" he muttered. "Keep the brute off!"

"He shall not touch you," said Tom Merry. "What is the row about?"

"He came here to—to—"

"I came here to get my letter," said Blane, speaking calmly now. "Levison has taken it from my study, and he refuses to give it to me."

"If that's the truth, the more you hammer him the better," said Manners.

"It is the truth."

Tom Merry looked sternly at the gasping, writhing cad of the Fourth. It was just like Levison to do as Blane had said; yet his punishment had been so severe that Tom Merry could not help feeling sorry for him. It would be weeks before Levison quite recovered from that terrific hammering.

"Is it true, Levison?" asked Tom Merry.

"No."

"Then what do you say about it?"

"I found a letter in the quad. I supposed it had blown out of a window, and I had to read it to see whom it belonged to," said Levison.

Tom Merry's lip curled. In any other fellow, the explanation would have seemed reasonable enough; but Levison was never at a loss for an explanation. He always had the most excellent reasons for doing the meanest possible things.

"Bai Jove, I wogard that as wot!" said a voice at the door. "Undah the circs, I wogard Blane as quite wight in findin' Levison guilty on suspish."

"Dry up, Gussy!"

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Give a chap room," said Kangaroo, pushing D'Arcy into the study. "We're all in this. If Levison has been boning people's letters and reading them, it's a case for a House licking."

"Yes, rather," said Blake.

"Faith, and ye're right intirely!"

The doorway was crowded with juniors. Blane had driven Levison round the study, hammering him, unconscious of the noise he was making, and Levison's yells had been heard as far as the staircase. Fellows had come from all quarters to see what the matter was; and although there was a pre-

judice against Levison, sympathy was pretty generally on his side as soon as the state of his face was seen.

Both his eyes were discoloured, and his nose looked like an over-ripe strawberry, and the handkerchief he was dabbing it with was crimsoned all over.

"My hat, he's been through it, and no mistake!" said Clifton Dane.

"I—I'm sorry I lost my temper so much," said Blane hesitatingly. "I—I don't often do so. But—but he wouldn't give me my letter."

"Why wouldn't you give him his letter, Levison?"

"I wanted him to prove that it was his."

"Isn't his name on it?"

"No."

"That alters the case, Blane," said Tom Merry. "If Levison picked the letter up in the quad—"

"He didn't," said Blane fiercely. "He stole it from my study."

"Well, it might have blown out of window, and Levison might have picked it up by chance," said Tom Merry.

"Levison is entitled to the benefit of the doubt anyway. If any other fellow said so, we should believe him—and Levison doesn't always tell lies, I suppose. If your name isn't on the letter, Levison has a right to ask you to prove it is yours when you claim it."

"Yaas, wathah! That's only faih, Blane, deah boy."

Blane hesitated.

Levison rose to his feet. His eyes were burning with malice and spite as he looked at Blane. After what he had received at Blane's hands, he was not likely to show any mercy or consideration to the Shell fellow.

"Let him prove it's his letter," he said. "He hasn't even seen the letter yet—he only knows that he's lost a letter, and that I've found one. If this letter is his, he can have it. But if it's his, he ought to be kicked out of the school."

"What!"

"I had to read the letter to find out the owner!"

"Oh, we've heard that!" said Blake.

"Well, I've read it. It's a letter to someone who ought not to be allowed to remain in a decent school," said Levison. "If the letter's Blane's, he can have it; but I think all the fellows ought to see it."

"Rot!" said Tom Merry sharply. "I don't want to see Blane's letters, for one."

"Nor I," said D'Arcy. "Wathah not!"

"I don't know," remarked Crooke, of the Shell. "If Blane has got any rotten secrets, he ought to be shown up. Of course, lots of us knew long ago about his fees being paid for him—there's not much in that. If that's what's in the letter, Levison, you're talking out of your hat."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Levison grinned sneeringly. The grin had a most peculiar effect upon his bruised and twisted face.

"It's not that," he said. "It's nothing of that sort. If it's Blane's, it ought to be shown to the Head, or Mr. Raitton. That's what I think."

"Bai Jove!"

"If it's Blane's give it to Blane, and mind your own bizney," said Tom Merry quietly.

"Let Blane prove it's his, then," said Levison maliciously. "Let him tell me what's in the letter, and I'll see if he knows."

"Will you do that, Blane?"

Blane hesitated. His face went red and white.

"No," he muttered.

"Why not?"

"My letter was a private one. It—may not be the same one that Levison has, and in that case I should be gratifying his curiosity for nothing."

"Quite right," said Tom Merry. "Let Blane see the letter, Levison, and he will say whether it is his."

Levison shook his head.

"He might say so when it wasn't true," he said.

"Oh, hold your tongue!"

"It's quite possible. If this letter is his, he is a criminal; and he's quite capable of telling lies about it, I suppose."

The juniors stared at Levison.

"A criminal!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Yes."

"My hat!" exclaimed Jack Blake. "You'd better have the letter read out, Blane, or there will be a rotten impression made. After what Levison has said, that's the best thing you can do."

"I should recommend it, deah boy."

"In any case, Levison has read the letter, and he will tell all the fellows what is in it," Monty Lowther remarked. "If you have it read out, Blane, you will prevent him from enlarging upon it, anyway."

Blane set his teeth hard. He realised, too, that that was the best course he could follow. But for some reason he shrank from having the letter read.

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A Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By REGINALD WRAY.

"If it's my letter, it's a purely private one," he said. "I don't want it read out."

"Look here, then, I'll hand it to Mr. Railton, if you like," said Levison. "He can look at it, and decide whether it's Blane's letter or not."

"That's fair enough, Blane," said Manners

Blane turned white.

"I refuse to have my letter shown to Mr. Railton!" he exclaimed.

"Then I'm not giving you the letter," said Levison. "If you can't prove that it belongs to you, and you're not willing to let Mr. Railton act as umpire, I'm not going to give it to you. It's not yours."

Blane made a movement forward. Tom Merry stepped quietly into the way.

"None of that," he said. "Hands off!"

"I am going to have my letter."

"Can't you prove that it's your letter?"

"It is not Levison's, at all events."

"No, it's not mine, and you can't prove it's yours," said Levison. "I am going to place it in the hands of the House-master; he's the proper person to have a letter that has no owner."

Blane bit his lip hard.

"Bai Jove! That's quite fair enough," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "You can't complain of that, Blane."

"Levison knows that it is my letter," said Blane, with quivering lips. "He knows that he took it off the table in my study, and did not pick it up in the quad, at all."

"That is going to wathah stwong, dea' boy."

Levison made a movement towards the door.

"I'm going to take it to Mr. Railton," he said.

Blane sprang forward again.

"Stop!"

"Hands off, Blane; he's doing quite right," said Tom Merry. "If it's your letter, Mr. Railton will give it to you."

"I tell you—Stop him!"

Blane was pushed back by the Terrible Three, and Levison, with an insolent grin at him, quitted the study. Blane made a desperate attempt to follow. He broke loose from the chums of the Shell, and bounded through the doorway.

"Stop him!" shouted Tom Merry.

"Hallo!" exclaimed a voice in the passage, as a heavy hand descended upon Blane. "What's the trouble here?"

It was Knox, the prefect!

CHAPTER 7.

Whose Letter?

KNOX grasped Blane by the collar.

"Let me go!" he exclaimed.

The Shell fellow struggled in his grasp.

"What's the row?"

"Levison's taking my letter away."

"Levison!" rapped out the prefect. "Come back!"

The cad of the Fourth turned back in the passage. Knox was still grasping the Shell fellow by the collar. The juniors looked annoyed all round. Knox, the prefect, was the least popular senior in the House, and no one was pleased to see him interfere in the matter, unless, perhaps, Levison was. But Knox's authority as a prefect could not be disputed.

"You've got a letter of Blane's, eh?" said Knox.

"He says it's his. I picked it up in the quad, and there's no name or address on it," said Levison. "I was going to take it to the House-master."

"You can give it to me instead."

"Certainly, Knox."

Levison handed the letter out of his pocket. Blane made a movement to take it, but the Sixth-Former pushed him back.

"Stop that!" he said sternly.

"It's my letter."

"I will soon see about that," said Knox, and he looked at the letter. Knox was quite as curious about other people's affairs as Levison was, and he meant to read the letter, anyway. But certainly Knox never expected to read what he now read.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed.

"If it's Blane's letter, he can have it," said Levison, with a sour smile. "But now you've seen it, Knox, I don't think he'll be in such a hurry to claim it."

Blane's very lips were white

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "That's a vewy mysterious lettah."

"Blessed if I can make the affair out at all," said Tom Merry. "Can you tell whether it's Blane's letter or not, Knox?"

Knox whistled softly.

"If this is Blane's letter, I don't think we shall be troubled much with him at St. Jim's," he said.

"Bai Jove!"

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"THE SCHOOLBOY MILLIONAIRE"

"The chap this letter is written to will be expelled as sure as a gun, if he's found," said Knox. "Is it yours, Blane?"

Blane licked his dry lips.

"I don't know till I've seen it," he said.

"Look at it, then. Hold his hands, Crooke, so that he can't snatch it; he looks as if he would like to," said the prefect, with a grin.

"What-ho!" said Crooke.

Knox held up the letter for Blane to read. It was written on a single sheet, and was all on one side of the paper. Some of the more curious of the juniors craned their heads to read it, too; but it was noticeable that Tom Merry and his chums looked the other way.

Blane's eyes rested on the letter.

"Read it," said Knox, with a cruel grin.

"I've read it."

"Is it yours?"

"No," said Blane heavily, "it's—it's not mine."

Knox chuckled.

"You don't claim it?" he asked.

"No!"

The juniors simply stared. After all that Blane had said, after his determination to have the letter from Levison, after the terrible punishment he had inflicted upon the cad of the Fourth, it came as a surprise to them that he did not claim the letter. It was not his letter after all, then.

Without being suspicious, the juniors could not help thinking that perhaps it really was Blane's letter, and that he did not claim it, because it had not been read by a prefect. There was evidently something in the letter to get the recipient into trouble, if it was read by others. Was that Blane's reason?

"So it's not yours?" said Knox

"It is not mine"

"Anybody else here lost a letter?"

There was a general shaking of heads.

"It's very odd," said Knox, in a most unpleasant tone.

"Blane has lost a letter, and Levison has found one, but it's not the same letter, according to Blane, though a minute ago he was shrieking that Levison had his letter. It's very odd! Don't you think so, Blane?"

"I—I thought it was my letter," Blane muttered. "He refused to show it to me, so I couldn't identify it."

"H'm! As the letter's not yours, I will read it out, and perhaps someone else can give me a clue to the owner," said Knox.

Blane made a convulsive movement, but he did not speak. The suspicion that the letter was really his, though he denied it, was strengthening.

"Listen!" said the prefect. "You had better all hear it, and some of you may be able to say whom it belongs to. It's very important."

And Knox read the letter aloud. It was a very strange one.

"Dear B.—Unless you do as I want, I shall show you up to all St. Jim's. I don't think the Head will be likely to allow you to remain, or any of the other fellows to speak to you, if you are allowed to remain, once your past is known. I mean business! If you want to come to terms, meet me at eight, you know where. If you mean to kick over the traces, look out for squalls.

"TOFFY."

"Bai Jove!"

"My only hat!"

"Great Scott!"

Blane stood white and silent. The prefect looked at him as he finished reading out the letter.

"Well, Blane, is that letter yours, on second thoughts?"

"No!" gasped Blane.

"You are not the 'Dear B.'?"

"No."

"B stands for Blane, I believe?"

"Oh, that's nothing!" said Jack Blake. "It stands for Blake, too, and the letter doesn't belong to me."

"Wathah not!"

"I am talking to Blane; hold your tongues, please!" said the prefect, frowning.

"Weally, Knox—"

"Silence! You do not know anybody called Toffy, Blane?"

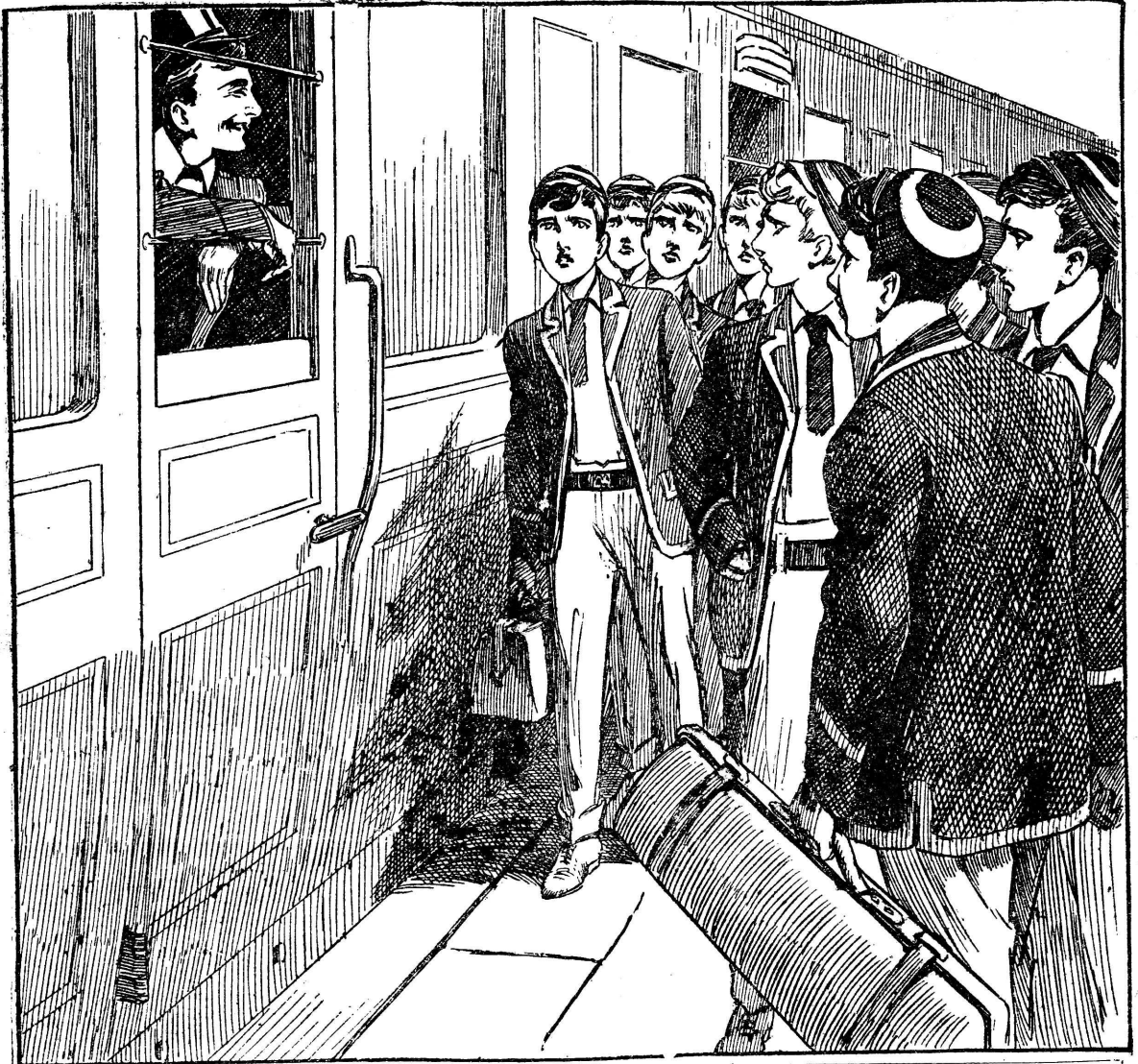
"No," said Blane, in a scarcely audible voice.

"You have nothing in your past that you are hiding from the fellows here?"

"No."

"Nothing that would cause you to be sacked from the

ANSWERS



The special train moved out of the station. The schoolboy millionaire kissed his hand from the window at the enraged and disappointed Highcliffians. That action gave the finishing touch to the wrath of Highcliffe. They shook their fists after the train, and stamped on the platform, and raved; and the special train disappeared down the line, leaving them so occupied, and Lord Mauleverer was gone on his journey to London.

(An amusing incident from "THE SCHOOLBOY MILLIONAIRE," the splendid, long, complete school tale, by Frank Richards, which is contained in this week's issue of "THE MAGNET" Library. Now on sale. Price One Penny.

school, or sent to Coventry, if it were found out?" pursued the prefect.

"No."

"H'm! Well, that's the case with some fellow at St. Jim's—some fellow whose name begins with a B," said the prefect caustically. "It mayn't be you; but it's somebody, and that somebody's got to be found. You have no idea whom it may be. I suppose?"

"No."

"You have seen this letter before?"

"No."

"You are quite sure that it isn't your letter?"

"Yes."

Knox looked hard at him.

"I believe you are lying," he said. "Anyway, I shall keep this letter, and investigate the matter. As a prefect, it is my duty to find the chap it is written to, and I have no doubt I shall find him. You have always had such a specially good reputation here, Blane, that I can't help suspecting that there may be something behind it. I never trust a fellow who seems too good. However, we shall see. If this is your letter, I shall find it out, and you may as well pack your box."

Knox put the letter into his pocket, and walked away. Blane cast a haggard look round upon the crowd of juniors.

No one spoke to him. Some of their faces were gloomy, some were curious; some were condemning. They all believed that the letter was his; they all believed that he had lied. That was clear.

Blane did not utter a word. He thrust his hands deep into his pockets, and walked down the passage, his face white as death.

CHAPTER 8.

To Go or Not to Go.

TOM MERRY sat in his study, with a pen in his hand. Monty Lowther and Manners were both busily at work; and Tom Merry ought to have been, but he was not. He seemed to have fallen into a brown study. His pen was dry, and his eyes rested upon the paper before him unseeingly.

Manners and Lowther glanced at him several times.

Monty Lowther finally groped in his trousers-pocket, extracted a penny, and laid it upon Tom Merry's hand as it rested on the table.

Tom Merry started, and stared at the penny.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed.

"Same to you," said Lowther.

"What does that mean, Monty?"

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A Tale of Tom Merry & Co.

By REGINALD WRAY.

"I couldn't help it. He stole the letter."

"Why didn't you destroy it, you fool?"

"I was going to, but— Oh, what does all that matter now? The letter is still in existence, in the hands of a prefect, and all the fellows have heard it read out."

"That's bad!" said the Toff slowly. "Very bad! But I suppose you denied that the letter was yours?"

"Yes," said Blane bitterly. "I lied about it—lied! And I got the proper reward of a liar—nobody believed me. They all know the letter was mine. The prefect has kept it to investigate, but he knows it was mine—they all know it. I was trying to get it back up to the moment Knox read it out, and then my denial of the ownership came a bit too late."

"Well, the letter didn't give you away, so far as I remember," said the other reflectively. "Your name wasn't on it, and mine wasn't, and there was no address on it. And I mentioned none of the facts—not Frayne's name nor the name of the place where—"

"Shut up!"

"Oh, all right, but we're safe enough here excepting for the rabbits and stoats," said the Toff, chuckling. "I'm sorry about the letter, Jerry, but it was your own fault for being so deuced careless. Besides, if you had done as I wanted when I first asked you, I shouldn't have written the letter."

"I couldn't do it."

"You could—you can—you must!"

"Look here, Toffy—"

"It's for you to look here! I mean business!" said the Toff. "I tell you I'm stony—right down on my uppers—and—"

"Can't you work?"

There was a contemptuous snort from the darkness.

"No, I can't—I don't mean to, at any rate! Are you working?"

"Yes," said Blane. "I'm working—working hard to get into an independent position. By the time Mr. Frayne takes me away from St. Jim's I expect to be able to earn my own living, if I can get rid of the past, and not have it always rising up against me, as it has done now."

The Toff chuckled again.

"You've called me a fool," went on Blane, in a low voice, "but I tell you, Toffy, it's you who's the fool. You'll never get on by stealing and swindling. What's the good of it, anyway? You and I have both played the fool—you more than I—and where are you now? Mr. Frayne would have done as much for you as for me if—"

"If I had humbugged him as you did!" said the Toff, with a scornful laugh.

"I didn't humbug him, Toffy. I meant every word I ever said to him, and, goodness knows, I've tried hard to live up to it!"

"More fool you!" said the Toff callously.

Blane set his lips.

"I say it's you who's the fool," he said. "You can't expect this to go on, Toffy. Suppose you make money for a time—more money than you could make by honest work—it can't last. You spend the money faster than you make it—you always did. Then you're on your uppers again, and have to steal. And sooner or later you'll be caught, and then it won't be the reformatory for three years again, Toffy. It will be prison—penal servitude—for five or seven years perhaps."

"Perhaps!"

"And you can face that, Toffy?"

"It's a risk to run."

"You can't have reflected—"

"I've reflected enough to know that I'd rather make a thousand a year than a hundred so long as it lasts," said the Toff coolly, "and I never had a taste for hard work. You were a good pal in the old days, Jerry."

"I'd be a good pal to you now, Toffy, if you'd do the decent thing."

"What's that—take to work and psalm-singing?" asked the Toff, with a sneering laugh. "No fear! Nothing of that for me, thanks! I'm going on as I've started, and I think I shall make a good thing of it. And you're going to help me, Jerry."

"I can't."

"Stuff! You can and will! You're going to admit me into the school to-night, and show me where the plate is kept. It's worth five thousand guineas, I know," said the Toff, his eyes glistening in the gloom, "and it will be the haul of a lifetime. I shall get a thousand pounds for it."

"You will get nothing for it—you won't touch it."

"I am going to have it to-night, and you are going to help me."

"Toffy," said Blane hoarsely, "don't be a villain—don't be such a horrible cad! You know I can't help you to rob the school."

"I know you must!"

"If you must be a rotten thief, why can't you go and steal somewhere else?" Blane muttered. "Why must you come here?"

The Toff laughed.

"Because there's a good haul here, my boy, and you're here to help me. I have a friend inside the building in this case, you know."

"I cannot help you."

"Stuff!"

There was a scratch, and a match flared out, and the Toff lighted a cigarette. Perhaps his object was more to see Gerald Blane's face than to light the cigarette. Blane was deadly pale, and beads of perspiration were upon his brow.

He looked fixedly at the Toff in the flare of the match.

The Toff was a young man, a couple of years, perhaps, older than Blane, with a face that was much older than his years. A boy in years, he looked like a man in experience, and such he was. His eyes were keen and watchful, and he wore a dark moustache over a lip that always seemed to be curling with ironic mockery.

The match went out.

The dark, mocking face was blotted into the darkness again.

"You are going to help me," said the Toff. "I'm going to make this haul. And look here, Jerry! If I get away safely with it, I'll make for Canada, and you'll never see me again."

"I don't believe you!"

"Honour bright, Jerry!"

"You were always a liar, Toffy. Besides, I can't do this—even to buy you off. If I had money I'd give it to you. But—"

"This won't cost you anything."

"I can't do it. Besides, if I did, they would suspect after that letter. They would suspect me of being an accomplice."

"Well, you could cut. I'd take you on as a pal again."

Blane shuddered.

"It's impossible, Toffy! Besides, if you were caught you'd give me away, even if they didn't suspect me at the school."

"I swear—"

"You know you would, Toffy—you've given a pal away before now. You know you'd do it if it would take a day off your sentence."

"I sha'n't get caught if you help me," said the Toff, after a pause.

"I can't help you."

"You've got to!" said the Toff roughly. "What are you afraid of? You want to stick to the new game, eh, and leave the reformatory right behind? Well, then, how are you going to do that if I come up to the school and give you away, or write a letter to the head-master explaining? You'd be kicked out of St. Jim's at once, and you'd never find work. You'd drop into the old ways, my fine fellow, and you'd have to do the same sort of thing as I'm proposing now, or else starve; and you'd have to do it on a small scale instead of a large one—picking pockets instead of making a thousand pounds at a time. Can't you see that?"

Blane groaned.

"Don't play the fool, Jerry! Make up your mind to do it, and let me in to-night. You shall have a good slice of the swag—I promise you that."

"Toffy, have mercy!"

"Don't play the fool, I tell you! You are going to let me in to-night."

"Not to-night, Toffy, not to-night!" said Blane hoarsely.

"For mercy's sake, give me time to think! Besides, they will suspect—they must suspect—so soon after that letter being read! And—lots of the fellows are watching me now—they are keeping their eyes on me. I might be seen and followed if I left the dormitory to-night."

The Toff muttered an oath.

"Well, there's something in that," he said. "It's all your own fault, and it's dangerous for me to be here. I might be seen, and that would be bad for both of us."

Blane caught his breath.

"Do you mean to say that you are—are wanted, Toffy?" he muttered thickly.

The Toff laughed scornfully.

"How do you think I've been living these last two years?" he demanded.

"I—I never thought—"

"If I'd known where to look for you I should have done better for myself," said the Toff pleasantly; "but I've only lately found you out, you see. It was a stroke of luck for me; it will lead to the haul of my life."

"Toffy!"

"If I am seen about here and caught it will be bad for both of us," said the Toff. "You'd better get rid of me as soon as you can, Jerry."

"Toffy, once more—"

"Once more, don't play the giddy goat. I'll leave it till to-morrow, if you like—under the circus, it will be safer, as you've made a fool of yourself over that letter; but to-morrow is the latest. Mind, at this time to-morrow I see you again, to make the arrangements, and I shall meet you at the school gates."

"Toffy—"

"At the school gates," said the Toff obstinately. "If you don't like it, you've got yourself to thank for it. I'll wait for you at seven o'clock in the trees just opposite the gates, where there's a plank over the ditch. And mind, if you're not there, I come right into the school as soon as seven o'clock strikes, and ask to see the Head."

Blane ground his teeth.

"You'd better take care, Toffy," he muttered. "You may drive me too far!"

The Toff laughed unpleasantly.

"Oh, you are thinking of giving me what you gave young Selby," he remarked. "Yes, I remember your temper, and how hard you can hit when you're wild. But I'm ready for that. I've got a knuckle-duster on, and if you begin any of that game, Jerry, you'll get the worst of it."

Blane clenched his hands hard.

"You hound!" he muttered.

"Thanks! Now, seven o'clock to-morrow evening outside the school gates; and if you're late, look out for squalls. I'll be off now—I've got some friends waiting for me at the Green Man."

Blane stood alone in the lane. It was some minutes before he moved; then, with a heavy sigh that was almost a groan, he retraced his steps towards the school.

CHAPTER 10.

Arthur Augustus Speaks.

LEIVISON was standing in the doorway of the School House, looking out into the dusk of the old quad, when Blane came up the steps. The cad of the Fourth fixed his eyes upon the Shell fellow with an unpleasant look. It would have been hard, as a matter of fact, for Levison to look pleasant just then, considering the state his face was in.

"So you've come back," he said.

Blane looked at him.

"Yes," he said. "I've come back."

Levison burst into a scoffing laugh.

"And you still say the letter wasn't yours, when you've been out to keep the appointment mentioned in it," he exclaimed.

Blane flushed.

"Mind your own business," he said.

"I fancy this is the business of every fellow at St. Jim's," said Levison. "I think you ought to be made to explain."

"Yes, rather," said Mellish.

"Whom have you been to meet, Blane?" asked Crooke.

"Mind your own business," Blane repeated.

And he walked on into the house without another word.

Curious looks followed him.

Levison & Co. had not failed to draw general attention to the fact that Gerald Blane had gone out just in time to keep the appointment mentioned in the letter; and that was taken as a convincing proof by most of the fellows that the letter really was Blane's, and that he had lied about it.

And even fellows who were not usually over-particular shrugged their shoulders at Blane now. A fellow who could stand up and lie like that before a crowd must be a rotter; that was the general opinion. And what kind of a secret was it that he had to keep, which made him willing to do such a thing?

The fellows felt that Gerald Blane was the kind of person who was best avoided.

And avoided he was.

When he went into the common-room, no one spoke to him. Blane was never talkative, and was not on closely friendly terms with anyone—but he had always been passably well liked, and treated with civility. Now the fellows made it a point to let him see that he was not wanted to speak.

He made a remark to Gore, of the Shell, and Gore turned his back; and Blane flushed painfully. After that, he was silent.

He sat in a chair by the open window, with a book in his hand; but he did not read.

He knew that eyes were continually turning upon him, and he knew that if he spoke to anyone, he would most likely be snubbed in the cruellest way.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy came in with Blake, and glanced towards the Shell fellow. The white and worried look on Blane's face caught his eye at once.

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"THE SCHOOLBOY MILLIONAIRE"

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"Bai Jove," said D'Arcy, "there's old Blane! I thought he had gone out."

"He's come in," said Levison, with a sneer. "He's kept the appointment, you see, and come in. Yet he had the cheek to say the letter wasn't for him."

D'Arcy turned his eyeglass upon Levison.

"Am I to undahstand that you are castin' doubt upon Gewald Blane's statement?" he asked.

Levison laughed.

"Well, I should rather say so," he said.

"The statement certainly was a wathah steep one," said the swell of St. Jim's. "But you should welflect, Levison, that it was possibly twue."

"Rats!"

"If you say wats to me, Levison—"

"Well, none of the fellows will speak to him, anyway," said Levison. "We don't want to talk to criminals here."

"Cwiminals, deah boy!"

"What else can he be? The chap who wrote that letter to him says it plainly enough."

"He may be lyin', you know, or exaggewatin'. I have not had much to do with Blane, but I have always warged him as a decent chap; and ewevy fellow's innocent till he's pwoved guilty, at all events."

"You'd better take him up, then," sneered Levison. "I can tell you he's going to be sent to Coventry, and so will you be if you talk to him."

"Wats! Come on, Blake, deah boy!"

Blake laughed, and followed the swell of St. Jim's. It was just like Arthur Augustus D'Arcy to take up the cause of a fellow who was down in the world. D'Arcy had had hardly anything to do, at any time, with Blane, who was in a different Form, and whose tastes were not on the same lines as D'Arcy's in any way. But at the present moment, Arthur Augustus was quite prepared to treat him as a special chum.

"Blane, deah boy," said D'Arcy, tapping the Shell fellow on the shoulder.

Blane started.

"Do you want to speak to me?" he asked.

"Yaa's, wathah!"

"Go ahead!"

D'Arcy paused, a little puzzled. He certainly wanted to speak to Blane, to show the other fellows that he, at all events, wasn't sending Blane to Coventry. But he equally certainly hadn't anything particular to say.

"Jollay warm weathah we're gettin', ain't we?" he said at last.

Blane stared.

"Yes, it's warm," he agreed.

"Shouldn't wondah if we get a thundahstorm."

"No."

"It would cleah the air, deah boy, wouldn't it?"

"Very likely."

Conversation seemed likely to lapse for want of material. D'Arcy looked round for an inspiration. Blake was grinning, and nearly every fellow in the room was watching D'Arcy. Most of them were grinning, too.

"You'd better not talk to me, D'Arcy," Blane said, in a low voice.

"Why not?"

"The fellows seem to be making up their minds to cut me."

"Because of that lettah?"

"Yes."

"If you were tellin' the twuth, Blane, it's howwibly hard on you," said the swell of St. Jim's sympathetically.

Blane laughed mirthlessly.

"Suppose I wasn't telling the truth," he replied.

"Weally, Blane—"

D'Arcy turned his monocle upon the Shell fellow with a very shocked expression.

"There are times when it's hard to tell the whole truth," said Blane miserably. "And—and if my letter hadn't been stolen, I shouldn't have had to say anything about it."

"Then it was your letter?" exclaimed Blake.

Blane started.

"N-n-no, I don't mean to say that," he exclaimed, "only—only— Oh, I hardly know what I'm saying—I'm worried to death. You'd better leave me alone."

"At all events, Blane, I have always warged you as a decent chap, and I sha'n't believe you are a liah unless you say so yourself," said D'Arcy.

"Thank you!"

Blake and D'Arcy moved away, leaving Gerald Blane alone. The Terrible Three, and Kangaroo, and Bernard Glyn, came into the common-room, and as soon as they saw how matters stood, they crossed over to Blane and chatted with him for some minutes. But no one else followed their example. Gerald Blane was being sent to Coventry by the juniors of the School House.

CHAPTER 11.

Tom Merry's Advice is Asked.

MR. LINTON, the master of the Shell, looked at Gerald Blane several times during lessons the next morning, in a most peculiar manner. Blane had always been one of his best pupils, most careful and attentive in class; and Mr. Linton placed him on a level with Tom Merry and Manners, generally the top fellows in the Shell. But this morning there was something decidedly wrong with Blane, of the Shell. His answers, when he was spoken to, were at random, and his mistakes in his work were such as a fag of the Third Form would hardly have made. Blane had such a good reputation as a steady worker that Mr. Linton could not set it down to "slacking," and he did not know what to make of it. He was very patient during most of the morning; but when, at last, Blane blundered in construing a simple verse, Mr. Linton rapped out some remarks on the subject.

"Blane!" he snapped.

Gerald Blane looked at him wearily. He was a hard worker, and his lessons always had interest for him. But he could not help feeling now that his time at St. Jim's was most likely drawing to an end, and his keenness for work faded with that thought. And with the trouble that was on his mind, he was not in a good condition for work, anyway.

"Yes, sir," he muttered.

"What is the matter with you?"

"I—I'm all right, sir."

"You have blundered inexcusably this morning, and have been most absent-minded and inattentive," said Mr. Linton. "Are you ill?"

"I—I don't feel very well this morning, sir," stammered Blane.

"Oh, that alters the case, of course!" said Mr. Linton more kindly. "You are too good a pupil, Blane, to become careless and slovenly in your work. If you do not feel well, I will not keep you to your lessons, and you may take a walk in the quadrangle until dinner-time."

"Oh, thank you, sir!" said Blane.

And he gladly left the class-room.

He felt better in the quiet old quad., under the quiet, leafy old trees. Gerald Blane had a problem to think out that day—a form of the never-ending problem that besets all of us. Was he to do right and suffer, or was he to do wrong in the hope of escaping suffering? That was what Gerald Blane had to decide before seven o'clock that evening.

To do as the Toff demanded seemed to him impossible—and even if he did it, he was not certain of escape from the threatened exposure. But to defy the Toff—that was terrible. It meant utter ruin to him.

All the work he had put in during the two years he had been at St. Jim's, would go for nothing; and all his hopes of the future, all his hopes of living down the miserable past, would be gone.

What was he to do?

He stood at the parting of the ways. He looked this way and that way, and on either way there seemed to be terrible difficulties in the path.

He knew which was the right path to follow. But had he the strength to follow it? Was he called upon to make so tremendous a sacrifice?

He groaned in spirit.

If he had only had someone to advise him—someone he could take counsel with. But he had no father, no mother. He had one friend in the world—the kind-hearted man who had sent him to the school. But he could not ask advice of Mr. Frayne on that subject. He knew in advance what the answer would be. Do right, and fear not—they would probably have been Mr. Frayne's words—easy enough to utter to a man who had nothing to fear, hard enough to follow to a lad who had everything in the world to lose.

Mr. Frayne, kind and charitable as he was, was not the man to help him now. If he had only had a father!

And at St. Jim's he had made no intimate friends, no close chums. He had always been afraid to do so lest something should come out concerning his past, and bring him to shame. To be looked coldly upon by one he had chummed with would have been too terrible a blow to the proud and sensitive lad, and he would never run the risk of it. But a chum would have been a great help to him now.

But he felt a craving to seek advice—assistance. Of all the fellows he knew at St. Jim's, who was likeliest to give him advice, even to listen to his trouble? The name of Tom Merry flashed into his mind.

"Tom Merry!"

He, at all events, would listen—would have kind words to say, if nothing more. Blane thought it out, and resolved. He waited outside the School House for the Shell to come out from morning lessons. Tom Merry came out at last,

with his arms linked with Manners' and Lowther's, and Blane shrank back.

He could not speak before the three of them. The Terrible Three nodded to Blane, and went down to the cricket.

They did not come in till just in time for dinner, but after dinner Blane found an opportunity of speaking to Tom Merry in the hall. He touched the captain of the Shell nervously upon the shoulder.

Tom Merry looked round with his genial smile.

"Can I speak to you?" asked Blane.

"Certainly! Go ahead!"

"In private, I mean?"

Tom Merry looked surprised, but he nodded.

"Come out into the quad.," he replied.

They left the School House. Blane stopped at a bench under the elms in the recess near the old chapel, and sat down. Tom Merry took a seat beside him. He watched his companion's face. Blane was very white.

"What is it?" asked Tom Merry. "Can I help you in any way?"

Blane nodded.

"Will you help me?" he said.

"Certainly! If I can!"

"I'm in trouble."

"I know that, old chap—anybody could see it. If it's a trouble I could help you out of I'd be only too glad," said Tom Merry sincerely. "I suppose it's about that blessed letter, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"I—I'm afraid I can't help thinking the letter was yours," said Tom Merry, colouring. "If that is the trouble—"

"That's it! The letter was mine. This is in confidence, of course?"

"Of course!"

"You must think me a frightfully mean rotter for lying before all the fellows in that way," said Blane miserably. "but—but I hadn't time to think! And—and how could I own up to having such a letter?"

Tom Merry was silent.

"But, of course, that's no excuse for me," said Blane drearily. "I lied like a rotter, and if you despise me, it's only what I deserve. It's a case of one wrong making more. If I had always done what was decent I shouldn't have been in the position of having to lie about things. And I suppose nobody believed me, anyway."

"I'm afraid nobody did, Blane."

"And I've really made it worse than if I had owned up that the letter was mine."

"I'm afraid so."

Blane laughed miserably.

"Well, I don't know that it makes much difference, if I'm going to be kicked out of St. Jim's," he said.

Tom Merry started.

"Kicked out of St. Jim's!" he repeated, in surprise.

"Yes. I expect it will come to that."

"Why should it?" said Tom Merry. "What have you done?"

"It isn't what I've done, but what I'm going to do, that I have to suffer for," said Blane, in a bitter voice.

"I don't understand."

"No," said Blane slowly; "I don't suppose you do, and I don't see how I can explain. But—but I want to ask your advice, all the same."

Tom Merry smiled.

"That will rather be asking advice under difficulties," he remarked. "But go ahead, and I'll do my best."

"Suppose," said Blane slowly—"suppose you had something in your past that you didn't want fellows to know, and another chap knew it, and threatened to let it out and disgrace you—"

He broke off.

Tom Merry looked hard at him.

"Some false charge against you?" he asked. "Is that what you mean?"

Blane's head drooped.

"No."

"Something true?"

"Yes."

"A real disgrace?"

"Yes."

"Your own fault, then?"

"Yes."

"Oh!" said Tom Merry.

He was too surprised to say anything more then. Gerald Blane looked away from him. The white misery in his face went to Tom Merry's heart. Yet—

"Never mind what it is," said Blane. "I've been sorry enough for it, and I've done my best to live it down and be decent—you know I've been decent ever since I've been here—ever since you've known me, anyway?"

"Yes; I know that."

"Well, a chap who knew me before—before I came here

has found me out. Unless I do what he wants, just as the letter said, he's going to disgrace me, and get me kicked out of St. Jim's."

"The cad! What does he want?"

"Never mind that now; but it's assistance in a rascally thing he's planning. I—I can't do it without—without giving up all I've struggled for, and sinking to what I was when I was his pal," said Blane hoarsely. "What am I to do? I know I've no right to speak to you, but—but I feel I must speak to somebody. What can I do?"

Tom Merry looked at him in deep pity.

"You think you would get sacked here if the truth were known?" he asked.

"Oh, that's certain!"

"And this chap means to tell it?"

"He does!"

"Unless you do as he demands."

Blane bowed his head.

"The hound!" said Tom Merry.

"Yes, he's a hound! But—but what am I to do? Can't you give me some advice?" groaned Blane.

"There's only one piece of advice I can give you," said Tom Merry quietly. "You're going straight now whatever you have done before—isn't that so?"

"Yes, yes!" said Blane eagerly. "God knows, I am going straight now!"

"Then keep straight!"

"And he—"

"Let the hound do his worst! He may not keep his throat. If he does, you must face the music; it's better than sinking to his level, and becoming a scoundrel. It's better to be decent and to suffer for it, Blane, than to be safe by being a rascal—and that's never safe, either—the fellow might betray you at any time."

Blane groaned.

"I know that, too."

"Then keep straight, and play the game!"

"That's your advice?"

"Yes; the best I can give."

Blane rose to his feet.

"You're right!" he said, with an effort. "It's hard to give it all up—hard, Heaven knows! But I can see that I shall have to do it—I can't sink into what I was! I'd die sooner than that!"

"It's hard cheese," said Tom Merry compassionately. "But you'll have friends to stand by you, even if you leave St. Jim's, surely?"

"I have no friends—only one, and he placed me here," said Blane wearily. "My own relations cast me off when I did what I did! And I haven't a father or a mother. But I deserve it all. It was my temper that was at the bottom of it. But for that, I should be as decent a chap to-day as you are. I suppose it's no good grumbling at the punishment. I got off too lightly, and Fate has found me out—that's what it is! Thanks for your advice, Tom Merry; I shall follow it!"

"I don't think you could do better, old man," said Tom Merry. "And if I can help you in any way—"

Blane shook his head.

"Nobody can help me now," he said. "I'm done for here. To-morrow I shall be gone from St. Jim's—for good!"

"Is it certain? Haven't you time to make terms in some way?"

Blane gave a hollow laugh.

"I've got to see him at seven o'clock this evening," he said. "If I'm a few minutes late, even, he says that he will come straight into the school, and see the Head! At seven o'clock it's all up with me—unless I agree to do as he wants!"

"And you won't do that?"

Blane did not reply immediately. Was a doubt creeping into his mind?

"Better stick to the game!" said Tom Merry quietly.

Blane made a sudden movement, springing to his feet. He turned; the form of a junior was lurking behind the elms at the back of the seat.

"Levison!"

Tom Merry swung round.

Levison met his glance with a flushed face. Tom Merry did not need telling that the cad of the Fourth had come there to listen.

"You worm!" said Tom scornfully.

"I came here by chance!"

"Oh, don't lie!"

Levison shrugged his shoulders, and walked away with his hands in his pockets. There was a peculiar glitter in his eyes. He had heard only Blane's last sentences; but they meant much to Levison.

Tom Merry looked at Blane.

"It's all right!" said the Shell fellow. "It doesn't matter what Levison knows—the whole school will know it to-morrow!"

"You are going to do the right thing?"

"Yes."

"Good! You can't do better, Blane, old man!"

Blane nodded, and walked away quietly. Tom Merry turned from the spot with a heavy heart. What Blane had done in the past was a mystery to him; but there was no doubt that the unhappy lad was trying to run straight now, and it was cruel fortune that he should be so baulked. Truly, the way of the transgressor is hard!

CHAPTER 12.

Too Late.

AFTERNOON lessons were over. There were merry voices, and the merry clicking of bat and ball on the cricket-ground. Seniors and juniors were there, playing the grand old summer game. Gerald Blane was not on the cricket-field. He was seated upon an old stone seat adjoining the school wall—an old stone that had been there for many centuries, and upon which old monks had rested in the days when St. James's was a monastic establishment, and Henry VIII. had not yet been born. Blane's face was white and hard.

Even yet he had not decided.

While he was with Tom Merry he had felt the influence of his noble nature; he had felt what Tom Merry would do in his place, and he had resolved to do that himself. But now doubts were thronging in again.

Why should he sacrifice himself—and everything he had worked for?

Was it to be expected of him? he asked himself with passionate anger.

It was right to suffer for wrongdoing—but he was called upon to suffer for doing, or trying to do, what was right.

If he had followed the reckless course of the Toff, he would have been safe; he would have had nothing to lose.

Because he was trying to play the game, and lead a straight life, he was at the mercy of his old associate.

It filled his breast with bitter anger to think of it. It was so cruel, so unjust; and he was in a mood to doubt Providence. What was he to do?

As he sat in the old stone seat, he could see in the distance, above the tops of the elms, one face of the old clock in the tower. He was watching it with dull eyes. When the hands indicated the hour of seven, he was to go and meet the Toff—or else the young scoundrel would come into the school.

Was it possible that some last appeal might move the Toff—might soften that hard and cynical heart?

Blane yet had a wild hope that it might be so.

The hand indicated twenty minutes to seven now. It would not take him two minutes to reach the rendezvous; the trees opposite the gates of St. Jim's, on the other side of the white Rylcombe road. The seat where he was now was within a stone's throw of the school gates, which were open till dark.

The Toff would not be there yet. Blane, like many another fellow in a predicament where there seemed to be no decision, left deciding till the last possible moment.

What was he to decide?

He had asked himself that question so often, without being able to find an answer, that his brain seemed to be dulled by it.

His faculties had fallen into a kind of numbness, from excessive thinking and puzzling, and he sat stolidly, his eyes fixed upon the distant clock-face.

He was deaf to the merry shouts from the cricket-ground, to the twittering of the birds in the trees, and the rustling of the leaves in the summer breeze. He was not even thinking now; he was watching the clock-face with a dull, fascinated gaze.

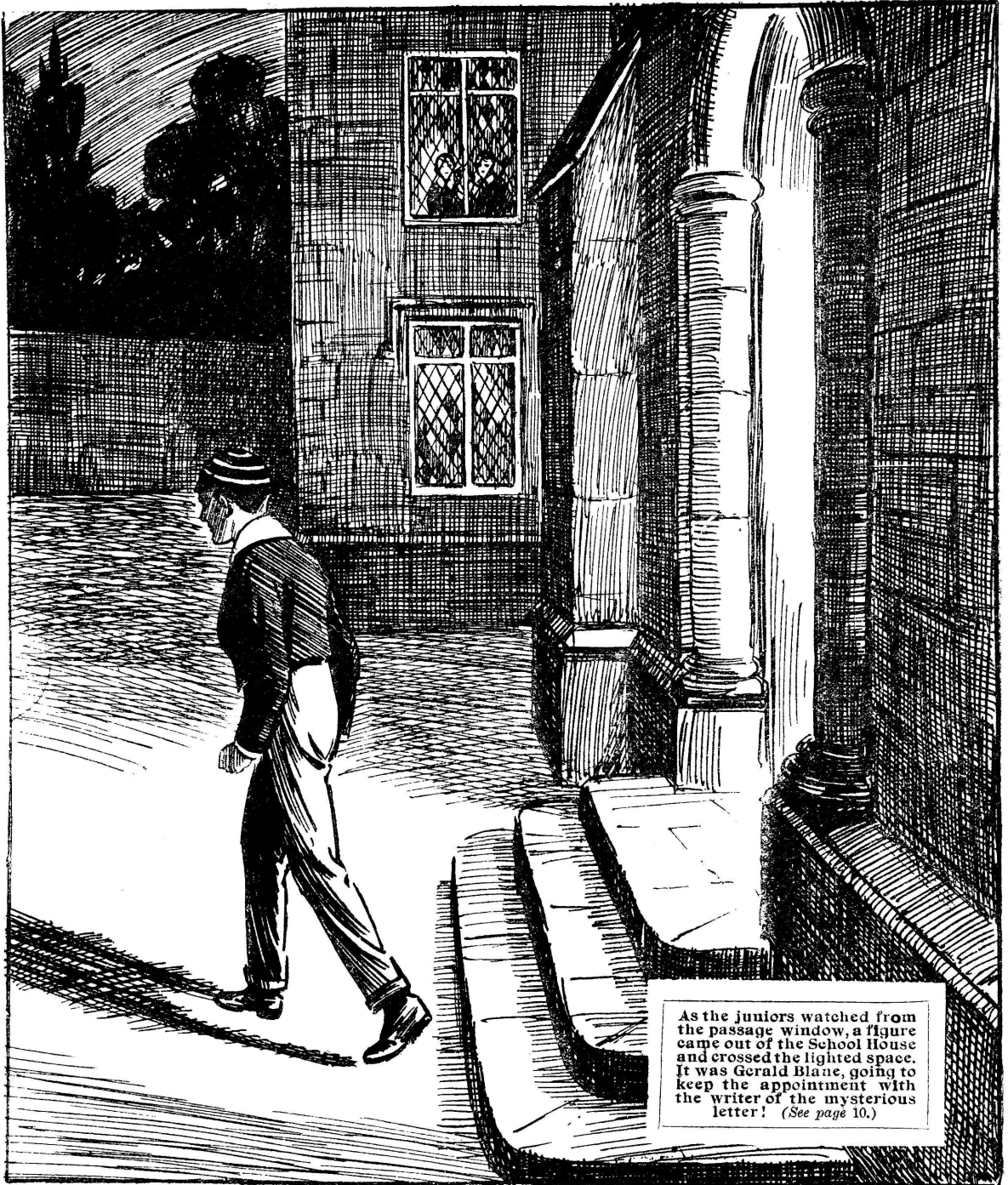
"Look at the rotter!"

Levison muttered the words.

"THE BLACK HOUSE ON THE MOOR!"

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As the juniors watched from the passage window, a figure came out of the School House and crossed the lighted space. It was Gerald Blane, going to keep the appointment with the writer of the mysterious letter! (See page 10.)

He was standing at some little distance along the wall, and he spoke to Mellish in a whisper.

Mellish grinned his evil grin as he looked at Blane.

"He looks pretty down in the mouth," he said.

"Hush!"

"Why?" said Mellish.

"I don't want him to see us. Look here," muttered Levison. "You know he went to see somebody at eight last night."

"Yes."

"He's going to see him again at seven this evening."

Mellish stared.

"How do you know?"

"I heard him talking to Tom Merry. He was asking Tom Merry's advice, I think; anyway, he said that if he didn't meet the chap at seven this evening, even if he was a few

minutes late only, the man would come in, and give him away to the Head—and he would be sacked from the school."

Mellish chuckled softly.

"It's a pity he can't be made to miss the appointment, then," he said.

"That's what I was thinking of," said Levison, with an evil light in his eyes. He rubbed his hand over his bruised and still aching face. "That's what he's jolly well going to be made to do."

"But how?"

"You know what he's sitting there for—to keep his eye on the clock. He doesn't want to risk being late."

"He could tell the time by his watch, I suppose—"

"Only he doesn't happen to have one," said Levison, with a sneering grin. "He's as poor as a church mouse. Mr. Frayne doesn't over-burden him with pocket-money, you see.

I suppose he thinks it's enough if he pays his fees here, and gives him a half-crown a week for his exes. Now, if Blane missed the appointment—

"You're not thinking of collaring him?" asked Mellish, his eyes opening very wide.

"I would," said Levison viciously. "I'd collar him, and tie him up in the wood-shed, if I could—and keep him there till the man, whoever he is, had come in and seen the Head. But that won't work; we couldn't handle him between us; besides, he'd yell."

"I should say so."

"There might be another way," Levison muttered. "Suppose the clock were to stop?"

"Eh?"

"I mean, suppose it were to be stopped. It's not likely to stop of its own accord, of course."

"My hat! What are you thinking of?"

"You know they are repairing the clock now," said Levison. "The man who was tinkering at it this morning has left his ladder there, in the tower. It would be quite easy to get up into the clock-room, and—"

"And what?"

"Suppose a hole were bashed in the dial, and a chap put his fist through and held back the hand?"

"Phew!"

"It would be easy enough," said Levison confidently, "and the arm wouldn't be seen from here, I should think; you see, those hands stand out well from the clock face, and the arm would be behind, and not so very much of it would show. The clock-hand could be jammed so that it wouldn't move on."

"My word!"

"Then that rotter would go on watching the clock, you see," said Levison eagerly; "and he wouldn't know it was past seven. See?"

"Too jolly risky, I say."

"Now, look here, Mellish, it's quite easy. You go and do it, while I keep an eye on Blane."

Mellish grinned.

"I don't see any special necessity for keeping an eye on Blane," he said. "But if it's necessary, I'll stay here and do it. You go and stop the clock."

Levison gave him an evil look.

His scheme seemed to be an excellent one if Mellish carried it out; but Levison was not very keen upon carrying it out himself. But the prospect of revenging himself upon the junior who had hammered him was too attractive. He nodded.

"Very well," he muttered, "I'll go."

Blane had dropped his head into his hands. He did not see Levison saunter away; he did not see Mellish leaning against the wall, watching him. The unhappy lad was unconscious of his surroundings.

Mellish turned his gaze upon the clock. He wondered whether Levison would succeed. The cad of the Fourth was cunning enough and determined enough for anything. He would not be able to get at the works of the clock, but the scheme he had formed could be carried out—if he had nerve enough. And for the sake of revenge, Levison was likely to find nerve enough.

Mellish's eyes never left the high clock face, set amid the ivy of the old tower.

The minute-hand was creeping on.

It indicated ten minutes to seven now. Unless Levison was swift, his interference with the clock would come too late.

Mellish gave a sudden start, and drew a quick, sharp breath.

A spot had appeared on the white face of the clock, below the twelve; Mellish was too far off to see it clearly; he would not have seen it at all if he had not been watching for it. But he knew what it was now.

"My, hat!" he muttered, in tense excitement. "He's done it!"

From the gap in the clock face, an arm, bare and white, came groping. The hand fastened upon the minute-hand of the clock.

Mellish gasped again.

The clock indicated seven minutes to seven.

CHAPTER 13.

Surrender!

BLANE raised his head from his hands. His glance sought the clock above the trees. Seven minutes to seven!

He had ample time yet.

Blane did not notice the mark on the dial, where the hand had come through—he did not see—it was impossible to see—the minute-hand had been twisted, so that it could not move on.

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And he did not know that more than seven minutes had elapsed since the clock was stopped.

He had ample time—so he believed—never dreaming that the fatal hour had passed. It would take him but two minutes to reach the place of the appointment; he had five minutes left yet to decide in.

He looked round him wearily. He caught sight of Mellish leaning against the school wall. Levison was just rejoicing him there; and both of them were looking towards the gates, with so keen an eagerness in their looks that Blane followed their glance.

Then he started, and sprang to his feet.

The Toff was just entering the gates.

With an evil frown upon his face, the rascal who held the fate of Gerald Blane in the hollow of his hand, strode in at the open gates, looking around him to find the direction.

Levison grasped Mellish by the arm.

"That's the fellow!"

And Mellish chuckled:

"It's all up with Blane now!"

Blane seemed to think so himself. He stood petrified, staring at the new-comer as if the evil, dark-faced, keen-eyed young man were a spectre.

The Toff's quick, restless eyes turned in his direction, and he saw Blane. A sneering smile crossed his face.

Then Blane found the use of his limbs. He ran quickly forward and interposed, as the Toff strode in the direction of the School House.

"Stop!" he muttered thickly.

The Toff paused.

"Well?" he said.

"Stop! Why didn't you wait—it's not seven?"

"It's five minutes past seven."

"You're wrong—look!"

The Toff followed the direction of Blane's raised hand.

"The clock's stopped, then," he said. "It's five minutes past seven. I waited for you four minutes—four minutes too long. Now I'm going in to see the Head."

"I—I—I—"

"Let me pass!"

"Be quiet!" muttered Blane, in a voice of agony. "There are fellows looking at us. Toffy, have mercy!"

"Let me pass!"

"Don't—don't go in yet. Come out into the road."

The Toff gave a sneering laugh.

"What for? If you're not going to do as I ask, what for? There's nothing for us to talk about."

"I—I—I—"

"One word," said the Toff. "Will you do what I want?"

"Toffy, I can't!"

"Then I'm going in."

"Hold on!" Blane's voice was hard and strained.

"Stop! I—I—I'll do it."

The Toff's eyes gleamed.

"Now you're talking," he said. "Come on!"

Blane followed him out of the gates. Levison and Mellish exchanged glances of angry disappointment. The Toff was not going in to the Head, after all, then. The exposure was not to take place. Quite unconscious of Levison and Mellish, Blane followed the young rascal into the trees opposite the school gates.

The Toff did not pause till they were deep in the glades, out of danger of being overheard or watched. Then he halted, and faced the unhappy Shell fellow.

"Well?" he rapped out.

Blane gave a groan.

"Do you really mean it, Toffy? You won't let me off?"

"I'll ruin you, and get you kicked out of St. Jim's, if you don't do as I want," said the Toff menacingly.

Blane's hands clenched hard, and his eyes blazed. The Toff thrust his hand into his pocket, and it came out again with a life-preserver in it.

"Look out!" he said. "If you begin any of your old tricks, you'll get the worst of it, Jerry. I'm ready for all that."

"Toffy—"

"You've come here to make terms, I suppose?" said the Toff. "Let's talk business, and have done with it. I've got to be let into the school to-night, and you've got to let me in, and show me where the plate is kept, and also where the headmaster keeps his money. Then your bizney's done, and you can go back to bed. I'll leave signs enough to show that it was a burglary, so that they won't know anybody in the house had a hand in it. It's all plain sailing."

"It's horrible!"

"Oh, stuff! You can have a whack in the swag—"

"Not a penny—not a farthing! I would not touch it if I were starving."

The Toff shrugged his shoulders.

"Just as you like," he said. "I'm not so particular; I can't afford to be. But I'm quite willing to take all the loot."

as far as that goes. You can go back to bed, and fancy it was all a dream, you know."

"Toffy, I—"

"Only you've got to help me through, that's all," said the Toff. "Man alive, it's as easy as rolling off a log! What are you afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid."

"Then what's the matter?"

"It's the horrible wickedness of it," groaned Blane. "I promised Mr. Frayne that I would keep straight, and the Head has been kindness itself to me. I'm on my honour at St. Jim's—on my honour to be decent."

The Toff laughed mockingly.

"On your honour!" he said. "The honour of a reformatory brat—the honour of a fellow who was gaoled for hammering a boy too hard, and who has lied and thieved."

"Who led me into that?" muttered Blane passionately.

"My own infernal temper took me into the reformatory, I know; but when I came out, without a friend or a relation to stand by me, and only a scoundrel like you—what was I to do? I know it was wrong, but I hadn't the courage to starve. I wish to Heaven I had done that. Then Mr. Frayne saved me, and gave me a chance, and you come along, like the fiend you are, to drag me down again."

"And I'll do it, too, if you fail me."

"You hound! You hound!"

"Enough said!" said the Toff roughly. "This is wasting time. Are you going to help me, or are you not?"

"If there is nothing else for it—"

"There is nothing else, you fool!"

"Remember," said Blane huskily—"remember, you have driven me to this."

The Toff laughed.

"I'll remember that with pleasure," he replied. "Now, what are the arrangements? What time do you go to bed?"

"Half-past nine."

"And the rest of the school?"

"Everybody is usually in bed by eleven. Sometimes somebody stays up till half-past."

"Suppose I make it midnight; that will make all safe."

"Yes," said Blane dully.

"Where will you let me in? I can climb the school wall, and get to the house? Where will you meet me?"

"You noticed the big door of the School House when you were in the quad, a few minutes ago?" asked Blane.

"Yes."

"There is a small window in the porch; it can be opened easily, and it is in the shadow. That is the best place."

"Good! That will be ripping!"

"I shall open it for you."

"And wait inside?"

"Is that necessary?"

"You've got to be my guide, my young friend," said the Toff unpleasantly. "When I get clear of the house, you can go back to bed."

"Very well," said Blane heavily.

"Midnight, then," said the Toff, with a grin. "It's settled; I shall be there. Good-bye!"

Blane did not speak. He turned and went back through the wood, and did not raise his eyes from the ground till he was within the gates of St. Jim's again. Levison met him in the quad.

"So your friend hasn't given you away, after all?" the cad of the Fourth exclaimed, with a bitter sneer.

Blane did not reply, but his right fist shot out, and caught Levison full on the mouth.

The cad of the Fourth rolled over with a yell. Blane turned on Mellish with flashing eyes.

"Do you want any?" he exclaimed.

Mellish backed hastily away. With a scornful look Blane strode on, and Levison rose slowly to his feet, rubbing his jaw.

CHAPTER 14.

At Midnight.

TOM MERRY looked at Blane almost in alarm when the Shell went up to bed that night. He had never seen him look so white and strained.

As the juniors went chatting into the dormitory, Tom Merry joined Blane, who looked at him with dull, heavy eyes from a colourless face.

"Blane, old man, you're looking rotten," Tom Merry muttered.

Blane nodded.

"I'm feeling rotten, too," he said.

"Is it so bad as that?"

"It will be all over to-morrow."

"You must go?"

"Yes."

"The fellow won't hold his tongue?"

"No, unless—"

"Unless what?" asked Tom Merry.

"Unless I become a thief."

Tom Merry started.

"Good heavens! Is it possible?"

"That's the price of it," said Blane, in a dreary whisper. "What would you advise a fellow to do, Tom Merry?"

"Defy him, at any cost," said the hero of the Shell promptly. "Nothing could justify anybody in becoming a thief."

"Well, I'm going to defy him."

"Good!"

"If I suffer for it, he will suffer too," said Blane, with a bitter smile. "I shall take care of that. He shall not ruin me for nothing."

"But how?"

"You will see to-night."

"To-night?" said Tom Merry.

"Yes."

And Blane turned away to undress. Knox, the prefect, came to see lights out for the Shell, and he glanced at Blane.

"Have you found your letter yet, Blane?" he asked.

Blane looked at him.

"No," he said.

"Do you still deny that the letter Levison gave me is yours?" asked the prefect, with a sneer.

Blane shook his head.

"No," he repeated.

"What! You own up that it is your letter?"

"Yes."

"Then you admit that you lied about it?"

"Yes," said Blane, "I lied about it."

Knox stared at him. He could not understand Blane at all. Knox was not a fellow of very fine perceptions.

"Oh, you lied, did you?" he said. "Well, I knew that you lied, and I think everyone else knew the same."

"Yes, rather!" said Crooke.

"So the letter is yours, after all, Blane?"

"I've said so."

"None of your cheek!" said Knox threateningly. "As the letter's yours, and you own up to it, I shall place it before Dr. Holmes in the morning, and you will have to explain it to him."

"You can do as you like."

"I intend to; and one of the things I shall like is to lick you for being cheeky," said the senior, coming towards Blane.

Tom Merry stepped in front of Blane. Knox gave him a savage look. Tom Merry met the bullying senior's eyes steadily, and Mannors and Lowther and Kangaroo quietly stepped up beside him, ready to back him up if necessary.

"Blane isn't quite himself now, Knox," said Tom Merry. "You might as well let him alone."

Prefect as he was, Knox did not care for trouble with the Terrible Three. He stopped, and gave a short laugh.

"Well, the young brute looks pretty seedy, I must say," he said. "And I suppose he will be expelled to-morrow, anyway. Get to bed."

The Shell fellows turned in, and Knox quitted the dormitory.

One by one the juniors dropped off to sleep; but Blane's eyes did not close. He lay wide awake, staring at the ceiling.

Blane had formed his resolution. He knew that the game was up; on the morrow he would have to leave St. Jim's. However the matter turned out, that could not be avoided, and Blane tried to steel himself to it.

But it was hard.

He had done so well at the school; he had succeeded in living down the past; he had run a straight course for two years. He had been at St. Jim's longer than Tom Merry, though he had never filled so prominent a place in the life of the school. He had been content to go quietly on his way—working hard, atoning for the past as well as he could, and preparing himself to take an honourable place in the world outside St. Jim's when the time should come.

It was hard—bitterly hard—to have his dream shattered in this way.

But it was inevitable, and he tried to make up his mind to it. What was he to do when the school was left behind?

The future was a blank.

There was no sleep for Gerald Blane that night.

The hours rolled out from the tower dully, heavily to the listening ears of the schoolboy.

Round him his Form-fellows were sleeping—the healthy sleep of untroubled youth.

He alone was awake, with aching heart and dull eyes.

Midnight!

Twelve strokes boomed out slowly, one after another, and each one seemed to go like a knell of death through the boy's mind.

He moved in his bed and sat up. It was already the time for the appointment with the Toff, and he had no minutes to waste.

He slipped from the bed.

But, instead of taking his clothes, Blane crossed over to Tom Merry's bed and shook him gently by the shoulder.

Tom Merry awoke.

He glanced up at the junior bending over him. In the dim starlight that came in at the high windows of the dormitory he recognised Blane.

"Blane!" he said, in a low voice.

The junior nodded.

"Yes, it is I."

"What is the matter?"

"Wake up."

Tom Merry sat up in bed; he was startled. For a moment he thought that perhaps the trouble lying so heavily upon Blane's mind had unhinged him.

"What is it, Blane?" he whispered. "Is anything the matter, old fellow?"

Blane seemed to choke for a moment. But when he spoke again his voice was low and clear and steady.

"I want your help," he said.

"How?"

"There are burglars here to-night."

Tom Merry gave a violent start.

"Burglars!" he muttered.

"Yes—one burglar, at all events."

"How do you know?"

"I do know," said Blane evasively. "Get up if you want to help me to capture him. He is here for the school plate."

"Great Scott!"

Tom Merry jumped out of bed.

"You can call Manners and Lowther, and wake Kildare as you come down," said Blane. "But don't make a noise, or you will scare him off."

"But who is it?"

"You will know soon enough."

Blane turned away and quickly dressed himself. Tom Merry peered at him in the dimness of the dormitory.

"Blane, old man, I suppose this is—is true?" he said.

Blane laughed bitterly.

"Quite right!" he said. "Once a liar, always a liar! You are right! Why should you believe a word I say?"

"I don't mean it like that, Blane!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"What I mean is—you are not rotting. There is really a burglar?"

"Yes."

"Honour bright?"

"Yes—on the honour of a reformatory boy," said Blane, with a bitter tone that seemed to cut Tom Merry like a knife.


"Blane, what do you mean?" he exclaimed quickly.

But Blane did not reply. He had glided towards the dormitory door, and he opened it and passed out into the passage without another word.

Tom Merry doubted no longer. He awoke Manners and Lowther with a few whispered words; and the Terrible Three dressed themselves quietly and left the dormitory. Two minutes later Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, was awakened.

CHAPTER 15.

Well Caught.

 OUTSIDE, in the dusk of the old quad, a form stole silently towards the School House. It stopped in the deep shadows of the old stone porch.

The Toff waited and listened.

He had found easily enough the window indicated by Gerald Blane. But the window was fastened, and there was no sign of the reformatory boy.

The Toff waited, gritting his teeth.

Was Blane playing him false, after all? Did the reformatory boy mean to keep him waiting there, and not to admit him? Had Gerald Blane been playing with him?

It did not seem possible, but—

But if it were so, the Toff's revenge would come on the following morning. Then he would see the Head, then Gerald Blane's past would be laid bare to the last shred, and the Toff would have the satisfaction of knowing that the fellow who had failed him had been driven in ruin and disgrace from St. Jim's.

These thoughts were working in the young rascal's brain as he stood waiting in the deep darkness of the porch, when he heard a click at the window.

He turned towards it instantly.

The lattice opened outwards.

The Toff swung towards the window, listening. Caution was a part of his nature, and, though he was certain that it was Blane who had opened the window, and opened it for him, he did not speak. He waited.

The lattice opened wide, and a dim head and shoulders appeared in the shadows of the little window. Then came a soft whisper:

"Toff!"

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It was Gerald Blane's voice.

"I'm here!"

There was a soft chuckle—so strange, so unlike Gerald Blane, that the thief outside was vaguely alarmed. He peered in at the open window.

"You're there, Jerry?"

"Yes."

"All serene?"

"Yes."

"Everything arranged all right?"

That strange chuckle again. And then:

"Everything."

"Good!"

The Toff climbed in at the window. It was easy enough for him. A hand fell upon his arm in the darkness and drew him on.

He followed blindly. He was in the hands of Gerald Blane now, and he did not hesitate to trust himself to his guidance.

The guiding hand led him on and pushed him into a recess in the passage, then it dropped from his arm.

"Hold on, Jerry!" muttered the Toff. "Are you leaving me?"

"For a minute, yes."

"What for?"

"I shall rejoin you in a minute."

"But—"

Gerald Blane was gone!

The Toff broke off, vaguely alarmed again. This did not seem like Gerald Blane at all. The Toff could not understand.

He heard a sound from the darkness of the hall. It was the sound of the window closing and being fastened.

A sudden thrill of fear came into the heart of the thief. What did it mean? What was Blane doing? And then another sound—the soft murmur of voices.

Voices!

The Toff shuddered with nervous apprehension. What did it mean?

"Blane!" he muttered loudly. "Blane! Jerry! Where are you?"

"I am here."

A flood of light—so sudden, so bright that it dazzled and blinded the midnight thief. He put his hands to his eyes. The electric light had been turned on suddenly, without warning.

"Jerry! You fool!"

The Toff broke off.

As he drew his hand from his eyes he saw that Gerald Blane was not alone. There were four others with him—Kildare of the Sixth, the stalwart captain of St. Jim's; and Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther.

They advanced upon the Toff in the glare of the light.

The young thief backed away—but the wall was behind him, and there was no escape. He slid his hand into his pocket.

"Keep off!" he panted. "Keep off! Or—"

"Better give in, you young fool," said Kildare coldly.

"Hands off! I—"

A life-preserver was in the grip of the Toff. Kildare sprang forward and grasped his arm as he was raising it.

Thud!

The Toff gave a cry of pain, and the life-preserver fell heavily to the floor as the captain of St. Jim's twisted his arm in an iron grasp.

The Terrible Three had their hands upon him the next moment. Gerald Blane did not touch him. He stood looking on, with a face as white as chalk, and a deadly gleam in his eyes.

The Toff struggled desperately.

He had four against him—four, of whom any one was his match—but he fought furiously for his liberty.

Trampling, struggling, whirling, and writhing, they grappled together; and the Toff went heavily to the floor, the Terrible Three falling over him.

"Got him!" panted Lowther.

"We've got him!"

"Hold him!" said Kildare quietly. "Here's the cord—tie his hands."

"Right-ho!"

And the cord was run round the Toff's wrists and drawn together, and Tom Merry knotted it securely enough.

Then the Toff was dragged to his feet.

His face was white with rage and fear, and his eyes were burning. His glance was full of rage as it turned upon Gerald Blane.

"That's enough!" he gasped. "You—you've got me! Hang you! Hang you!"

Kildare smiled grimly.

"Yes, we've got you," he said grimly. "We've got you,

my lad, and we're not going to let you slip through our fingers. Hold him!"

Tom Merry and Lowther kept a grasp upon the arms of the Toff, bound as he was.

But the Toff was thinking no longer of escape. That was impossible. All his thoughts now were of revenge upon the one who had trapped him.

"So you've given me away, Jerry!" he hissed, and his voice was scarcely audible with the rage that consumed him. "You've betrayed me!"

Blane did not reply. His face might have been carved in ice.

The Toff was shaking with fury.

"You've sold me!" he said.

Blane nodded at last.

"Yes," he said. "I never meant to let you rob the school. I've given you away. Are you satisfied?"

The Toff choked with rage.

"Hang you—hang you!"

Blane laughed mirthlessly.

"You're caught," he said—"you're caught, and you'll go to the treadmill! I wish you were going to be hanged, Toffy!"

The Toff gritted his teeth.

"He was in this with me!" he shrieked. "He let me in; he helped me to get in! He was going to rob the school with me! I swear it! He has turned on me because I'm caught. If I hadn't been caught, he would have shared the swag. I swear it! That was the arrangement we made. He was in this with me!"

Kildare laughed scornfully.

"You are not likely to get anybody to believe that," he said.

The Toff almost foamed at the mouth.

"It's the truth," he shrieked—"I tell you it's the truth! He was in it with me. It was his idea as much as mine all the time. I tell you—"

"It is useless to tell us that."

"It's true—it's true! If I hadn't been caught—if you hadn't been awake, he would have shared—"

"Do you know why you were caught—why we were awake?" said Tom Merry quietly. "It was because Gerald Blane warned us that there was a burglar here, and awoke us to come down and deal with him."

"What—what?" stammered the Toff blankly.

"It is all through Gerald Blane that we have caught you."

"Oh!"

The Toff did not seem to realise it for a moment or two. He stood silent, dumbfounded. Blane's expression did not change.

CHAPTER 16.

Blane's Past.

"WHAT is that, Kildare?"

It was the Head's voice.

Several of the masters, and a good many of the boys, had been awakened by the struggle, and they were crowding round the spot. Way was made for the Head.

Dr. Holmes looked amazed at the sight of the young thief in the grasp of the chums of the Shell.

Kildare hastened to explain.

"Blane found out that there was a burglar here, somehow, sir," he said. "He woke Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther, and they woke me. We came down, and Blane turned on the light, and we found this fellow here."

"Dear me!"

"I don't know how Blane knew anything about him, sir, but it was through Blane that we caught him. The credit is all Blane's."

The Toff burst into a scream.

"All through Blane—all through Blane! Oh, I tell you he was in it with me! He's turned on me now; that's all."

"Rats!" said Tom Merry.

"Yaas, watah; wats, and many of them!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, who had arrived upon the scene in a suit of highly-coloured pyjamas, with a bicycle lantern in his hand. The lantern was not needed, as the electric light was on at full force, but the swell of St. Jim's did not seem to be aware of that. "I am quite convinced that you are uttewin' wascally falsehoods, you uttah wottah!"

"Let him speak," said Levison.

"Shut up, Levison!"

"I'm not going to shut up," said Levison obstinately.

"Let Blane explain his letter and explain what he knows of this chap. I saw him with this very fellow this afternoon, inside the school gates."

"Bai Jove!"

The Head glanced at Levison, and then at Blane.

"Is that the case, Blane?" he asked quietly.

"Yes, sir," said Blane dully.

"Do you know this person?"

"Yes."

"He let me into the school," shrieked the Toff. "He's an old reformatory boy; he was at the same reformatory that I was, in Middlesex—the one that Mr. Frayne is governor of. You know, who sent him here."

"Bai Jove!"

"He was put in the reformatory for nearly killing a fellow in a fit of temper," the Toff yelled. "He's a thief, too! He let me into the school now to rob the place; but he's changed his mind, and betrayed me! Oh, but I will be revenged for this! I—"

The doctor held up his hand.

"Silence!" he said.

"I tell you—"

"Silence! Your desire for revenge discounts anything you may have to say against Blane," said the Head coldly. "Blane has always borne a good character in the school, and I shall not easily believe anything against him."

"I tell you—"

"You shall have an opportunity of telling us anything you choose," said the Head. "Since you admit knowing this person, Blane, you will consent to an investigation of the matter?"

"Yes, sir."

"Bring him to my study, Kildare, please. Mr. Railton, will you kindly come, too, and you, Blane?"

"Certainly, sir!"

"You other boys can go back to bed," said the Head.

There was a general murmur of disappointment. But the will of the Head was law, and the fellows turned unwillingly to the stairs again. They dispersed to their various dormitories, excitedly discussing the affair.

Dr. Holmes and Mr. Railton entered the Head's study, and the Head turned on the light. Kildare brought the Toff in, and Blane followed.

Mr. Railton quietly closed the door.

There was the same icy calmness in Gerald Blane's face—the calmness of one who knew his doom and had steeled himself to meet it.

Dr. Holmes turned a stern glance upon the prisoner.

"Now, tell me what you choose," he said. "In the first place, who are you? What is your name?"

"Harry Bryce. I'm called the Toff," said the thief. "I was at the same reformatory with that fellow—with Gerald Blane. After we left we were pals together; we've been on many a job like this. He's given me away this time, but he shall suffer for it, by—"

"Silence!"

"Ask him," shrieked the Toff—"ask him! He dares not deny what I've said. The man who sent him to this school will bear out what I say, if you ask him. He stood by Blane because Blane pulled the wool over his eyes, that's all."

"Have you anything else to tell me?"

"He's a thief—he's a thief, as I am!"

"Anything more?"

"I wrote him a letter yesterday—he told me the letter is still in existence; a prefect has it—and it will prove what I say."

"Very well! As you have made your statement, you have nothing more to do here," said the Head. "Will you lock this person up in a study, Kildare, and telephone to the police-station at Rylcombe?"

"Certainly, sir!"

Kildare's hand fell heavily upon the Toff's shoulder, and drew him towards the door. The Toff turned a spiteful look upon Gerald Blane as he went.

"I've cooked your goose for you, at all events!" he exclaimed. "You hound! You sold me—sold me—"

"I never meant to help you rob the school, Toffy," said Blane dully. "I meant that if you drove me to it, I'd get you arrested and ruined as well as myself. You've done it. The fault is all yours."

"Hang you! I—"

"Come along!" said Kildare. And he jerked the prisoner out of the study, and the door closed behind him.

Blane stood silent, hardly conscious, apparently, of the glances the Head of St. Jim's and Mr. Railton bent upon him.

"Blane!" said the Head, breaking the silence.

Blane started.

"Yes, sir."

"How much is true of what that scoundrel has stated? You had better be frank with me, my boy."

The Head's voice was gentle enough.

Blane gave a groan.

"It's mostly true, sir."

"You are, as he said, a reformatory boy?" the Head asked, in low, steady tones.

"I have been, sir."

"Tell me all about it."

"You know most of it now, sir," groaned Blane. "I've kept it a secret for two years here, and I might have kept

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it a secret still, but for that villain. He found me out, and then I knew that all was up. Heaven help me! I've been in Mr. Railton's House all the time I've been here, sir, and he will tell you I've always been decent."

"I have seldom had any fault to find with Blane, sir," said the House-master, with a compassionate look at the unhappy boy, "and never in a serious way."

"I am glad to hear that, Mr. Railton. Go on, Blane!"

"It was my own fault in the first place," Blane muttered. "It was my wretched temper. I had a row with a boy at school—my first school—a chap named Selby. He was a beastly bully, and he was always ragging me, and I—I turned on him one day, and hit him harder than I meant to. I—I hurt him!"

"Do you mean to say that you injured him?" demanded the Head.

Blane nodded.

"Yes, sir. He brought it on himself, but—but I shouldn't have done it. I had lost my temper, and hardly knew what I was doing. He was ill for a long time, and I—I was sent to a reformatory. Selby is well again now—he's all right—but he had to leave school for two years and travel. I left to go to a reformatory." He laughed wildly. "I suppose it served me right. Only it's ruined my life."

"And then, Blane?"

"Mr. Frayne—the gentleman who pays my fees here, sir—took an interest in me there. He was the governor. But I was under the influence of the Toff—that fellow Bryce—and when I left, I was sent back to my people, as Mr. Frayne thought, but—but they wouldn't take me. I've no father or mother, and the rest wouldn't speak to me. They said I'd disgraced them enough, and they washed their hands of me. I suppose they were quite in the right, too, but—but that left me with Bryce, and I helped him in—in something he did. It was that or starve! Good heavens, sir, I wished a thousand times afterwards that I had starved instead! I—I couldn't stand it. I wasn't built to be a thief. I left the Toff, and went back to Mr. Frayne, and told him all about it, and begged him to help me to be honest. He would have helped me in the first place, if I'd asked him. Heaven bless him!"

"And he helped you?"

"Yes, sir. He gave me a trial, and was satisfied with me, and then he thought I might take up my life where I had left it off before—before my misfortune. I had been to a public school in Cheshire, and so he sent me here, as being a long way from my old place. Nobody was likely to know me here, and it was a good time afterwards. But the Toff found me out. But for him, all would have gone well. Mr. Frayne had complete faith in me; he wouldn't have done you the wrong, sir, to send a fellow here who couldn't be trusted. Oh, sir!"

"Mr. Frayne is a most respectable gentleman, and I fully believe that," said the Head. "I understood that you were a protegee of his, but not exactly in what way. And since you have been here—"

"I've done my best, sir. Ask my Form-master if I haven't worked hard and done my best—ask Mr. Railton—ask any of the fellows if I haven't been decent!" said Blane hoarsely.

"And when this person found you, Blane—"

"He came down here to crack the crib, sir—to rob the school; and while he was spying about, he saw me and recognised me. Then he saw how easy the job would be if he had help from inside, and he made that the price of his holding his tongue."

"The rascal!" said Mr. Railton.

"And what was your reply to him, Blane?" asked the Head, looking steadily at the junior.

"I refused to do as he asked, sir."

"And then?"

"He threatened to betray me—to ruin me here," muttered Blane, "and then—then I confess, sir, I wavered in my mind. I—I did allow myself to think of helping him, to get him to go away and leave me in peace."

"But you did not do it?"

"I—I couldn't! When it came to it, I couldn't! I let him plan for me to let him in, and I woke up Tom Merry and the others to capture him. I knew that if I didn't help him he would betray me. He had warned me of it. And I meant that he should suffer as well as I."

"He certainly deserves to suffer," said the Head. "He will go to prison. But you, Blane—"

Blane groaned in misery.

"I shall have to go away, sir. I couldn't remain here, with all the fellows knowing this, even if you allowed me—and you can't."

The Head was silent.

"I'm ready to go, sir," muttered Blane. "I've done what was right, anyway. I've played the game, as Tom Merry advised me, and Mr. Frayne will know that I'm not ungrateful. Now, I can go, Heaven knows to what? But I shall never become like the Toff. I'll die first!"

"My poor lad," said the Head, in a moved voice, "you seem to suffer now for your rightdoing, not for your wrongdoing, though your wrongdoing was the cause of it in the first place, you must remember that."

"I know it, sir—I know it only too well!"

"You must certainly leave St. Jim's," said the Head slowly. "Even if I could allow you to stay—and I would—it would be impossible for you, with the other boys knowing that you have been in a reformatory. You could never live it down now that they know. But you need not fear for your future, Blane. A boy who has the courage and the strength of mind to do right, as you have done, in the face of such threats, need not fear for his future. You have one good friend in Mr. Frayne, you have another in me, and I shall see, Blane, that you have every chance to redeem yourself."

The tears were running down the junior's cheeks now.

"Oh, sir!"

He could say no more.

"St. Jim's would be no place for you, after this," said Dr. Holmes gently; "but there are other places, Blane, where you can continue your studies, and have every opportunity of making your way in the world, and I will see that you do not suffer for having chosen the right path now. I do not believe in condemning anyone for life for a single transgression, and I am convinced that you are sincerely repentant. Your conduct at this school shows it. You shall have your chance, Blane, and in the future, when this trouble has passed, you will be glad that you did right at this time, when it seemed terribly hard not to do what was wrong."

The doctor held out his hand.

Gerald Blane took it, and his tears fell upon it. He moved blindly from the study, overcome by emotion; and the Head's eyes were moist, too.

The crash had come, but it is probable that Gerald Blane was happier that night than he had been for some time.

The next day Blane was gone from St. Jim's; but he was not forgotten there. His true story won him general sympathy among the best fellows at the school, and Tom Merry & Co. were glad to know that in another place where his history was unknown, an honourable career was opening before the boy whose past had been so cruelly against him.

THE END.

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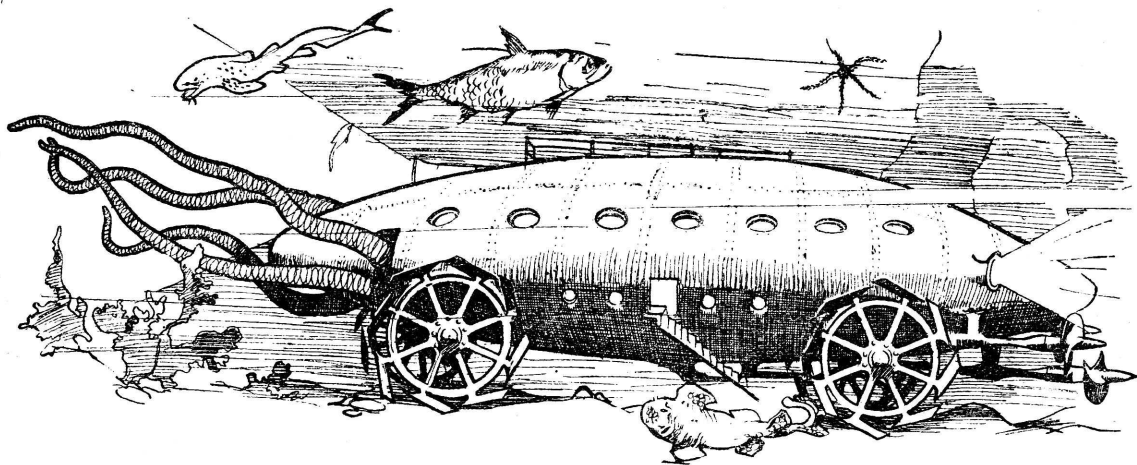
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By REGINALD WRAY.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.**Seen from the Cliff.**

"Cheer up, Dick. Because the Morning Star is three months overdue, that is no reason why she should have gone down with all hands. You admit that your father cruises about in a most erratic manner, travelling wherever fancy takes him. Most likely he was tempted to explore some remote Pacific islands, instead of sailing straight from Sydney to Bombay, en route for home, as he intended."

Dick Dauntless shook his head.

"Even so, he wouldn't be three months entirely out of touch with civilisation," he replied sullenly. "Depend upon it, Jack, some calamity has befallen the yacht. Besides"—he hesitated, then continued speaking quickly and excitedly—"I feel as though something is about to happen."

"Nonsense. What should happen?" cried Jack Orde. "Come on, it's a beautiful night, and a brisk walk will sweep the cobwebs from your brain."

Dick Dauntless nodded consent.

A few minutes later the boys had left the grounds of Weltsea College, and were covering with long, rapid strides, the stretch of moorland which separated the school from the sea.

It was a glorious night; a full moon shone brightly from a starlit heaven.

Presently they reached a spot where the brow of a mighty cliff overhung the sleeping waters of Weltsea Bay.

Stretched at full length on the edge of the cliff, the boys gazed thoughtfully out to sea.

It was a peaceful scene.

Beneath them rolled the restless German Ocean.

Far away in the distance an ocean liner was making her way towards the English Channel and the broad Atlantic.

Closer in shore, two brown-sailed fishing-boats glided by.

For some minutes neither of the boys spoke.

It was Dick Dauntless who first broke the silence.

"I will wait till the end of the month, then if I hear nothing of my father, I will set out in search of him. Old Runthorn, our family solicitor, will let me have the needful."

"What about the Head? He may not let you go."

"Yes he will!" declared Dick, with conviction. "I wish you could come with me," he added thoughtfully.

"I wish I could, old chap," replied Orde ruefully. "But my people are not bloated millionaires like yours. Between ourselves, Dick, I—"

He ceased speaking, for Dick Dauntless had grasped him by the arm, and was pointing excitedly to the beach at the foot of the cliff.

"Good heavens, Jack, what is that?" he ejaculated.

"A wreck, I should say, or, perhaps, an abandoned boat,"

replied his chum, pulling his head and shoulders over the crumbling edge of the cliff that he might catch a better view of a strange object that lay, like a rounded rock, in the sea immediately beneath them.

"It's not a boat, it's too big. Look, it is moving!" cried Jack excitedly.

It was true, the mysterious object was slowly rising from the sea, and crawling higher and higher up the stretch of beach in the centre of the bay.

"It's a submarine!" ejaculated Orde, as he caught the reflection of the moon's rays on the strange construction's glistening side.

"A submarine with feet, then," corrected Dick Dauntless, "or are they wheels?" he added, as he saw four circles of huge, rounded pads revolving slowly, as they dragged their burden nearer and nearer to the face of the cliff.

Inch by inch, foot by foot, this incredibly wondrous thing emerged from the waves, until at length it stood revealed, a veritable house on wheels.

Dick Dauntless and Jack Orde stared in open-eyed amazement at the strange apparition.

Dauntless's grip on Orde's arm tightened. The mighty mass of glistening steel had paused before an enormous rock which barred its way. Suddenly four pairs of writhing tentacles shot from the machine, and wound themselves—in a way horribly suggestive of an octopus seizing its prey—round the obstructing rock.

For a moment the bands tightened, and the next moment the huge stone, which must have weighed several tons, was lifted from its sandy bed, and hurled, with a dull, resounding plunge, into the sea.

"Germans!" said Jack Orde, in hoarse, excited tones.

A low laugh escaped Dick's lips.

"You have invasion on the brain, old chap!" he declared. "There may be Germans on board that strange vehicle, but not enough to capture a troop of Boy Scouts."

For some minutes the chums watched the moving structure in silence.

"Come away, Dick, I don't like it," whispered Jack, at last.

"Not until I have found out more about it," replied Dick doggedly. "Hush!" he added. "See, the top has opened."

It was true.

A circular door had swung back on its hinges, and the next moment a man's head and shoulders was thrust through the opening.

He was not a very tall man, about five foot ten at the most; but as he stood on the sloping roof and gazed, with folded arms, out to sea, there was an air of power, strength, and

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confidence in his pose that left a strange impression upon the two boys.

At first he stood with his back to the unseen watchers; but, after a time, he turned to gaze northward, and Dauntless caught a glimpse of a marble white face, with a profile like that of a Greek statue, save that the lower part of the face was hidden by a short, curling, yellow beard.

"Thank goodness, it's a man. I wouldn't have been surprised to have seen anything come out of that iron house!" cried Orde. "Let's hail him, Dick. If he answers, we'll at least know his nationality."

Before his comrade could stop him, he made a funnel with his hands, and bellowed out.

"Hallo, below there!"

The mysterious stranger turned abruptly on his heels, glanced up the face of the cliff, then stooped as though speaking to somebody inside the vehicle.

The next moment the boys placed their hands before their eyes, half blinded by the fierce beams of a searchlight that flashed from the steel house full upon them.

The light disappeared as quickly as it had arisen, and when they looked again the submarine house had vanished.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

A Strange Theft.

"Well, of all the rummy goes I ever came across, this is the rummiest!" laughed Jack Orde. "What is it? Why did it come? Where has it gone?"

Dick Dauntless did not answer.

His eyes were fixed upon the precipitous face of the cliff some two hundred yards away.

Jack Orde followed his companion's gaze, and a low whistle of astonishment rose from his lips as he saw a small object mounting the rocky face of the cliff.

"It's a bird!" he muttered.

"It's no bird. A bird has not legs and arms!" asserted Dick confidently.

"A monkey, perhaps," suggested Jack.

"Even a monkey can't climb where there's no foothold. There's only the smugglers' path by which anything but a fly could climb the cliff."

"Anyhow, that animal—or whatever it is—is doing it. Come on. We may be in time to catch it as it reaches the top!" cried Jack, rising to his feet, and running swiftly over the rough grass.

But run as they might, they only reached their goal in time to see a small, crouching figure spring over the edge of the cliff, then scurry across the moor like a frightened rabbit.

Whooping with excitement, the two boys dashed in pursuit.

They might as well have chased a swallow through the air as that swift, elusive little form.

It could evidently have outstripped them if it had liked, for it would dart ahead with a strange, grunting cry; then, springing on a protruding rock, await their approach.

But when they dashed forward to secure it it vanished, to reappear amongst the coarse grass some twenty yards ahead.

Once when Jack Orde tripped and sprawled headlong into a clump of gorse, Dick Dauntless could have sworn that a peal of elfin laughter rang in his ears.

Presently, the tall wall encircling the college grounds was reached.

Clambering up a tree close at hand, the creature ran nimbly along a branch, sprang on to the wall, remained poised for a second, then disappeared on the other side.

Neither Dick Dauntless nor Jack Orde felt inclined to follow the example their elusive chase had set, yet were unwilling to give up the chase, and for the next ten minutes searched amongst the trees and evergreens with which the grounds were dotted. But in vain.

As, silent and wondering, they approached the big doors of the college, a window on the ground floor opened, and they saw the creature they had followed from the sea spring out and rush straight towards them.

With outstretched arms, Dick and Jack barred the way.

When but a dozen feet separated him from his would-be captors, the little creature uttered the merriest, wildest, most mischievous laugh the boys had ever heard, and, springing in the air, did a double somersault over their heads, then darted off at full speed down the gravel drive.

"It's human!" declared Dick. "And, being human, can be caught. Come on, Jack!"

But though the boys ran as they had never run before, they only reached the gate in time to see the one they sought running at an incredible speed half-way between the cliff and the college.

As they passed through the hall they met the science-master, and, remembering that it was from the laboratory window the strange figure had sprung, Dick related the latter portion of their adventure.

Mr. Richards, the science-master, turned pale at the

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"THE SCHOOLBOY MILLIONAIRE"

thought of an invader in his laboratory. There were acids and metals there more precious than gold.

Bidding the boys follow, he unlocked the laboratory and entered.

The open window verified their tale.

Overturning a table laden with phials in his haste, Mr. Richards rushed to a corner cupboard, the door of which had been ruthlessly smashed open.

Instinctively his hand flew to the topmost shelf.

A cry of despair burst from his lips.

"It's gone!" he gasped, looking with almost ludicrous dismay from Dick Dauntless to Jack Orde.

"What's gone, sir?" asked the former.

"My bottle of X2 acid—a whole ten ounces of it! The largest quantity ever collected by a single scientist. It cost me months of labour, and hundreds of pounds in cash to manufacture that ten ounces. And now it's gone! Stolen by some ruthless scoundrel!" moaned Mr. Richards.

Tears stood in the scientist's eyes as he spoke; and Dick Dauntless was about to suggest that the school should be turned out in what he felt would prove a vain attempt to capture the thief, when his attention was attracted by a parcel, evidently fallen from the table Mr. Richards had overthrown.

He picked it up, and by the light of an electric lamp over his head saw that it was addressed in clear, bold writing to: "The Renowned Scientist, John Richards."

"Perhaps this will explain the mystery, sir," he said, handing the parcel—a small, square package—to the science-master.

Mr. Richards tore open the wrapper, to find within a sandalwood box, on which was written:

"Please accept the enclosed in payment of ten ounces of X2. Also my regret that circumstances should have compelled me to negotiate a forced sale. CAPTAIN FLAME."

Wonderingly Mr. Richards opened the box. Within lay a massive antique ring set with a cameo cut from an enormous ruby.

The stone was of incalculable value, and to a certain extent consoled the scientist for his loss.

"It's a king's gift," he declared. "All the same, I'll get my X2 back, if I have to bring half Scotland Yard down here to do it!"

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Kidnapped.

Dick Dauntless retired to bed, but not to sleep.

Every time he closed his eyes his heated fancy conjured up the tall, spare form of the unknown standing on the roof of the wondrous submarine caravan.

At length he passed into a fitful slumber, from which he awoke with a strange, mournful sound ringing in his ears.

"What's that?" he muttered, starting up in bed.

"You heard it, then, Dick?" queried Jack Orde, who was sitting up on the bed adjoining that of his chum's.

"Yes—that is, if there really was a sound. But I was half-asleep at the time, and—"

"It was no dream. Listen! There it is again!" interrupted Orde, holding up his hand as, through the open window, came a long-drawn, mournful cry, such as neither listener had ever heard before.

"Hang it all, Jack, I can't stand this! I'm going to find out what it means!" cried Dick, springing out of bed and rapidly throwing on his clothes.

"I'm with you!" agreed Jack Orde, following suit.

Day was just breaking. A slight mist rising from the ground promised a hot day.

"I say, Dick!"

"Well?"

"What about the house on wheels we saw last night?"

"What about it?" asked Dick.

"Do you think it liked the sound comes from that?"

Dick Dauntless shook his head.

The problem was unsolvable.

"Which way?" continued Jack Orde, turning to his companion, whom he was accustomed to follow as a leader.

"The window, of course. Old Jinks, the night watchman, is sure to be prowling about the hall," was the reply.

As the words left the boy's lips the weird, mysterious cry sounded through the still, morning air once more.

Louder, wilder, more unearthly than before, it ended in a kind of wailing cry, as though impatient at their delay.

Jack Orde laid a detaining hand on his chum's shoulder.

"I don't like it, Dick—it's uncanny!" he declared, in low awestruck tones.

"Then don't come!" retorted Dick, with unwonted shortness.

Noiselessly throwing up the lower sash, he crept out, hung for a moment by his hands whilst his groping feet sought a stone ledge on the top of one of the windows, then made his way to a jutting porch that shaded a side door.

Barely had he reached the ground ere Jack Orde dropped to his side.

"Coming, then!" ejaculated Dick.

"Where you go I'll go. But, all the same, I don't like it," declared Jack.

"Rot!" retorted Dick. "Come on, stick to the grass."

As they reached the moor the sun rose in all its full summer splendour.

The bay reached, they stood for some minutes looking down upon the rocky wall of cliff which hemmed in the tiny bay.

"There's nothing here. We have been drawn out of our warm beds by a dream," said Dick at last.

"The first time I have ever heard a dream!" grinned Jack Orde.

Dick nodded.

"That was real enough, at any rate," he admitted. "But, after all, it was most likely a wandering cow calling its calf—although it seems to me that it would have required a whole herd of cows to have produced that volume of sound."

"Don't know. Noises always seem much louder in the stillness of early morning," replied Jack; adding, with a laugh: "Whither now, my gallant leader? Should we hie us back to bed? It is one of the annoying things of nature that when you are up you want to be in bed, when you are in bed you want to be up."

"Bed me no beds," misquoted Dick. "At any rate, not until we have had a swim."

"A swim, a swim! My kingdom for a swim!" shouted Jack. And the next moment they were racing to the northern extremity of the bay, down which was a rugged but little-used road known as Smugger's Path.

The tide was out, and, having negotiated the rugged descent, the boys raced along the wide stretch of clean, firm yellow sand towards a tiny cave, used by the boys as a bathing-hut.

Ere they reached the mouth of the cave Dick Dauntless, who was leading, came to an abrupt halt and pointed with none too steady a hand at a double row of circular depressions printed deep in the yielding sand.

For nearly a minute the boys gazed at the oval marks in speechless astonishment.

"What are they—footprints?" queried Jack Orde, in low, hushed tones.

Dick Dauntless shook his head. "Don't you remember the strangely-shaped wheels on which the thing we saw last night moved?" he asked.

Jack Orde nodded, but made no reply.

Thoughtfully Dick removed his clothes and laid them on a rock in the centre of the cave.

Jack Orde shuddered as he thought of the strange monster that might be lurking beneath the calm sea. But he shook off the nervous dread that oppressed him, and, with a loud whoop, waded waist-deep into the sea, then, arching his back, plunged beneath the waves.

As he rose, shaking the salt water from his head, Dick Dauntless emerged from the cave and, with the waves lapping his feet, cried:

"I'll give you thirty seconds' start and race you once round the bay!"

"Right-ho!" came back the answer.

The cheery acceptance of the challenge was followed by a loud, piercing cry of terror; and Dick Dauntless stood as though turned to stone when he saw a black, sinuous streak twined round his chum's naked body and saw him held aloft in the grasp of what looked like a thick, wire rope, then drawn swiftly beneath the surface.

Careless of everything save that his chum was in danger, Dick Dauntless hurled himself into the sea and swam vigorously towards the spot where he had last seen Jack Orde.

He was a magnificent swimmer, the holder of the school long-distance championship; and before the waters, agitated by Jack's disappearance, had calmed down he was treading water and looking wildly over the undulating waves.

Suddenly something hard and icy-cold closed relentlessly round his waist, and he felt his body encircled by a writhing band of steel.

For the first time in his life Dick Dauntless knew what fear was. His hair seemed rising on his head, his blood

seemed turned to ice, a deadly chill crept down his spine; yet even when he was plunged beneath the waves and borne at terrific speed through the water he managed to keep sufficient control over his nerves to note that the tentacle was drawing him swiftly towards a darkened doorway, which opened like a huge mouth to receive him.

A moment later he was plunged into darkness. Then he felt the water recede, and, opening his mouth, found that he could breathe freely.

Barely had he made this discovery ere a door opposite the one by which he had entered glided on one side, and he found himself in a luxuriously appointed room, in the centre of which stood the man he had seen on the roof of the submarine house the previous night.

A paroxysm of ungovernable rage shook Dick Dauntless's frame. Clenching his fist, he struck with all his force at the white, stern, motionless face of the stranger.

But ere the blow could fall the stranger's hand closed round his wrist with a strong, sure grip that made the enraged boy feel as though his arm were embedded in a mass of solid steel.

For nearly a minute boy and man confronted each other, face to face, eye to eye.

A wondrously sweet smile softened the stern lines of the unknown's face—a smile before which Dick Dauntless found his anger swiftly evaporating.

"Fear nothing, my lad! So long as you serve me faithfully and without question no harm shall befall you," declared his captor.

"Why should I serve you? By what right have you brought me here?" poured in indignant queries from the boy's agitated lips.

"You will serve me at first because you have no option but to do so; soon, I hope, of your own free will. As to my right to press you into my service, you will ere long learn that Captain Flame acknowledges no right but that of his own will," was the haughty reply.

"Welcome, Dick Dauntless! Welcome to Captain Flame's kingdom—a kingdom greater than that enjoyed by any king or emperor on land!" he added, his voice shrill with rising excitement. "Mine is the whole boundless expanse over which the restless waters of the mighty ocean roll; mine trackless forests of marine vegetation, wide, sweeping plains, mighty caverns. Mine is a kingdom such as man has never before even dreamt of, stretching from pole to pole, encircling in one unbeaten line the very globe itself.

"To you, and to those whom I have chosen, belong the delights of traversing unchecked, unforbidden, the whole of its mighty limits. There is none to say us nay. The armies of the world cannot stop us, the navies of the world can never track us down. Does your heart covet riches? The spoils of a thousand galleys are within your reach—pearls from unknown beds, mines which no hands but ours may work. Would you acquire knowledge? Creatures living beyond reach of the longest fathom line can be studied and classified. There is not a living atom in the sea, a fish swimming in its upper surface, or a creature crawling on its bottom, the sea shall not reveal to you. This and more is at the disposal of those whom Captain Flame calls his friends."

Whilst speaking the strange being's whole frame seemed to expand, his lean body grew more erect, his eyes flashed with a deep, burning intensity; he spoke in loud, rolling, sonorous tones, and, despite his anger, despite his anxiety for his chum, Dick felt his nerves tingling with excitement and pleasurable anticipation of he scarcely knew what.

As suddenly as it had arisen, Captain Flame's enthusiasm abated. Dropping into his usual quiet, almost drawing voice, he said:

"Enough; you shall see and judge for yourself. Pass through yonder door. Though a brave lad, your companion lacks the courage and strength you enjoy. Tell him that Captain Flame has passed his word that no ill shall befall him."

Pointing to a panelled doorway, Dick's strange captor left the room by another exit.

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NEXT WEEK: "THE BLACK HOUSE ON THE MOOR." and "DEEP SEA GOLD." ORDER EARLY!

A Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By REGINALD WRAY.



Dick Dauntless stood as though turned to stone, as he saw a black, sinuous streak, like a thick wire rope, twine itself round his chum's body!

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Mopsa Introduces Himself.

Eager to find Jack Orde, Dick Dauntless thrust open the door Captain Flame indicated. He found himself in a comfortably furnished room or cabin, containing two bunks, on one of which lay the form of his friend.

The boy was trembling in every limb, and moaning pitiably.

"What, Jack, old chap! Cheer up! We are not dead yet, though by all rules we ought to be, for, so far as I can guess, we are at the bottom of Weltsea Bay," cried Dick cheerfully, as he laid his hand on his chum's arm.

Jack Orde started up, unspeakable terror shining from his eyes; then, as he recognised his chum, he rolled over on his face, and burst into a flood of hysterical tears.

For some minutes Dick left him alone; then, as his sobs grew fainter, he seated himself on the side of the bunk, and, in as matter of fact tones as his own excitement would allow, repeated his conversation with Captain Flame.

Jack had nothing to tell. All was blank from the time he was dragged under the waves until he found himself in the bunk on which he now lay.

"What are we to do, Dick? How can we escape?" he asked, as he grew more calm.

"I'm not sure that I wish to escape," replied Dick. "Captain Flame has passed his word that no harm shall befall us, so I do not see why we should not get as much fun and enjoyment out of the adventure as possible. Especially as," he added, with a dry laugh, "for the life of me I cannot see how we are to avoid it."

"What will the Head and the chaps think?" wondered Jack.

Dick shrugged his shoulders.

"It will be a bit of a puzzle to them, and—" He ceased speaking, then added: "By Jove, old chap, they'll find our clothes in the cave, and think we're drowned! Oh, hang it all, we must get back to shore, even if it's only to let our friends know we are all right!"

Seeing Jack Orde was in danger of relapsing into his former state of misery, he changed the subject by saying quickly:

"Talking about clothes, hope they are not going to keep us like this long."

A faint smile lessened the strained look of unhappiness on Orde's face.

"Like the betting man who hears of a good thing, I'd like a little on," he confessed.

Barely had the words left his lips ere a sliding panel, immediately behind him opened.

Anxiously the boys awaited what might next betide.

Jack Orde had just moved forward to investigate, when a large bundle hurtled through the opening, and, catching him full in the face, sent him sprawling on the floor.

Dick Dauntless turned an indignant face towards the opening. It was a false move. A second bundle struck him on the head with such force as to send him staggering back on the top of his unfortunate chum.

As the two lads rolled on the floor, Dick Dauntless caught a fleeting glance of a small, laughing face peering at him through the aperture.

Jack Orde did not see it, but both boys agreed that an irresistibly merry peal of laughter had come from beyond the sliding panel.

Rubbing the lower part of his body, upon which Dick Dauntless had alighted with no light weight, Jack Orde rose to his feet.

Similarly engaged with the back of his head, Dick Dauntless followed suit.

"Well, of all the—" began Jack Orde.

"Certainly! Them's my sentiments," grinned Dick. "We have seen the serious side of this submarine caboose. I'm glad somebody about the place has got an idea of humour."

"Humour, do you call it?" groaned Jack, whose interior economy was still a bit upset.

Dick Dauntless made no further remarks. He was otherwise engaged.

Attached to one of the bundles was an ordinary luggage label, a perusal of which revealed the words:

"R. Dauntless, Esq. For outward application only."

Jack's name and a similar direction was on the other bundle.

"They seem to know who we are, at any rate, Jack. Let's see what kind of medicine they have prescribed for us."

As Dick Dauntless spoke he untied the string with which his bundle was secured, and found within a complete outfit, consisting of a suit of clothes, shirt, pants, socks, and shoes, of a peculiarly pliable leather, with thick soles of some closely woven fibre.

The two boys regarded the garments curiously. They were made of a soft, elastic material of a brownish-green colour, and, to their surprise, fitted them as though fresh from the shop of a first-class West End tailor.

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"THE SCHOOLBOY MILLIONAIRE"

is the Title of the Splendid, Complete School Tale of Harry Wharton & Co. appearing in this week's "MAGNET" Library. Now on Sale. One Penny.

"Well, I'm jiggered! They must have taken our measurements whilst we were asleep in our little cots at Weltsea," declared Jack Orde.

It was not until some time afterwards they discovered that the fit was due to the elastic nature of the material, which accommodated itself to the size and shape of the wearer's body.

"This is better," cried Dick Dauntless, stretching his limbs. "Hallo, how on earth did you get here?" he added, turning to a small figure squatted on the side of the topmost bunk.

There was no mistaking the nationality of their strange visitor, his small, almond-shaped eyes, yellow skin, and long pigtail proclaimed him a Chinaman.

But such a Chinaman!

Though perfectly formed, he was barely three feet in height, and had the merriest, most roguish-looking face the boys had ever seen on a human being.

"What is it?" gasped Jack Orde.

"It's not a it, it's a he," retorted the little creature, adding, with an air of comical dignity: "Mopsa a great man in his own county."

"I shouldn't have thought you were a great man in any county," laughed Dick.

The creature sprang bolt upright, and, folding its arms, replied, in crushing tones:

"Sir, you no gentleman; just a common, everyday person."

Dick's fingers closed round the little chap's neck. He shook him playfully.

"You little rascal!" he cried. "Sit there!" He lifted Mopsa on to the side of the bunk. "Now tell us what place this is, and who is Captain Flame."

Mopsa's narrow slits of eyes softened into an expression of doglike affection.

"Captain Flame best, kindest, greatest man ever lived," he declared earnestly. "He knows everything; he does everything. He invented this house on wheels. He makes the clothes we wear from seaweeds. He walks at the bottom of the sea as though on dry land. He fears nothing. He saved Mopsa from big fellers who were going to eat him."

Then the little chap dropped his voice and glanced fearfully around, as he added:

"Captain Flame, he terrible; he frowns and people die. When the mad fit is on him he no man, he one great, big debil. You love him, you hate him. He your biggest enemy; he your greatest friend."

"A bit contradictory, eh, Jack?" whispered Dick.

"He likes you," continued Mopsa. "He says you got more courage than all the rest of the young white trash."

"Is there anyone else here besides us?" asked Dick.

Mopsa held up five fingers.

"Five, eh? How did they get here?"

"How you came; all same way," explained Mopsa.

At that moment the tinkling of a distant bell fell on their ears.

"That's the captain. He wants you in chart-room," said Mopsa, leading the way from the cabin.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Within the Octopus.

Dauntless and Orde were ushered into a small but well-appointed room, in the centre of which was a round table, covered with what they at first sight took to be a many-coloured cloth.

Calm, pale, inscrutable as ever, Captain Flame sat in a comfortably upholstered revolving armchair before the table.

He looked up as the boys entered, and greeted them with a kindly, encouraging smile, which seemed somehow to banish the lads' anxieties and fears.

"You have made Mopsa's acquaintance, I see. I warn you to be careful in your dealings with him. Never was so large a quantity of mischief bound up in so small a parcel," said Captain Flame, playfully pulling the Chinaman's pigtail.

"Ah!" he added, pointing to the table before him. "There's a sight that should do an Englishman's heart good to see!"

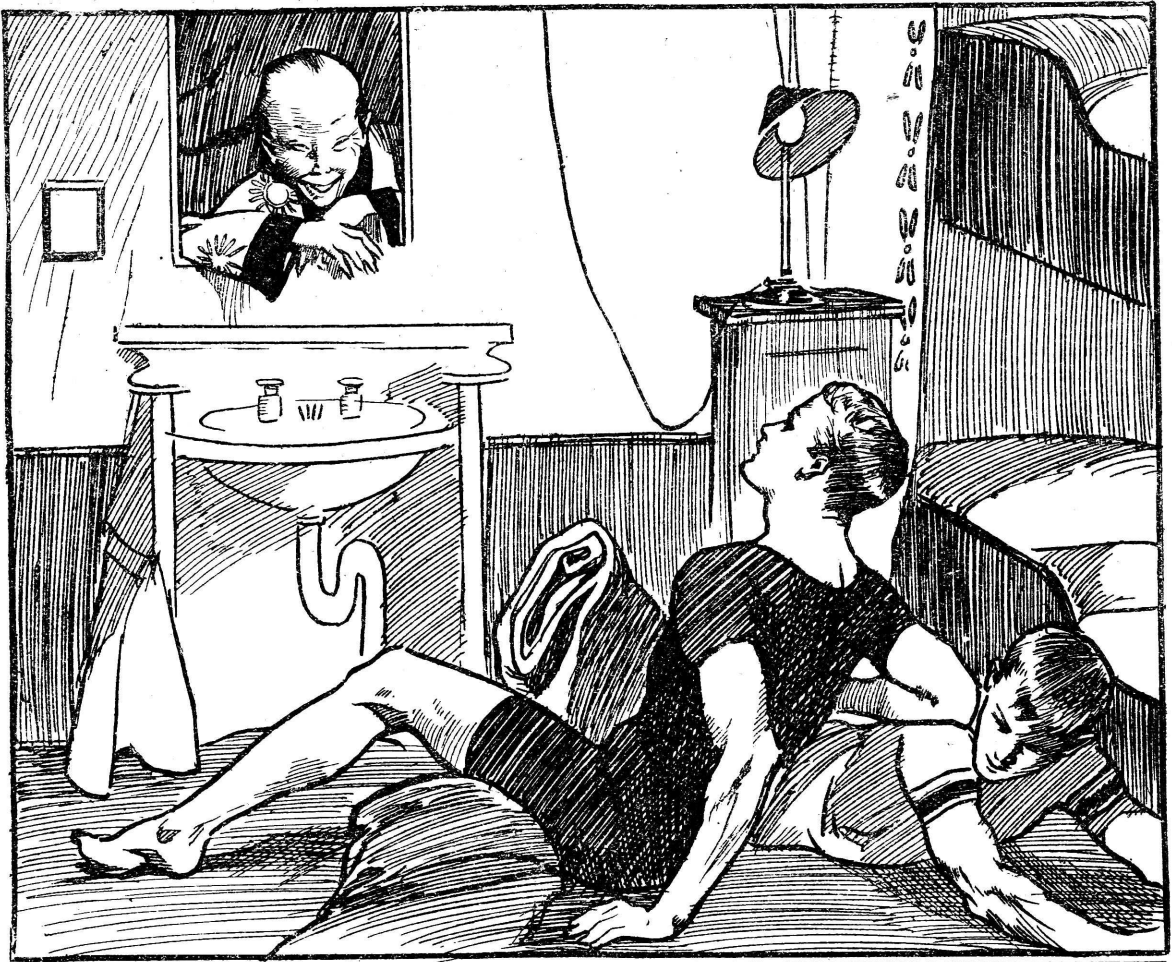
The boys leaned eagerly forward.

What they had taken to be a coloured tablecloth, was in reality an improved camera obscura, which, like the periscope of a submarine, showed what was taking place on the surface of the ocean.

Displayed upon the table was a wide expanse of ocean, across which, moving with the regularity of clockwork, swept a huge fleet of battleships, with swift cruisers on either flank, destroyers darting hither and thither as an advance guard.

From every ship fluttered the glorious folds of the White Ensign, and the boys knew that the British fleet was passing high above their heads.

"Now, my lads," said Captain Flame, as the fleet passed from view, "I hope you have forgiven the unceremonious way in which I brought you on board. It was no accident



As the two lads rolled on the floor, Dick Dauntless caught a glimpse of a small laughing face peering at them through the aperture in the wall. (See page 24.)

which brought me to Weltsea Bay. I came with a double purpose. First, to secure a certain acid known as X2, of which I had run short. The second reason of my visit to Weltsea Bay was to fetch the son of one whose yacht has mysteriously disappeared somewhere in the Pacific Ocean."

Dick Dauntless started.

"You mean my father? You knew him?" he cried excitedly.

Captain Flame bowed assent.

"You say his yacht has gone down. Do you think he is—?" Dick paused to control his feelings. "Do you think he is dead?" he asked, in low, hushed, anxious tones.

"I cannot say, my boy. I think not; I hope not. Nor do I know what has become of the yacht. To find it is why I am hastening as quickly as my moving house, the Octopus, can carry us back to the Pacific."

He paused, then added abruptly:

"Come, lads, let me show you the wonders of the Octopus. First," he added, pointing once more to the table, "look your last upon Europe."

The boys obeyed, and gazing upon the table, saw a mass of jagged rocks, surmounted by a lighthouse, flash swiftly on the scene.

"The Casquettes!" gasped Dick, who remembered seeing these dangerous rocks on his voyage to England. "We cannot be in the Atlantic already!"

"We are, the Octopus is no sluggard. See!"

He touched one of the buttons before him as he spoke.

Immediately revolving shutters flew up on three sides of the room, revealing a scurry of foaming water splashing against the sides, beyond which could be seen the huge wheels, that bore the wondrous moving house, revolving rapidly.

Ahead appeared a wide vista of dark blue water, lightened by the beams of a powerful searchlight.

"The drawback to moving quickly is that our view of the

ocean on either side is subdued. I will slow down," said Captain Flame, touching a lever by the side of his chair as he spoke.

Immediately the water became cleared, and the boys were lost in wonder and amazement as they gazed for the first time upon the wonders of the sea.

Huge fish moved sluggishly along the ocean bed, the smaller denizens of the deep flashed swiftly in and out of waving masses of seaweed.

"That will do for the present, you will have ample time to feast your eyes upon the scenery of my submarine empire," declared Captain Flame. "I will show you over the vessel, and introduce you to your future comrades."

A touch of a lever closed the iron shutters which protected the plate glass sides, whilst the depression of a button sent the Octopus rushing forward at its former enormous speed.

Captain Flame touched a bell-push. A bell tinkled at a distant part of the Octopus.

A minute later a strongly-built, hard-featured man entered the apartment.

"This is Mr. McIntyre, my engineer," said Captain Flame, introducing the new-comer to the boys.

Wiping his hands on a piece of waste, the engineer shook hands with the two boys.

"Likely looking youngsters, Captain Flame, sir," grunted McIntyre. "Hope I'll never have you, lads, in the engine-room, much though I'd like to."

"Mr. McIntyre isn't an Irishman, though you might think so from his last remark," laughed Captain Flame, seeing the look of amused bewilderment on the boys' faces. "The engine-room of the Octopus is where boys are sent as a punishment. We maintain strict discipline here; but I think you will find that I am never unjust."

As he spoke, Captain Flame led the way down a narrow corridor, from the further end of which came a sound of many voices.

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NEXT WEEK: "THE BLACK HOUSE ON THE MOOR," and "DEEP SEA GOLD." ORDER EARLY!
A Tale of Tom Merry & Co. BY REGINALD WRAY.

Throwing open a door Captain Flame entered a fair-sized room. On either side of this room were neatly-curtained, comfortable-looking bunks, beyond which could be seen the plate-glass walls of this strange submarine car, so that the occupants of the bunks could lie down and watch the varied scenery through which they passed.

Engaged in some noisy game at a table were four boys.

For nearly a minute Captain Flame and his two companions watched the lads, who, absorbed in their game, were unconscious of their presence, until one of them, chancing to look up, saw the little group standing in the doorway.

Immediately the game ceased, and the boys, springing to their feet, stood in attitudes of respectful attention.

"Sorry to interrupt your game, lads. I have brought two companions to replace the two we left behind at the works.—Tom Allstraw."

A tall, manly boy of about Dick's own age, with a keen intelligent face, approached.

The new-comers surveyed Tom Allstraw critically, as boys will do, then instinctively held out their hands, which the other took just as a second boy summoned by Captain Flame came up.

"This is Will Avery," said Allstraw. "He'd make his fortune on the stage as an acrobat anywhere. This is Charlie Steel, our baby," he added, turning to a delicate-looking youngster of about twelve, who came eagerly forward to shake hands with the new-comers.

"And this is Harry Monston," added the boy.

Dick noted that Tom made no remark whilst introducing this lad.

Harry Monston was a well-built, if somewhat thin lad, of about seventeen. His handsome face was marred by a morose expression, intensified by the almost Asiatic darkness of his complexion.

"Should I show Dauntless and Orde their bunks, sir?" asked Allstraw.

"Presently, I am going to show them round the Octopus. You can come if you like," replied Captain Flame, retracing his steps a short distance.

Descending a short flight of stairs he flung open a huge iron door.

Immediately the boy's ears were assailed with a loud, clanking noise, as of machinery in motion.

"The engine-room," shouted Captain Flame, his voice almost drowned by the volume of sound that floated around them.

They found themselves surrounded on all sides by swiftly-moving wheels. Strangely-shaped cranks revolved in the centre of enormous shafts moved backwards and forwards from iron-banded cylinders.

At the extreme end of the engine-room a boy was polishing the steel head of one of the cylinders. He was stripped to the waist, perspiration poured in streams from his naked body.

The noise of machinery had drowned the new-comers' approach, but warned of their presence by the draught of cool, refreshing air through the open door, he raised a scowling face, and looked at Tom Allstraw with such a world of hatred shining from his eyes, that Dick almost instinctively moved closer to his new friend as though to protect him.

Captain Flame stepped to the front.

In a moment the worker dropped his eyes and resumed his previous occupation; but as, in response to a touch on his shoulder, Dick turned to follow the others from the engine-room, he saw the boy shoot a sullen, venom-laden glance after the inventor.

"Who was that chap at work in the engine-room?" asked Dick, as soon as the door, closing behind them, shut out the grinding roar of wheels.

"He is Karl Munchen, a German, the only black sheep in our little family," was the reply. "I don't like to say anything against a fellow in trouble, but he's a bad egg, if ever there was one."

"What was he doing there?" asked Jack Orde.

"He was bullying little Charlie Steel. I gave him the thrashing he deserved, and the matter would have ended there, but Captain Flame came in just as I had finished. When he heard what the row was about, he sentenced Karl to three days' cleaning the machinery whilst in motion."

Ere Dick could make any comments, Captain Flame, who had mounted a short iron ladder that led to a trap in the ceiling beckoned Dick Dauntless and Jack Orde to follow.

They did so, and found themselves in the most wonderful compartment of that wonderful house.

On every side were mirrors arranged so as to reflect the whole scene through which they were passing.

Immediately before was an enormous tube through which appeared the uneven bed of sea over which they were travelling.

Dick Dauntless glanced inquiringly at Captain Flame.

"There are five lenses varying between six and eighteen THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 184.

"THE SCHOOLBOY MILLIONAIRE"

inches in thickness in that tube, so that in reality you are standing at the eyepiece of an enormous telescope," explained the inventor. "But stand aside, my lad, you're obstructing the steersman's vision," he added, with a smile.

Dick obeyed, and glanced behind him to see Mopsa squatted, tailor fashion, on a round stool immediately before a small wheel, which now and again revolved rapidly beneath his touch, as he steered the Octopus clear of some obstruction.

"Everyone on board except myself, has to take a spell at the wheel, so, as we have no idlers here, you'd better stop behind to take your first lesson in steering from Mopsa," said Captain Flame, turning to Jack Orde.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

A Savage Attack.

Leaving Jack with Mopsa, Captain Flame led Dick Dauntless back to the chart-room in the forepart of the vessel.

Barely had he crossed the threshold ere he hastened to the plate-glass wall and gazed in alarm at what looked like nothing so much as a huge moving mountain, which glided without apparent effort across the rays of the searchlight.

"It is a bull whale!" muttered the inventor. "One of the few creatures the Octopus fears."

Even as the words left his lips he sprang to the levers, for the whale annoyed by the searchlight, or, perhaps, by the appearance of so strange an intruder in his domains, wheeled swiftly round.

The next moment Dick Dauntless was gazing in horror at a huge, blunt nose, surmounted by an enormous frontal bone, that towered a dozen feet above the summit of the Octopus. With a single movement of its fluked tail the bull whale hurled its huge bulk at the submarine house.

The animal's enormous head struck the car with fearful force that sent all within sprawling to the floor.

The solid structure swayed and trembled, then rose on end like a rearing horse.

Ere she could settle down the whale charged again, this time inflicting a slanting blow on the upturned bottom, which sent the huge vehicle rolling on to its side, and the next moment Dick Dauntless found himself stretched upon what had been the walls of the apartment.

Cries of terror and groans of pain resounded from the interior of the car, above which arose the calm tones of Captain Flame crying:

"Hold on, for your lives, lads! If she strikes again we are doomed! No construction made by human hands can withstand another such onslaught."

As Captain Flame's ominous words resounded in his ears, Dick Dauntless scrambled to his feet.

With difficulty retaining a foothold on the slippery glass he awaited with breathless anxiety the final charge of the enraged whale.

The Octopus trembled like a terror-stricken thing of life as her huge wheels revolved rapidly, the lower one tearing its way deep into the rocky bed of the ocean.

A terror-laden, anxious minute followed.

Presently Dick ventured to look round.

Captain Flame had disappeared.

A minute later the wheels ceased to revolve, and he knew that calm and collected as ever Captain Flame had stopped the engines.

A fearful silence obtained throughout the overturned car. The cries of alarm had ceased.

Nothing could be heard save a strange, ominous creaking, which seemed to come from every part of the Octopus at once.

It was as though she groaned beneath an enormous pressure which was straining her plates to bursting-point.

Fortunately, the electric light still sent its bright beams through the room.

Looking up at what had been the side of the apartment, Dick saw that the plate-glass was completely covered by some heavy, dark grey substance.

What had happened? Were all on board the Octopus killed? Was he left to perish miserably in that glass coffin beneath the waves?

Determined to find out the worst, he moved towards the door.

The next moment he sprang eagerly forward as Captain Flame's head and shoulders appeared above what had been the side of the door.

"Is the Octopus injured, sir?" he demanded breathlessly.

"That I am going to find out. You can come if you like," replied the inventor, as coolly as though they were still pursuing an even course over the ocean bed.

(To be continued in next Thursday's number of the "GEM" Library. Will regular readers kindly hand this number containing the open g instalment of "Deep Sea Gold" on to their friends.—The EDITOR.)



A splendid tale dealing with the thrilling adventures of a trio of Britishers.

A Brief Resume of the Previous Installments.

Three friends—Bob Hardy, Ralph Chesterton, and Tom Manton—meet accidentally in Cairo, and are despatched by an eccentric millionaire to the small South American State of Tecsaguay on an errand of mercy. This consists of putting a stop to the slaughter which the Venebia, Tecsaguay's one modern battleship, is inflicting upon the unprotected inhabitants of Argendor, a hostile State.

Arrived in Elvasgo, the capital of Tecsaguay, the three friends interview the President, and learn that the Venebia is about to start upon another expedition of slaughter.

By means of a trick they lure the crew of the battleship on to the shore, and go aboard, to find but three men on guard. They have overpowered these without much difficulty when suddenly Tom utters a warning cry: "Look out, Bob!" The engineer turns quickly, to see his old enemy, Halil Ahmed, the Arab, aiming a savage thrust at him.

(Now go on with the story.)

The Price of Victory.

The weapon descended with terrible swiftness, and Bob Hardy thought that his last moment had come. But suddenly, like a flash of lightning, a form darted in between him and the descending blade. The whole thing happened in the fraction of a second, and the thud of the knife could plainly be heard as it struck Tom Manton's form and buried itself almost to the hilt in his shoulder.

He involuntarily uttered a cry of agony, and sank to the deck. Halil Ahmed, seeing what he had done, turned round swiftly, and took a clean dive overside, before, in fact, Bob or Ralph could put out a hand to stop him.

The former had seen partly what had occurred, and his eyes were blazing and his teeth were set firm as he drew his revolver and leaped over the rail. He felt no compunction whatever in performing this act of vengeance—of justice.

Crack!

Almost simultaneously with the report a shriek rang out, and the Arab could be seen struggling in the water. He had plainly been hit, but whether fatally or not Bob could not tell. He did not wait further to see, but hurried across to where Ralph was bending over their fallen comrade.

"What is it?" whispered Bob hoarsely.

Ralph looked up with a terribly serious face. Tears were in his eyes, and when he spoke his voice had a break in it. He held in his hand the deadly knife, covered now with Tom's life-blood.

"He's done for, Bob," he whispered, his voice quivering with emotion; "the blood's simply pouring out of his shoulder. What shall we do—what shall we do? He's given his life to save yours, Bob. Poor old Tom!"

The civil engineer bent down, all thoughts of their mission banished.

"He's not dead," he cried; "he can't be dead, Ralph! Tom—Tom, tell us— Ah!"

The wounded man had opened his eyes, and in the light of one of the lamps they could see a forced smile appear on his features.

"It's all right, old fellows," he murmured. "Don't worry about me; get on with the business. That brute would have killed you, Bob, so I had to do something. I'm afraid I'm done for, but—"

His eyes closed again, and Bob tried hard to swallow the lump which had risen in his throat. This was a terrible climax to their long list of successes, and he grasped Tom's hand convulsively.

"Don't say that, old man," he cried passionately. "We can pull you through. What does it matter about this confounded ship now?"

"You'll have to do the work," whispered Tom, opening his eyes again. "We don't want to be all killed, Bob, do we? Just bind this gap up, and shove me in the launch. I shall be all right there till you've done."

"But we can't leave you!" cried Ralph, in agony. "We might come back and find you dead."

Tom managed to smile again, although it could be seen that he was suffering untold pain.

"Rats! After all, I don't think I'm so bad as I first thought. It's in my shoulder; and as I'm a hardy sort of beggar, I may pull through. But buck up and get the work over; you're wasting all the best time."

The other two realised this now, and were tremendously cheered by their chum's words. During the first dreadful moment they had thought that he was dying, but now they realised that although his wound was a very serious one, it was not necessarily fatal.

"Rush below to one of the bunks and find a sheet," cried Bob, starting to his feet suddenly. "Here we are talking, and neglecting the wound. We'll soon have you fixed up, Tom, old chap."

In a moment the two of them were on their feet, active and alert. Tom had dropped back on to the deck, partially unconscious. His action had been one of the bravest of the brave. He knew positively well when he sprang in front of Bob that he himself would receive the knife-thrust. Yet he had done it as though the consequences would be light, as though there had been no danger whatever.

Tom Manton was a hero—a credit to his Majesty's Navy. He had risked his life to save a friend, and a pluckier action than that would be impossible to perform.

The Fuse is Laid.

Crash!

The deck of the Venebia quivered as a mighty clap of thunder roared out overhead. The storm, which had been gathering for an hour or two past, was on the verge of breaking. The air was still calm and breezeless, and, so far, no rain had fallen.

"Have you got everything fixed?"

It was Ralph Chesterton who asked the question. He and Bob had just met in one of the corridors below, and the latter, who had just emerged from the magazine, hurried onwards to the companion.

"Yes," he replied. "The fuse is set to go off in ten minutes, so we'd better be shifting. There's tons of explosive material there, and when it goes off it will blow a hole clean through the bottom of the ship."

"There's no chance it may fail?" inquired Ralph, as they hurried upwards. Both of them spoke in a subdued tone of voice, and all the heartiness and good humour seemed to have left them. Their thoughts all the while they were doing their work were fixed upon their injured comrade.

"Chance it may fail?" repeated Bob. "Not the slightest. When the magazine blows up nothing can possibly save the ship from destruction. At last she is to be rendered helpless, unable to perpetrate further vile deeds of massacre."

They reached the deck, and as they did so again the thunder roared out overhead. Bob looked up at the sky critically.

"It'll break before long," he exclaimed. "We want to be clear of Elvasgo before it finally does so. Hurry up; time won't wait for us, you know!"

They hastened down the accommodation ladder, and stepped aboard the little motor-launch. Tom was there, bound up, and half unconscious with loss of blood and pain from his wound. By rights he should have been attended to immediately, but there was no time for that. He did not look up as they stepped aboard, but lay there with pale face and closed eyes.

The next minute the launch was scudding across the bay at full speed, and the battleship was laying dark and silent on the surface of the ominously still waters. It was much darker now, and the two chums, as they sat silent and grave in their places, could scarcely distinguish the battleship's outline. Now and again a flickering flash of lightning would rip its way across the sky.

Ashore, several lights could be seen glimmering from the houses of the capital. For some reason the street lamps were not illuminated, doubtless because there was no one left in charge of the gasworks. In consequence, the houses themselves were left without lights. At such a time as this the matter was a trivial one, but to the comrades it was quite the opposite; they were delighted, and welcomed the friendly darkness.

"The ten minutes are up, aren't they?" exclaimed Ralph suddenly, after a long silence. They were nearing the quay-side now. Bob glanced at his watch by the light of a little electric lamp which hung over the engine.

"One minute yet," he exclaimed briefly.

Somehow both of them were disinclined to talk. The tragic happening which had resulted in Tom's disablement had taken all the life out of them; the spice of the adventure had vanished, and their sole thoughts now were to get away, and let their chum have the proper attention he needed.

(To be concluded.)

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 184.

NEXT WEEK: "THE BLACK HOUSE ON THE MOOR." and "DEEP SEA GOLD." ORDER EARLY!

A Tale of Tom Merry & Co.

By REGINALD WEAY.

OUR NEW WEEKLY FEATURE

**"The Black House on the Moor."**

This is the title of our next week's story of St. Jim's, and as my friends will guess, more than a touch of romance will run through this rousing school story. The terrible position in which Cousin Ethel, the juniors' girl chum, finds herself, arouses all the chivalrous instincts of Tom Merry & Co., and in the midnight rescue expedition which leads to the culminating point in a series of the most thrilling episodes, Figgins, of the New House, is most prominent. You will find "The Black House on the Moor" one of the most powerful and interesting school tales you have ever read.

What is Your Verdict?

Well, by the time you turn to these few lines from Your Editor's pen, you will probably have read the opening chapters of our grand new serial, "Deep Sea Gold," which are contained in this issue. The great question which is agitating my mind is: What will my chums' verdict be? Not that I have any real doubt really what the verdict will be, but I feel as if I must hear from your very own selves, my readers, how much you like and how you enjoy reading the latest prize I have secured for you. I feel sure that my judgment will not prove at fault over this wonderful story, which becomes better and better, if possible, as it goes on. So write me a postcard, each of you, my friends and readers, just to satisfy me, whatever your opinion is, of Reginald Wray's latest masterpiece.

"DEEP SEA GOLD."**Another Letter from a Girl Reader.**

Printed below is a letter which I have received from another of my numerous girl readers, who lives in far-off South Africa. Like so many of my letters, it contains suggestions, and also some information.

"Doornfontein,
"Johannesburg.

"Dear Editor,—I have been taking in the GEM for the last three years, and although I happen to be a girl, I thoroughly enjoy your ripping yarns.

"If you will not think me rude, I should like to make one or two little suggestions. Now, since Tom Merry & Co. have been to America, France, etc., could they not pay a visit to South Africa, and come to Johannesburg. I should also like to hear a little more of Harry Noble & Co. and Buck Finn.

"All the girls in Jo'burg seem to take in the GEM and 'Magnet,' and all those I know think them lovely.—Yours truly,
SYBIL I."

Many thanks for writing, Miss Sybil. Johannesburg is a long way from St. Jim's, but who knows whether Tom Merry may not get as far as that when he next goes on his travels? I am glad to hear that I have so many girl friends in Jo'burg.

Back Numbers of The "Magnet" Library Required.

Robert McCallum, of 24, Blackhall Street, Paisley, writes to ask me how he can obtain a complete set of all the half-penny numbers of the "Magnet" Library, for which he is willing to pay. Well, Robert, I am afraid I cannot help you except by publishing your letter. The back numbers you want are now out of print, and cannot be obtained from this office. Your only hope in getting them lies in the chance of this paragraph catching the eye of some fellow "Magnet" reader who may be willing to part with the numbers you require.

"The Iron Island" in Book Form.

"A Constant Reader," writing from Bradford, is anxious to know whether the popular serial story, "The Iron Island," is to be obtained in book form, as he thinks the tale absolutely the finest he has ever read.

I am sorry to disappoint my reader, but I am afraid that this wonderful story is not published in book form as yet. If he will have patience, and wait awhile, I think it is very likely that his wish, and that of many other GEM readers, will be gratified before very long. That is as much as I am able to say at present.

Camping Out.**No. 4.—WHAT TO TAKE.****Cooking Arrangements.**

One of the most necessary adjuncts to an enjoyable camping-out holiday is good, well-cooked food, and plenty of it. This being the case, a considerable amount of thought must be given to this subject before the expedition is started. Those of my readers who are intending to spend their summer holidays in this manner, and who do not know what camping-out in this country is really like, might be inclined to say: "Oh, so long as we take a frying-pan and a gridiron, we shall be all right. We can do all our own cooking by means of wood fire." That is all very well, but sometimes it is impossible to get fuel, and when obtainable, it is often damp, and blinding smoke is all that can be obtained.

Again, it may be impossible, for many reasons, to light a wood fire where you are encamped. Therefore, the outfit must include a good reliable oil-stove. A good one which will bake as well as boil and fry, is rather expensive; but this difficulty can usually be avoided, if expense is a consideration, by one of the party borrowing an oil-stove from home. Take also a large, tightly-corked bottle filled with oil, and always see that this bottle, after use, is carefully packed away by itself. Also, when not in use, keep the stove away from food and clothing. A frying-pan—enamelled—a large tin saucepan, some tin mugs—one for each person—knives and forks, spoon, plates, a tin kettle and bowl, pepper and salt castors, tin-opener, corkscrew, one or two empty galley-pots in which to keep butter and jam, a light tin bucket, and several pantry towels are the other chief items which will be required.

Before starting, the various members of the party should make a list of the articles they intend to take with them, and then go over them several times and endeavour to find if they have left any important item out.

Lighting.

Of course, when it gets dark of an evening, some sort of light will be necessary. Candles are all very well for lighting up a tent, but a good sensible safe lamp is much better. For burning candles you cannot beat those old-fashioned square candle-burning lamps, one of which can be obtained very cheaply. If an oil-lamp is used, by no means take an ordinary house lamp. Borrow or purchase one of those round stable lamps, which not only give a very good light, but are safe to use.

Provisions.

It is impossible in the short space of an article to enumerate everything which should be taken, as so much depends upon the spot where the camping-out holiday is to be held. Take tea, coffee, sugar, etc.; but if the country through which you will pass is thickly populated, all perishable articles, such as meat and so forth, should be purchased as required.

THE END.

(A new series of helpful articles will commence in next week's issue of THE GEM Library. Order your copy in advance. Price One Penny.)