

SPECIAL EXTRA-LONG SCHOOL STORY OF TOM MERRY & CO. IN THIS ISSUE.

EVERY WEDNESDAY.

The GEM 2^D

LIBRARY
OF
SCHOOL AND SPORTING STORIES

No. 832.
Vol. XXV.
January 19th, 1924.



ERIC KILDARE'S SECRET!

(A tense moment from the Grand Extra-Long Complete School Story of St. Jim's, contained in this issue.)



Your Editor Chats With His Readers.

Address all letters: The Editor, The "Gem" Library, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Write me, you can be sure of an answer in return.

My Dear Chums,—Next week's issue of the GEM will be found full of splendid features, just as per usual. One attraction which will make the coming number memorable is an extra long complete yarn of St. Jim's. In this story Giacomo Contarini comes into the limelight, and has, in point of fact, rather too much of the glare for his own taste, but that, of course, cannot be helped. We are always glad to welcome Contarini. He has figured in some of the grandest tales of the series.

"A VENDETTA AT ST. JIM'S!"

By Martin Clifford.

That is the first item of our "bill" for next Wednesday. It deals with a remarkable sensation which sends a thrill through the whole school. I am not going to touch on the plot, except just to mention that it intimately concerns a newcomer to St. Jim's. This personage hails, like Contarini, from the boot-heeled kingdom in the sunny south of Europe. How and under what conditions this individual, by name Luigi di Marco, arrives at the establishment, you will learn all in good time. His first appearance causes plenty of mirth, but it is not all comedy. We hear of a long-standing feud. Luigi proves himself a pretty desperate fellow, and his methods do not commend themselves a bit to the St. Jim's fellows. The latter do not understand this strange vendetta business. It is altogether foreign to their ideas. The British idea is to have a jolly good row, if the occasion warrants it, and then bury the hatchet deep, and forget all the trouble. I am certain you will be interested to read of the amazing events which follow the arrival at St. Jim's of an Italian with weird views on the subject of revenge.

THE WORK OF MARTIN CLIFFORD.

No author can blow his own trumpet. That is why I want to say something here concerning the original method and the real knowledge of the St. Jim's chronicler. Mr. Martin Clifford is the lucky possessor of what you may term the storehouse mind. Some budding authors start off with the notion that any fellow can write a story. So he can, of a sort. But the big professional author who has put in long years at the trade knows well enough that this writing business means the devotion of a lifetime, or it is bound to end in smoke. Martin Clifford scores because of his immense supplies of information on countless subjects. It is not merely in connection with next week's winner that I say this. Still, the Italian yarn is a case in point. Mr. Clifford understands many languages; he is deep in classics; he has a simply wonderful grasp of history, and he has travelled extensively. It is all this that makes a story from his pen so well worth reading.

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"THE DIAMOND OF GHAZIABAD!"

By Cecil Fanshaw.

Paul Mannerling is well known to GEM readers. This brilliant and resourceful individual is met with next week in a peculiarly powerful story of the Secret Service. Mannerling has won his way to a great position, and his responsibilities are many. But big work, such as falls to his lot, brings with it plenty of peril. The new story of intrigue and adventure bristles with thrills. Mannerling, as a super-detective, gets on the track of the famous diamond which is worth a king's ransom, and has been the pivot of many a desperate coup. The yarn is a fine one. The Ghaziabad diamond is a real mystery stone, and its dazzling glitter has lured to destruction numberless victims of its sparkling spell.

AN ECHO FROM CANADA.

A reader of the GEM living at Verdun—the Verdun of Canada, not the famous town in France—writes to me a very courteous letter. "Having knowledge of the fact," he says, "that you are at all times pleased to hear from your readers, especially from so far a distance, I am taking the opportunity of communicating with you again, trusting my letter will find you in the best of health. You will remember that I wrote to you several times whilst I was in England with the Canadian Expeditionary Force. I was in the Druid's Cross Hospital, Wavertree, Liverpool, and I have yet in my possession two of your letters, which I shall prize for all time, for all that was contained therein has proven to be right." My chum goes on to chat of Tom Merry and Cardew. It is a privilege to get such a letter as this, and to know that the GEM is still his weekly companion.

"TOM OF THE AJAX!"

Of course, next week's issue will contain a striking instalment of this great serial. The further chapters show Tom Gale in a very tight place indeed, and the instalment ends up on a thrill second to none. This serial has any amount to recommend it to sea-lovers and others, and you cannot help but follow with palpitating interest the adventures of the plucky youngster who has to meet the assaults of an implacable enemy like Stonky Burr. Tom cuts away from impossible conditions, and we see him fighting for the freedom which is indubitably his right. You are never likely to forget Tom's experiences as a stowaway.

THE TUCK HAMPER.

One fact can be taken for granted. The Tuck Hamper in this dashing New Year of 1924 will be right up to the fine standard of the past. So send in your gayest wheezes. You may have a chance of one of these tempting prizes.

Your Editor.

"MY READERS' OWN CORNER!"

OUR TUCK HAMPERS ARE PRIME!

Remember, boys and girls, we award a delicious Tuck Hamper for the best storyette sent us each week—also half-a-crown is paid for each other contribution accepted. Cut out the coupon on this page, and send it, together with your joke to me.

THIS WINS OUR TUCK HAMPER!

COW-ARDLY.

An enterprising salesman was trying to persuade a farmer to buy a bicycle. The farmer was in town for the day, and had determined to see everything. "I'd rather spend my money on a cow," he said, after listening to the other's arguments. "But think," said the salesman, "what an idiot you'd look riding about on a cow." "Not half such an idiot as I'd look trying to milk a bicycle!" answered the farmer.—A Tuck Hamper filled with delicious Tuck has been awarded to Harold Midgley, 7, Tudor Gardens, Barnes, S.W. 13.

STRANGE, BUT TRUE!

Two Irishmen were arguing. "Well," said Pat, "I don't think you can tell me what keeps bricks together." "Shure," said Mike, "it's mortar." "Wrong!" said Pat. "That's what keeps them apart!"—Half-a-crown has been awarded to Fred G. Mann, 27, Hythe Road, London, N.W. 10.

TIT FOR TAT!

Brown was walking along a country lane when he observed a negro setting a light to some dry grass. "Don't you burn that, Sambo," he said, approaching the negro. "It will be as black as you are." "Don't yo' worry 'bout dat, sir," replied the dark one. "It will soon grow as green as you are!"—Half-a-crown has been awarded to Maurice Ambler, Bradley Cottage, Greenland, Halifax.

MOVING DAY!

A man was moving to a new house, and a friend met him carrying his chicken-rum on his back. It was pouring hard with rain. "Hallo! Why didn't you get someone to help you, Tommy?" asked the friend. "I did," replied Tommy. "He's inside. You see, it is no good both of us getting wet!"—Half-a-crown has been awarded to Norman Howe, 3, Highbury New Park, N. 5.

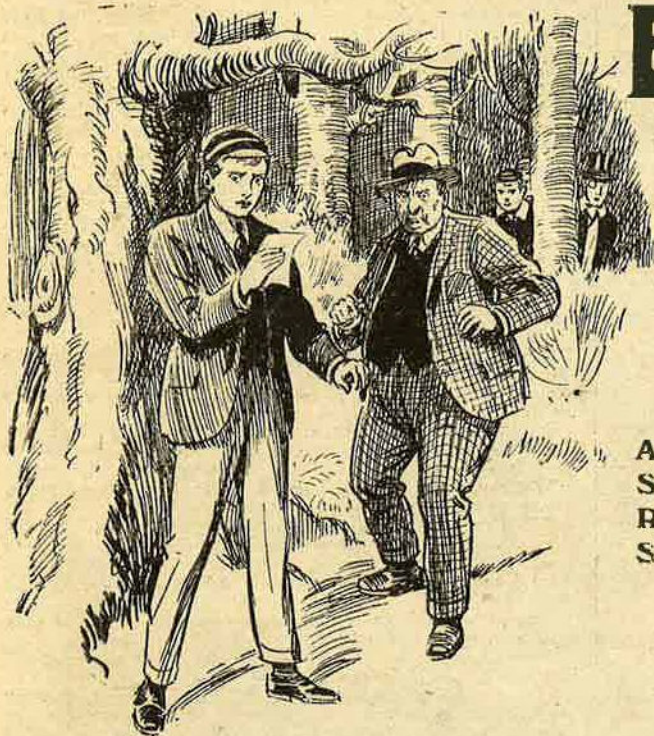
All attempts in this Competition should be addressed to: The GEM, "My Reader's Own Corner," Gough House, Gough Square, London, E.C.4.

TUCK HAMPER COUPON.

THE GEM LIBRARY.

No attempt will be considered unless accompanied by one of these Coupons.

Thinking not of himself, Eric Kildare, the stalwart captain of St. Jim's, sacrifices his good name and position in an endeavour to save his cousin Desmond from disgrace!



ERIC KILDARE'S SECRET!

A Special Extra-Long Complete School Story of the World-Renowned Tom Merry & Co., at St. Jim's, written by the greatest of authors,

Martin Clifford.

CHAPTER 1. Fags Wanted!

"YOU chaps seen young Wally D'Arcy?" grunted Baggy Trimble of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, poking a fat face inside Study No. 6. "Kildare wants him."

"Gone to Wayland, deah boy," remarked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Then he'll get it hot," grinned Baggy Trimble, evidently enjoying the thought that D'Arcy minor would "get it hot." "Kildare's in a rare old wax—got a cousin, or brother, or uncle, or something coming, and he can't find a blessed fag."

"That's wathah wotten," said Arthur Augustus. "I weally hope the young wascal—"

"It's nearly tea-time, and there isn't a giddy fire in the study or anything," grinned Trimble. "It's rather a special sort of visit, too. This chap's an old St. Jim's boy, besides being Kildare's uncle, or cousin, or whatever he jolly well is, and he's sailing for America, or Timbuktu, or somewhere to-morrow—"

"What a lot you can happen to hear at keyholes," remarked Digby.

"Kildare wants to make a jolly old fuss of the chap," grinned Trimble, ignoring Digby's pointed remark. "Isn't it a scream? I'm jolly glad, though. Cheek, I call it, making a Fourth chap like me go hunting for his blessed fags! Blow him! Kildare's a beast—a stuck-up beast—"

"Oh, am I, Trimble?"

"Oh, enuabs!"

It was Kildare's voice, and Baggy Trimble jumped. He spun round, to find the captain of St. Jim's standing in the passage behind him. Kildare was dressed for out-of-doors, and his usually good-natured face was grim.

"So I am a stuck-up beast, am I?" asked Kildare.

"I—I say—I—I didn't know—"

"I know you didn't," snapped Kildare. "It's lucky for you I happen to be in too big a hurry to stop to teach you better than to speak of a Sixth-Former like that, Trimble."

"Oh dear!" gasped Trimble, agreeing with Kildare there.

"Cut off, you young ass!" said Kildare.

And Trimble "cut off" quickly enough. Kildare entered the study and faced the grinning juniors.

"Where is your minor, D'Arcy?" he demanded wrathfully.

"Gone to Wayland, deah boy," said D'Arcy. "Weally, Kildare—"

"Dash it all!" snapped the captain of St. Jim's, frowning

with annoyance. "Those footling fags are never at hand when wanted. Anyway—"

"If we can do anything, Kildare—" began Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus eagerly.

"If we can do anythin', Kildare, deah boy, we shall be only too happy to help."

Kildare was about to turn on his heel, but he stopped suddenly. Taking out his pocket-wallet, he shoved a pound-note into the hands of the surprised Arthur Augustus.

"Yes, you can help, D'Arcy," said Kildare. "Here's a quid. Get in some cakes and things from the tuckshop. Then you can light a fire in my study and get tea ready. I'm just off to meet a visitor at Rylcoube Station, and will be back in half an hour or so."

And with that Kildare hurried away. He left Arthur Augustus staring blankly at the pound-note, and Blake, Herries, and Digby chuckling.

"Bai Jove!" gasped the swell of St. Jim's.

He was astounded. Certainly he had offered to help Kildare. But that help was intended to be in the form of advice, or, at most, an offer to find a fag to carry out the fagging. He had certainly never intended to offer to light fires and get tea ready—in short, to do the work Wally of the Third had evidently neglected.

"Bai Jove!" repeated Arthur Augustus, looking rather distressed at his chuckling chums. "How vevy awkward, deah boys! I wegard that as wathah thoughtless of Kildare to expect a Fourth-Formah to fag, you know."

"You've let yourself in for it, Gussy," grinned Blake.

"You can't back out now, you know."

"I have no intention of twyin' to back out, Blake," said Arthur Augustus, after a moment's pause. "Aftah all, it is wathah an honour to fag for the captain of St. Jim's, you know. And, weally, Kildare is such a decent fellow. I have a gweat wegard for Kildare, deah boys. It is vevy awkward, and wathah infwa dig, for a fellow of my standin' to fag, I will admit. But Kildare expects me to do it, and, weally, I could not let him down."

"Get a jolly old licking if you did, Gussy," grinned Herries. "Anyway, go ahead. We'll come and watch you on the job."

"I twust," said Arthur Augustus, turning his eyeglass rather frigidly on Herries, "that you fellows will do more than watch. I made the offah of help on behalf of this studay, and it was accepted by Kildare. I weally twust you fellows do not intend to dwaw back. I wegard it as a studay affainh."

"Bow-wow!"

"Half a mo, Herries," said Blake. "Gussy's right there, you know. In any case, I'm blessed if I mind fagging for a chap like old Kildare. Won't do us any harm. Yes, we'll help, Gussy—"

"Vevy well, Blake, deah boy," said D'Arcy. "I weally hardly expected this studay to fail to wise to an occasion, you know. Aftah all, it is wathah hard lines on old Kildare. If he—"

"Oh, cut the cackle, and let's get on with the job," said Blake, jumping up briskly. "You cut off for the grub, Gussy, and we'll see to the fire and get things shipshape."

"I was meahly wemarkin', Blake—"

"No time for remarks," said Blake. "We'll have old Kildare back before we've started the job, you cuckoo! Buzz off! There's an old suitcase in the corner there—"

"But, weally, Blake—"

The energetic Blake grasped Arthur Augustus by the collar and ran him out of the study. Then he slung the suitcase after him.

"We'll rise to the occasion all right," remarked Blake. "Come on, you chaps!"

And while the astonished D'Arcy still grovelled in the passage, the rest of Kildare's new and voluntary fags marched past him en route for Kildare's study.

"Bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus, scrambling wrathfully to his feet. "You uttah wuffian, Blake! I have a vevy good mind to thwash you—"

The noble Gussy paused, realising that Blake was out of hearing, and, wisely deciding to postpone thoughts of "thwashin'" Blake, he picked up the suitcase and went downstairs to make his wrathful way to the school tuckshop under the elms.

CHAPTER 2.

Very Awkward!

"ONE dozen jam-tarts—twopenny ones, please, Mrs. Taggles."

"Yes, Master D'Arcy."

"One dozen doughnuts, and—yes, one dozen mewingues, please, Mrs. Taggles."

"Very well, Master D'Arcy."

"One large sultana cake—a five-shilling one, please, Mrs. Taggles."

Arthur Augustus paused reflectively. For several moments the swell of the Fourth had been reeling off his orders without pause—tarts, cakes, all sorts of good things which Arthur Augustus deemed necessary for Kildare's tea—and he had been ordering them by the dozen. That Kildare—or his visitor—were extremely unlikely to need jam-tarts, meringues, or chocolate eclairs by the dozen did not seem to occur to Arthur Augustus.

But now he paused, wondering if he had already exceeded that amount of money.

"Pway weckon that little lot up, Mrs. Taggles," he remarked thoughtfully. "I wathah fancy I have weached my limit, bai Jove!"

D'Arcy had—as Dame Taggles informed him after a laborious reckoning. In fact, he had passed the limit of the pound by the sum of sixpence exactly.

Fortunately the swell of the Fourth discovered a stray sixpence in his pocket, and, after paying the bill, Arthur Augustus began to pack the bulky bags of foodstuffs into the suitcase.

Three juniors who had been standing at the far end of the tuckshop, listening to D'Arcy's orders with open mouths and bulging eyes, now exchanged expressive glances.

The three were George Figgins, Fatty Wynn, and Kerr of the New House, and until the entry of Arthur Augustus they had been discussing footer and stale doughnuts.

But the sight of the good things D'Arcy was purchasing had taken their interest from footer and stale doughnuts.

"The—the bloated millionaire!" breathed George Figgins. "What a gorgeous spread those Fourth Form worms are in for! My word! Over a quid's worth, and we—"

"We can only chew beastly stale doughnuts!" groaned Fatty Wynn, watching the busy Arthur Augustus with glistening eyes. "I—I say, Figgy, couldn't we—something ought to be done about it."

"It ought, Fatty," agreed Kerr, grinning. "I'm not a blessed Socialist, but—"

"And something is going to be done!" whispered Figgins, a gleam coming suddenly into his eyes. "Those silly School House chumps will be making themselves ill if we don't do something! Listen to me, chaps!"

Fatty Wynn and Kerr listened, and grinned as they listened. And then, with startling suddenness, Kerr hit Fatty Wynn in the chest, while Fatty Wynn smote Kerr just above the belt. The next moment the two had closed and were staggering about the little shop, breathing threatenings and slaughter, and, apparently, fighting in a deadly embrace.

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Up to then Arthur Augustus had been too busily engaged even to notice the New House trio, but now the sudden commotion drew his noble attention.

"Bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "Wynn and Kerr fighting! Is it possible, weally? What—what—"

Arthur Augustus was astounded. He was shocked. The sight of two such bosom pals as Wynn and Kerr in deadly strife distressed the good-hearted Gussy beyond measure.

"Bai Jove!" repeated D'Arcy, looking at Figgins, who was jumping round, apparently attempting to separate the combatants. "What is the mattah, Figgy? Cannot you—"

"Stop 'em? I can't!" yelled Figgy frantically. "You silly asses, stop—"

Kerr suddenly broke away and bounded out of the tuckshop doorway, with Fatty Wynn, shouting threats and savage remarks, hot on his track. And after Fatty Wynn went Figgins, shouting and waving his arms wildly.

"Bai Jove, how feahfully wotten!" gasped Arthur Augustus in great distress. "A wiff in the lute, bai Jove! I can hardly cweedit it! I weally hope—"

D'Arcy hurriedly finished packing the foodstuffs into the suitcase, and then, with the overflow in a parcel under his arm, he left the tuckshop, leaving a startled Dame Taggles behind him.

Outside Arthur Augustus glanced about him anxiously. There was no sign of Wynn and Kerr, but Figgins was just coming from behind the tuckshop wearing a worried look.

"Figgy, deah boy," exclaimed Arthur Augustus, "pway, whatevah is w'ong? What—where—"

"They're having it out behind the tuckshop," panted Figgy, apparently overcome with grief. "Oh, the silly asses! To think it should come to this! Lifelong pals—more like brothers than pals—lifelong friendship—fighting like—like—"

Figgins broke down—or appeared to break down. D'Arcy eyed him, much agitated.

"Figgy, old man— But—but cannot you stop them?" he ejaculated. "I weally twust—"

"What's the good of me trying?" asked Figgins, shaking his head helplessly. "I'm such a duffer! I'm not clever enough, not diplomatic enough. I only seem to make matters worse. It needs a chap with brains and tact—tact and judgment. If only you, Gussy—"

Figgins paused, waiting for Arthur Augustus to swallow the bait. And the noble Arthur Augustus swallowed it quickly enough.

"Pway leave it to me, deah boy," he said promptly and a trifle loftily. "I wathah pvide myself on possessin' tact and judgment fah above the awevage, you know. I wathah shine in a situation where a delicate and diplomatic handlin' is wequahed, deah boy."

"Then—then you'll—"

"I will wush away at once," said Arthur Augustus.

"Pway hold these things, Figgins—"

Figgins took charge of the bag and parcel with rather suspicious eagerness—suspicious, that is, to anyone else but the unsuspecting and trusting Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. And then that would-be peacemaker rushed away.

He rounded the corner of the tuckshop, and sighted Kerr and Wynn at once. At first sight they appeared to be waltzing joyfully together, but as D'Arcy rushed up he found them hitting each other often, and—to D'Arcy—hard, very hard.

"Stop, deah boys!" shouted Arthur Augustus, rushing between them. "Pway pause and welflect— Yawoooh!"

D'Arcy's utterance ended in a fiendish yell as one of Kerr's brandishing fists took him under the ear, possibly by accident, possibly not. He yelled still more as one of Fatty Wynn's fat fists took him under the chin, and Arthur Augustus staggered back and measured his length on the hard ground.

What happened after that the would-be peacemaker scarcely knew. It is usually the ironical fate of peacemakers to find themselves in the wars, and Arthur Augustus found himself in the wars now. He was trampled under-foot for some moments, and then both Wynn and Kerr came down on top of him together.

"Call me a Welsh rabbit, would you?" howled Fatty Wynn, apparently addressing Kerr. "Take that!"

"Call me a blessed Scotch herring, would you?" howled Kerr. "Take that, you rotter!"

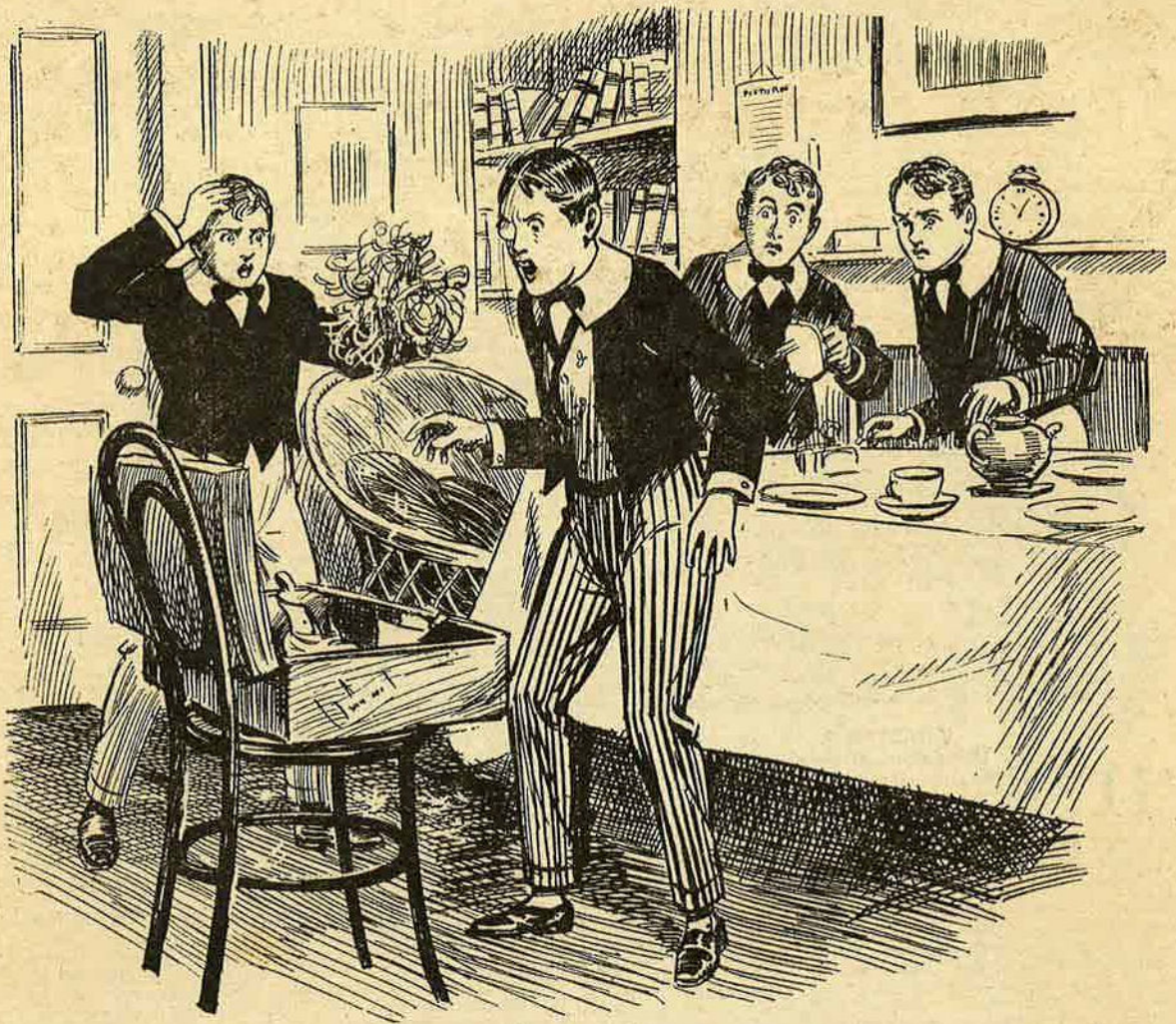
Arthur Augustus took them both and shrieked frantically. He hardly knew whether he was on his head or his heels.

Relief came quite suddenly, however. From the front of the tuckshop there sounded a shrill whistle, and as they heard it, both Wynn and Kerr ceased struggling abruptly.

"Well, my only hat!" panted Kerr, looking down at the almost frantic Arthur Augustus. "What's old Gussy doing here?"

"Like his cheek butting in!" remarked Fatty Wynn, winking at Kerr. "What's the game, Gussy?"

"Oh, bai Jove!" gasped the swell of St. Jim's. "You—you weckless wottahs! Couldn't you see me, you—"



A RUDE AWAKENING!—"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, as he blinked dazedly at the contents of the suitcase. "What's the matter?" demanded Blake, jumping up. "Why—what the thump—" Instead of bags and cakes and other good things, the suitcase contained nothing but a pair of old, muddy football boots, a ragged football vest, and a brick! (See page 6.)

"How did we know you'd come butting in?"
 "You wough wottahs!" gasped D'Arcy. "I weally wish I had left you to fight it out, bai Jove! I butted in because I wegarded it as my duty to wepair the wiff in the lute, you wottahs! I was surprisid beyond measurah to see two such close fwriends fightin'. It distwessed me tewwibly. I wesolved to butt in to heal the wound—to persuade you to shake hands and buy the hatchet, you know."
 "Shake hands, eh?" remarked Kerr, winking again—at Wynn. "That's rather a good wheeze, Fatty. Shall us?"
 "Yes, lets," said Wynn, with a smile.

They shook hands solemnly. D'Arcy eyed them a trifle suspiciously now. His noble brain was beginning to clear, and both Kerr and Wynn's words and actions struck him as suspicious.

"Bai Jove, you—" he began.
 "Yes, shake hands and be friends," said Kerr solemnly. "Friends to combine and fight against the common foe. Who are the common foe, Fatty, old man?"
 "These School House worms, of course."
 "Then I vote we start by bumping Gussy. Collar him!"
 "Bai Jove! Heah, what—welease me, you—" Bump!

Three times the astounded D'Arcy was bumped, and then Fatty Wynn and Kerr walked away, arm in arm, leaving Arthur Augustus sitting there gasping painfully.

"Bai Jove!" he gasped at last, blinking after the New House juniors. "What—weally, I hardly— Oh, bai Jove!"

Quite suddenly Arthur Augustus remembered Figgins and the bag and parcel.

"Oh deah!" groaned the luckless Gussy. "It was all a twick—a wotten twick to collah the gwub! Oh, the wottahs! I will—"

As the dreadful suspicion gained ground Arthur Augustus sprang to his feet in great wrath. Then he paused and his noble brow cleared.

Coming round the tuckshop corner was the lanky figure of George Figgins, and in his arms was the bag, likewise the parcel. Apparently it was no trick after all.

"Splendid, Gussy!" exclaimed Figgins enthusiastically, nodding to Wynn and Kerr, who were still arm-in-arm a little distance away. "You've managed the oracle, then? I knew you would."

"I have been tweated with gwoss diswespect and wude-ness," said Arthur Augustus. "The wottahs—"

"But you've managed it, Gussy," said Figgins heartily. "Good! How can I ever thank you—"

"Pway do not bothah, Figgay," said D'Arcy, giving Figgins rather a hard look. "I am not at all suah— How-evah, youah studay-mates appeah to be fwriends once more, so that is all wight. Pway hand me my—"

"Here you are, old top!"

"I weally must wush away now like anythin'," said Gussy, as Figgins handed over the bag and parcel. "This gwub is for Kildare's tea, and—"

"Wha-a-at?"

"For Kildare's tea, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus innocently. "Kildare is expectin' a visitor, and we are gettin' tea weady for him in the absence of young Wally. Pway excuse me wushin' away, Figgay!"

And Arthur Augustus rushed away with the bag and

parcel, leaving Figgins staring blankly after him. He was still staring when Wynn and Kerr, having seen Arthur Augustus out of the way, came running up.

"Got it, Figgy?" asked Fatty Wynn anxiously. "Got the grub?"

"Ahem! Yes, but—"

"Oh, good!"

"Ripping!" agreed Kerr. "We'll have the feed—"

"No, we won't!" groaned Figgins, his long face the picture of dismay. "I—I say, you chaps, we've made an awful blunder; we've pinched old Kildare's tea!"

"Eh? What?"

"We've collared Kildare's grub," gasped Figgins. "It wasn't for those School House rotters at all."

"But—but—"

Figgins explained, and the faces of his hearers fell dismally as they began to understand.

"We'll have to take it back," groaned Figgins. "There'll be an awful row, and we can't get poor old Gussy into a mess."

"Oh crumbs! Why not send it back? If we meet those rotters—"

"Can't risk the stuff not getting to Kildare," growled Figgins. "We'd better take it ourselves, then we can explain if necessary. Let's hope the skipper won't be there, though. Come on, sooner we do it the better."

And followed by his dismayed chums Figgins ran to a clump of bushes round the side of the tuckshop. He rooted out a pile of paper bags—bags which contained the good things which Arthur Augustus had purchased, and which the crafty Figgins had abstracted whilst Gussy was acting the part of the peacemaker.

Loaded up with these, the New House trio hurried across to the School House, their faces gloomy and anxious. Raiding the provisions of the rival juniors of the School House was a pastime in which they often indulged and enjoyed. But raiding the provisions intended for the captain of St. Jim's tea was a different matter altogether.

CHAPTER 3.

The Visitor Arrives!

"HALLO, here's the dummy!" exclaimed Jack Blake. "Where the thump have you been to, Gussy? Takes you some time to get a few cakes from the tuckshop, and no mistake!"

While Arthur Augustus had been foraging, Blake, Digby, and Herries had been busy in Kildare's study. Newly swept and garnished as it was, the room looked bright and cosy, and a cheery fire crackled and glowed in the grate. Before the fire Blake was crouching, making toast, and he turned a crimson, perspiring face towards Arthur Augustus D'Arcy as that junior entered the study with the suitcase and parcel.

"I have been delayed, dear boy," explained Arthur Augustus. "Howevah, I appeal to be in time, so that is all right. I wathah fancy this little lot will make quite a decent spweed, bai Jove!"

"Yank the stuff out, then, and get the table set!" grunted Blake. "Help the ass, you fellows. Old Kildare will be here any minute now!"

"Right-ho!"

Arthur Augustus laid the suitcase on a chair, and slipped the catches. Then, as the lid flew open, he jumped. At the same moment Herries tore open the parcel, and as he did so he gave a yell.

"Why, what the— Gussy, you frabjous ass!"

"Bai Jove!"

That was all Gussy could say. He stood petrified, blinking dazedly at the contents of the suitcase.

"What's the matter?" demanded Blake, jumping up. "Why, what the thump—"

It was Blake's turn to jump. For, instead of bags of cakes and other good things, the suitcase contained nothing but a pair of old, muddy footer-boots, a ragged footer vest, and a brick. The parcel contained nothing more appetising than a bundle of shavings.

"Bai Jove!" repeated Arthur Augustus, with a gasp. "Oh dear! Those awful wottahs were pullin' my leg aftah all, bai Jove! Oh, the feahful wottahs!"

"Explain, you dummy!" shrieked Blake. "What—why—who—"

"Those New House wottahs!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

And he explained, his noble features going pink as he noted the looks of alarm and utter disgust on the faces of his hearers.

"Well, you utter ass!" breathed Blake, at last. "To let those New House worms take you in like that. Oh, you—"

"Weally, Blake—"

Before the dismayed Arthur Augustus could continue the study door opened, and Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther of the Shell looked in.

"Well, how goes it, kids?" asked Tom Merry, looking

round. "We heard you were fagging for Kildare, and trotted along. Want any help? I hear— Hallo, what's the trouble—Gussy again?"

The Terrible Three grinned as Blake savagely explained the unfortunate circumstances.

"It's nothing to grin about, you asses!" said Blake, glowering at D'Arcy. "There's no tea, and Kildare will be back any minute."

"It is rather awkward," admitted Tom Merry. "What about sending Gussy to explain to those New House sweeps? After all, old Figgy isn't a bad sort, and—"

"Thanks, old top!" came a cheery voice. "No need to send Gussy, though; here we are!"

Tom Merry spun round, to find Figgins standing in the doorway. With Figgins were his henchmen, Fatty Wynn and Kerr, and all three were grinning.

"Well, my hat!" gasped Herries. "The cheek of the rotters!"

"Little us," grinned Figgins. "What price the rift in the lute, Gus? I see you've found the boots and the— Here, it's all right—it's pax, you—"

But it wasn't pax in so far as the School House juniors were concerned. As one man Blake & Co. flung themselves at the New House juniors.

"I'll give you coming to rub it in, you rotters!" howled Blake. "Smash the cheeky asses!"

As members of the School House, the Terrible Three naturally joined Blake & Co., and they piled in with a will. Against the seven avengers the luckless New House trio had no chance. They struggled manfully, but it was a brief struggle, and they went down at last, knees and hands pinning them down.

"Give in, you New House worms!" gasped Tom Merry. "We'll teach you— Oh, my hat! What a mess!"

It was a mess, undoubtedly. In the excitement and wrath of the moment the School House juniors had scarcely noticed the paper bags Figgins & Co. were carrying. But they could not help noticing them—or rather their contents—now. In that desperate scrimmage the paper bags had come to utter grief, and their contents were scattered over the room and the persons of the combatants.

There were tarts, and chocolate eclairs, and cream-horns squashed on the carpet, and jam and chocolate and cream adhering to the persons of the juniors. Fatty Wynn had sat plump on a bag of jam-tarts, and the resulting conglomeration had improved neither Fatty's trousers nor the carpet.

Blake & Co., now the battle was over, fairly blinked in bewilderment at sight of the havoc.

"What—where the thump has all this stuff come from?" gasped Blake. "Figgy—"

"You—you burbling idiots!" choked Figgins, clawing a mass of cream and crumbs from his collar and his neck. "Couldn't you let us explain? Can't you see? We heard this beastly stuff belonged to Kildare, and we were bringing it back, you utter asses!"

"Oh crumbs!"

As they realised that they had been a little too hasty, Blake & Co., and Tom Merry & Co. groaned. Then Blake suddenly remembered where they were, and he gave a gasp.

"Quick, you idiots!" he panted. "For goodness' sake, let's get this awful mess cleared away before old Kildare comes in. He'll fairly rave if he catches us— Oh, crumbs!"

Blake ended with a gasp as the door suddenly opened. But it was not Kildare—though the features of the newcomer strongly resembled those of the genial skipper of St. Jim's. He was a tall young man in a heavy travelling coat—a bravny giant, with fair hair and moustache, good-natured face, and blue eyes that twinkled humorously as they rested on the startled faces of the juniors. Behind the stranger hovered Toby, the School House page.

"Which this 'ere is Master Kildare's study, sir," said Toby, with a rather scared glance at the scene within.

"Oh, is it, by Jove!" ejaculated the stranger, looking round a trifle grimly. "I should have thought—ahem! Very well—and thank you, my boy."

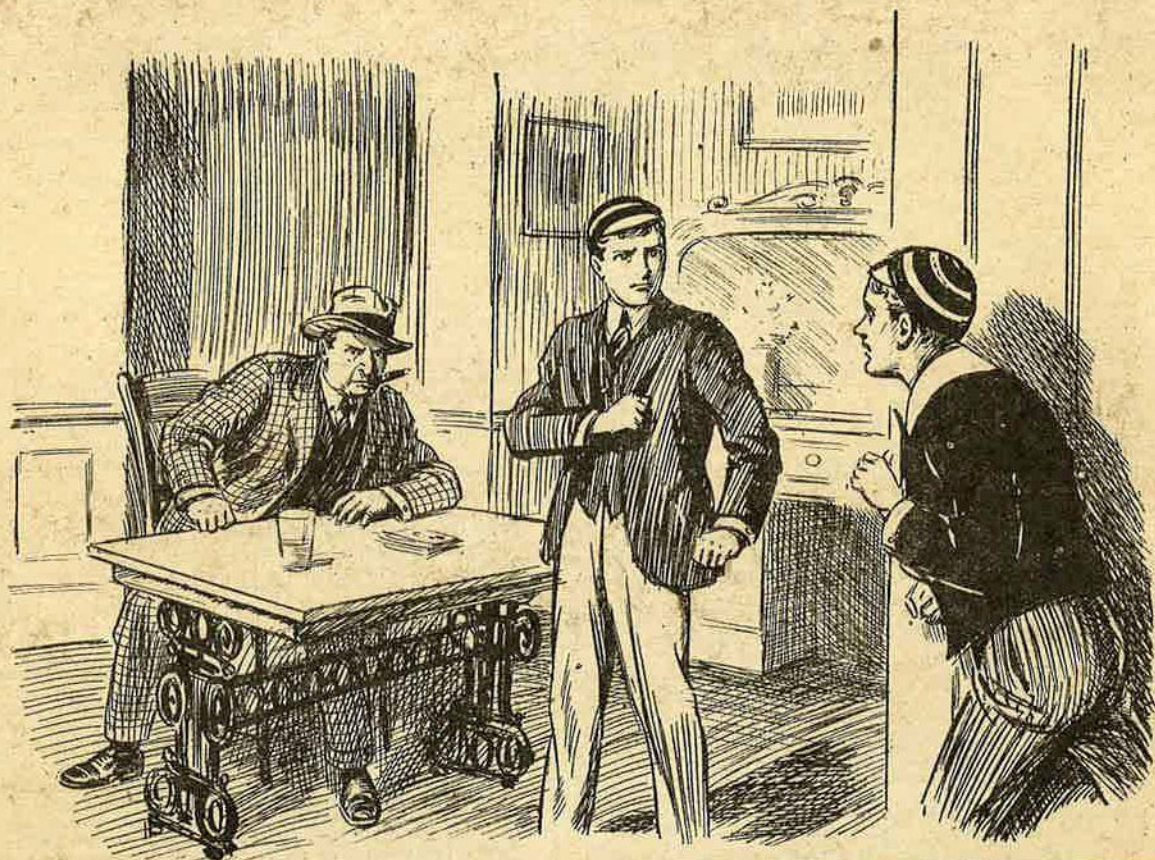
Toby withdrew, closing the door. The stranger came forward, and smiled genially at the horrified juniors. There was a moment's awkward silence. Tom Merry broke it.

"Won't—won't you sit down, sir?" he gasped, hurriedly rubbing away a sticky-looking mass of squashed jam-tart from the easy-chair. "Kildare won't be long. He—he's gone to the station."

"He was expecting me, so I suppose he went to meet me," murmured the young man with a rather doubtful look at the chair. "Nunno! I won't sit down, thanks. I came along in a taxi and must have missed him on the road. I am his cousin—Desmond Kildare. H'm. So—so this is Kildare's study, eh?"

"Y-e-es, sir," stammered Tom Merry, feeling called upon to make some sort of explanation. "You—you see, we—we're fagging for him."

"You don't say so?" was the surprised answer. "In my time the captain of St. Jim's had only one fag. Kildare is certainly a very unfortunate—I mean to say, fortunate



KILDARE'S SECRET! Tom Merry entered the room, and then paused as his gaze fell upon Kildare standing, white-faced and tense, before a small stone-slab table on which was a glass and a little heap of banknotes. Behind the table was seated a man, and as Tom saw the fat, flabby features and beady eyes he recognised him in a flash. (See page 10.)

fellow in possessing ten. Very! I can just imagine how delighted he must feel at having ten juniors romping about his study. He'll be pleased to come in and find his study decorated with jam-tarts, I'm sure."

The juniors realised the stranger was pulling their legs, and they went crimson.

"We—we had a bit of an argument, sir," explained Blake, gaining confidence as he noted the twinkle in Desmond Kildare's eyes. "I'm afraid Kildare will be—ahem!—rather waxy. You—"

"I should imagine so," was the grim answer. "But why not do what you were suggesting when I entered—clear up before Kildare arrives, eh?"

"Bai Jove! Weally, sir—"

"If you don't mind, we will," mumbled Tom Merry. "You—you see—"

Tom Merry broke off with a gasp. At that moment they were startled to hear a voice in the passage outside—a well-known voice, apparently speaking to Mr. Railton. As he heard it, Desmond Kildare whistled softly.

"I'm afraid you've left it too late now, my young friends," he said. "If I'm not mistaken that is my cousin's voice. Hard lines—by Jove, though! I'll tell you what! We'll save the situation yet. I'll run out and persuade my cousin to show me round the old place before tea, eh? That will give you plenty of time to put things ship-shape. So long, and mum's the word!"

And with that Kildare's extraordinary cousin opened the door and slipped out. The St. Jim's juniors heard him greet Mr. Railton and Kildare in the passage, and after laughing and chatting move off.

"Phew!" breathed Tom Merry, as their footsteps died away. "What do you chaps think of that? Isn't he a brick?"

"Yaas, wathah!" agreed Arthur Augustus. "That was wathah sportin' of the deah boy."

"Fairly saved our bacon," agreed Blake. "Buck up, and let's make the most of the chance. You New House rotters had better help."

"Yes, rather," agreed Figgins.

And they helped eagerly enough, realising as Tom Merry & Co. did that the good-natured Old Boy had saved them from a record licking. Kildare was a good sort—but there was a limit. And in mucking up Kildare's study, they had certainly passed the limit.

Many hands made light work, and in a very few moments the room had been put to rights. Luckily several of the bags had escaped damage, and their contents made quite a respectable show on the table. By that time Wally of the Third had put in a belated appearance, and, after explaining, the juniors left the rest to him. Their brief duties as Kildare's fags were ended and they were only too thankful they were ended.

"We're well out of that," remarked Tom Merry, as they went to their respective studies for tea. "My hat! That chap Desmond Kildare's a real brick. It was jolly decent of him to chip in like that. I vote we give him a jolly good send-off when he goes to-night, you fellows."

"Yaas, wathah, bai Jove!"

"Hear, hear!"

And they did. When that evening Kildare's cousin climbed into his taxi at the gates, a crowd of juniors sent a rousing cheer after him—greatly to the astonishment of Eric Kildare. Kildare could not understand it. But Desmond Kildare did, and he poked a grinning face from the taxi-window, and waved a cheery farewell to the juniors.

CHAPTER 4.

Something Wrong!

"IT'S goin' to wain, deah boys," remarked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Beitah huwvy, you know." "Quite a brainy idea—for you, Gussy," said Lowther.

"Good job we took the path through the wood—plenty of shelter," said Herries. "I suggested it, you know."

"And a rotten suggestion it was," grunted Blake, in disgust. "Blow the shelter—what shelter it is. This beastly mud's worse than rain."

"It's going to rain cats-and-dogs soon," opined Herries.

There was little doubt about that. The sky, seen through the bare branches of the trees overhead was overcast and threatening, and big drops of rain were beginning to fall. The seven juniors—Tom Merry & Co., and Blake & Co., turned up their collars and hastened their steps along the muddy path under the trees in the deepening dusk. Having been to the pictures in Wayland, the juniors were now returning home, and they were not only anxious to escape a drenching, but they were hungry and eager for tea.

With feet slipping and sliding in the mud, and on the sodden carpet of dead leaves, the juniors stumbled on, and before they had gone many more yards the rain fell with a vengeance. It pelted down in sheets, and as Blake had hinted, the bare trees above them gave little shelter from it. "Bai Jove, you fellows!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "We shall be like drowned wats soon. Think of my clobber—it will be ruined!"

"Blow your silly clobber!" sniffed Blake.

"We shall need a blessed boat soon," growled Lowther. "I say, isn't there an old shed about here somewhere?"

"Yes," said Tom Merry. "There it is—through the trees over there. Come on!"

The juniors followed Tom Merry's lead in a mad stampede as that junior left the path, and made a dive for an old woodman's hut, dimly seen through the slanting sheets of rain in the gathering dusk.

They came up to it with a rush, and crowded inside, eager to escape from the torrential downpour. Tom Merry entered first, with D'Arcy at his heels, and as he dashed into the gloomy interior there came a wild yell from within, followed by a heavy fall and a startled oath. He had charged full tilt into a man, standing sheltering inside.

"Oh crumbs—sorry!" panted Tom Merry, staggering back from the unexpected impact. "I—I didn't see you!"

The man sprawling on the brick floor of the old hut, growled another savage exclamation and scrambled to his feet. He seemed about to fling himself at the junior in his rage, and then suddenly catching sight of the juniors swarming at Tom's heels, he stopped—apparently thinking better of his intention.

"You—you careless young hound!" he muttered savagely. "Why couldn't you look where the thunder you're runnin' to?"

"I'm sorry," said Tom, realising that the fellow had some cause for anger. "We were anxious to get under shelter. I couldn't see you in the gloom there. I hope you're not hurt?"

The fellow growled something in reply, and stood back a little, allowing the juniors to crowd farther in. He stood thus, in sullen silence, whilst the juniors turned their attention to the pelting rain outside. The apology had been made, and apparently accepted, though grudgingly, and they felt no further interest in the man.

But apparently the man felt a further interest in them.

He stepped towards them at length.

"Excuse me, young gents," he exclaimed, glancing at their caps. "You're from St. James' School, I see?"

The juniors turned, struck by the change in the man's tone.

"Yes, we are," said Tom Merry shortly.

The fellow hesitated, and the juniors eyed him questioningly.

"There—there's a chap at St. Jim's—a schoolboy—I want to see," explained the man slowly. "His name's Kildare. Perhaps you young gentlemen can tell me how I can see him?"

"You can see him at the school any time," said Tom Merry. "He is the captain of St. Jim's. If you ask at the porter's lodge—"

"I mean, see him outside the school," explained the man hastily. "My business is private and confidential. I'd like to see him outside. If you young gents could kindly give me a hint as to how I could best meet him—"

The stranger paused questioningly.

The juniors stared at him rather curiously. Now he had emerged from the shadowy hut they saw that he was fairly well dressed, if somewhat loudly. He was fat and flabby, clean-shaven, and had a large, hooked nose, and beady eyes—not handsome by any means. What private and confidential business such a prepossessing individual could have with the captain of St. Jim's they could not imagine. They certainly wondered.

But Tom Merry saw no reason why he should not help the man.

"He's often out of gates," said Tom. "But—but unless you know him by sight, I don't see—"

"That's the trouble," said the stranger. "I don't. And if I wrote and made an appointment, it ain't likely—"

He broke off abruptly.

"Look here," he said, after a pause. "I suppose you young gents don't happen to know his cousin—a big chap, named Desmond Kildare? I heard he was round here, lately."

Tom Merry gave a start.

It was only three days since Desmond Kildare's visit to St. Jim's, and the juniors had good reason to remember that visit. They eyed the man in no little astonishment.

"Yes, we know him," said Tom.

"Is he like his cousin at all?"

"Yes, very much," said Tom briefly. "You can't mistake the resemblance."

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"Then I'll know him all right," grinned the man. "I suppose it's no good hoping to see him to-night?"

"You might," said Tom. "As a matter of fact, he's out of gates now. We left him in Rylcombe less than fifteen minutes ago."

"Vewy likely he'll come along this path. Tom Mewwy," said D'Arcy, anxious to help.

"If he's ass enough," murmured Monty Lowther.

"It's possible," agreed Tom Merry, nodding. "He might take this short cut, though—"

"Then I'll take the chance and go to meet him," was the quick answer. "I'll know him, young gentlemen."

And without troubling to thank the juniors, the man elbowed his way through them, and went tramping through the sodden undergrowth towards the path, his small eyes gleaming.

The juniors watched him go very curiously. Tom Merry was frowning a little. He did not like the look of the man, and he wondered if he had done wisely in putting him on the track of Eric Kildare.

He wondered still more on that score the next moment.

As the man reached the woodland path a figure came tramping under the trees. There was no mistaking the stalwart, athletic form.

"Kildare, bai Jove!" remarked Arthur Augustus. "I was wight, then, you fellows."

The juniors saw the man accost Kildare, and the two stood talking a moment. The sudden squall of rain and sleet had passed over by now, and the juniors saw what happened next quite clearly.

They saw Kildare suddenly step forward and hit the stranger clean under the chin. The man's head went back, and he went sprawling in the mud.

"Phew! That was a good 'un!" gasped Blake, grinning. "I wonder what the thump—"

"Better chip in," breathed Tom Merry. "I don't like the look of that fellow, you chaps. If he starts playing dirty—"

Without stopping to finish, Tom Merry went at a run through the trees. His chums followed at once, and the juniors came up to the two on the woodland path, their footsteps hardly making a sound on the sodden leaves.

They found Kildare standing over the fallen man, his face white, his fists clenched. They heard his words clearly.

"Say that again, you rotter!" he hissed through his teeth.

"You dare to say that about Desmond Kildare—as decent a chap as ever breathed! Get up, and—"

He broke off, suddenly aware that they were not alone.

"What are you kids doing here?" he snarled. "Get out!"

"But—but—" began Tom Merry, staring.

"Cut out!" snapped Kildare briefly.

The juniors hesitated, and glanced at the man who was staggering to his feet. His features were red with rage, and there was a dangerous glint in his eyes.

But as Kildare took a step towards them they moved away, though reluctantly. But they did not go far. There was an angry note in the skipper's voice which was new to them. But for all that, they did not intend leaving the popular captain of St. Jim's to face such a dangerous-looking customer alone.

But evidently the man had no intention of showing fight. He stood for a moment glaring at Kildare, and then, after saying a few words the juniors failed to hear, he pulled something from his pocket and handed it to the senior.

Kildare took it. He made a movement as if to throw it into the other's face, and then, suddenly altering his mind, tore the envelope open. In the gathering gloom he peered at the letter it contained, and then he stepped suddenly back, and the letter fell from his fingers.

"Looks like bad news for Kildare," muttered Tom Merry.

"I—I say, I think we'd better clear, after all. It's not our business."

Blake nodded, and the juniors turned and tramped away along the path. Only once did Tom Merry look back, and as he did so he gave vent to a gasp—a gasp that caused his chums to look back also. They were just in time to see Kildare hand the stranger something he took from his pocket-wallet.

"Treasury notes!" breathed Tom Merry. "Phew! I—I rather wish we hadn't seen that, you chaps. Come on. And not a word to anyone about this, mind."

"Wathah not, Tom Mewwy."

And the juniors tramped on to St. Jim's in a very thoughtful and gloomy crowd. What the queer business meant they had no idea. But that it augured ill for the popular skipper of St. Jim's they had little doubt. Nor had they any doubt that it was connected in some mysterious way with Desmond Kildare, Eric Kildare's cousin, who they believed had sailed for South America the day before.

The thought made the juniors far from happy.

On arrival at the school, the Terrible Three repaired with Blake & Co. to Study No. 6 to tea—Arthur Augustus being in funds that day. But even the cheerful crackle of a blazing fire and the cheery, well-filled table did not dispel their

gloom. And five minutes after tea had started they had cause to feel gloomier still.

The door suddenly opened, and Kildare entered. He gave the juniors a rather frightened look. His face was grey, and the juniors were shocked at the change in him.

"I—I'd like a word with you fellows," he said, his face flushing suddenly red. "I—I suppose you haven't mentioned to anyone what—what you saw to-night?"

"No, we certainly haven't, Kildare," said Tom Merry quickly, eyeing Kildare's twitching features in concern. "You—you know—"

"Yes, I know. I hardly expected you would," said Kildare quietly. "If—if you fellows would like to oblige me, you won't mention it to a soul. It—it's a private affair, and—and I'd rather it wasn't talked about. You understand?"

"Of course, Kildare," said Tom Merry awkwardly. "And—I say, we're awfully sorry if it's trouble for you, Kildare, you—"

"That's all right," said Kildare. And he left the room abruptly.

CHAPTER 5.

Helping Kildare!

THERE were a good number of people at St. Jim's who noticed Kildare's strange manner during that evening and the next day.

Undoubtedly Kildare was not himself. He went about his duties with a worried brow and a preoccupied manner. Not only that, but he was unusually snappy and irritable, especially with those luckless juniors who happened to upset his august equilibrium. Indeed, young Wally D'Arcy, his fag, made more than one dark threat—to other fags, not to Kildare—that he would jolly well chuck up his job and go on strike if it went on much longer.

But that was not all. Before evening the next day a strange whisper was circulating through the School House, an explanation that seemed to account for the sudden change in the usually good-natured and cheery Sixth-Former.

Kildare was in financial straits, was frightfully hard-up, and trying to borrow money right and left from his fellow-seniors in the Sixth.

As Kildare was about the last fellow in St. Jim's to borrow money from anyone without very urgent reasons, most of the fellows who heard that explanation took it with a grain of salt. But when Tom Merry & Co. heard it they wondered, knowing what they did.

As might be expected, it was from Baggy Trimble that Tom Merry and his chums received the information. Indeed, it was more than probable that the Paul Pry of the School House had put that unpleasant whisper into circulation.

"Who told you this, Trimble?" demanded Tom Merry, giving his chums a quick look. "You seem to—"

"Nobody told him," grinned Lowther. "He's been doing a bit of unauthorised listening-in, like these blessed wireless pirates—eh, Baggy? Was it a keyhole?"

"You shut up, Lowther, you beast! Don't judge other people by your own rotten standard of honourable conduct," said Baggy, with dignity. "I say, you fellows, isn't it a scream? Fancy old high-and-mighty Kildare cadging round for loans! Frightfully hard-up, I believe. Gee-gees and cards, I expect. You—"

"Don't be a fat fool!" snapped Tom Merry angrily. "Kildare—"

"He's doing it, anyway!" grinned Baggy. "I heard—I mean, a chap told me that even old Darrell, his pal, turned him down: could only lend him a quid, and he wants fifty. He's having to sell his blessed old motor-bike."

"Oh, shut up and get out!" snapped Blake irritably. "Clear before I puncture you, you fat gossip-monger of a balloon!"

"He tried to sell it to Darrell. In fact, he's been hawking the old jigger all over the shop," grinned Baggy, unheeding. "Forty quid, he's asking. Check, I call it! I say, d'you chaps think he'd let me raffle it for him if I ask? Here, what—Leggo, you cad!"

The cad—otherwise Jack Blake—did let go, but it was only after planting a dozen hearty kicks behind Trimble's fat person. Then Baggy went through the doorway of Study No. 6 like a stone from a catapult.

Blake kicked the door closed, and the juniors looked at each other rather queerly.

There was probably a great deal of exaggeration in Trimble's rather disturbing story, but, nevertheless, Tom Merry & Co. had good reason to believe there was a grain of truth in it.

That curious incident in the woods the previous evening had deeply disturbed the juniors, for they idolised the popular and genial skipper of St. Jim's.

But, after all, it was none of their business, and the juniors had decided not to discuss it among themselves, nor with others. Now, however, indignation against the tattling Baggy Trimble caused Blake to refer to the subject again.

"That fat frog ought to be kicked hard every time he comes scandal-mongering!" he grunted. "Only that will stop his silly tongue. I suppose he's spreading the yarn all over the House."

"And it grows as it spreads," said Lowther. "By bedtime Kildare will have murdered the Head, robbed his safe, clubbed Mr. Railton, and raided Mrs. Taggles' till."

"Oh, forget it!" said Tom Merry uneasily. "It looks like being had enough. Everybody seems to have noticed Kildare's off colour, and when they hear Trimble's yarn they'll think there's truth in it. Anyway, I thought you fellows were coming with us to the village. If you are, then buck up."

"Let's clear these things away first," said Blake, jumping up from the table.

Blake & Co. had just finished tea, and they soon had the tea things cleared away, and then, getting their caps and coats, they went out with the Terrible Three.

The Terrible Three were on shopping bent, and they had called on Blake & Co. on their way out-of-doors. And their chums of the Fourth had been willing enough to accompany them. Of late the rival juniors from Rylcombe Grammar School had been unusually active, and it was wiser for the St. Jim's juniors to go to the village in force when the cheery Gordon Gay & Co. were on the warpath. Seven juniors were not likely to prove such an easy prey for a rag as three.

Chatting footer matters, the juniors tramped along the muddy lane cheerfully enough. They had put thoughts of Kildare out of their minds, and even when Kildare himself overtook them on his motor-bike they did not refer to the subject. But just as they were passing the local garage on entering the village, Tom Merry stopped, and a shade crossed his face.

"Look, you fellows!" he said.

The juniors could see straight through the big, open doors of the garage into the lighted interior. Kildare was there with his motor-bike. Standing by, examining the machine with a calculating eye, was the motor engineer.

The meaning of the scene was obvious to the juniors. Kildare's anxious face, as he watched the garage owner, coupled with what they had heard from Trimble, made the inference plain.

"So there was something in Trimble's yarn," said Lowther. "Old Kildare's selling his bike."

Tom Merry nodded.

"Come on, let's get away!" he said.

The juniors went on to the chemist's, where Manners had some photographic purchases to make. Then, after a brief call at the village tuckshop, the juniors started back for home. But it seemed as if they were fated to be reminded of Eric Kildare and his affairs again that evening. For, just as they were leaving the village, Tom Merry stopped once again with a startled exclamation. And this time more than a shade crossed his face.

It was a look of blank astonishment.

"What's bitten you now, Tommy?" asked Lowther, staring at his chum's face. "What's the matter?"

"Didn't you see?" stammered Tom. "Kildare! Well, I'm blessed! He's just entered that inn across the way. Walked in as large as life."

"You're seeing things, Tommy!" grinned Lowther. "Sure it wasn't the Head himself?"

"It was Kildare," said Tom, with conviction. "And he didn't sneak in, either. He walked in as if he owned the blessed place!"

"Then I can't believe it was Kildare!" grunted Blake. "Kildare isn't the sort of chap to sneak in anywhere. But—but—"

He paused, and the juniors eyed each other. The inn across the road was the Royal George, an unsavoury place with an unsavoury reputation. To see the captain of St. Jim's entering such a place was rather staggering, to say the least of it.

"He must be thundering well potty, marching into the beastly place like that!" breathed Tom Merry. "If anyone had seen him—"

"And somebody has besides us!" hissed Lowther suddenly. "Look there!"

The juniors followed Lowther's glance and jumped. Standing on the opposite pavement, with his back to them, was Gerald Knox of the Sixth. He was staring at the entrance to the inn, and they could imagine what his feelings were. Not only was Knox the most unpopular prefect at St. Jim's, but he was Kildare's bitterest enemy, as they well knew.

"Phew!" breathed Blake. "What awful luck for Kildare! Now the fat's in the fire. He hasn't seen us. Better get out of sight, though."

The juniors slipped into a nearby doorway, and watched, curious to see how Knox would deal with such a situation. With his enemy thus delivered into his hands it was unlikely the ungenerous prefect would let such a chance to score slip by him.

But a moment later the juniors realised that the worst was yet to happen. For, even as they slipped into hiding, a well-known figure came along the village street. As they recognised him the juniors saw that Kildare's luck was dead out that evening.

"Ratty!" muttered Tom Merry. "Oh, what rotten luck! Kildare's number's up now!"

It certainly seemed so. Mr. Ratcliff, the ill-natured House-master of the New House, was as unpopular a master as Knox was a prefect. He stopped and stared curiously, and not a little suspiciously at Knox.

"Why, Knox, what are you doing here?" they heard him rasp. "You appear to be—"

Knox wheeled, startled, and the juniors saw the look of malicious satisfaction that spread over his face as he recognised the master. They stood talking together, but though their voices reached the juniors' ears, they could not distinguish the words. Then, quite suddenly, Mr. Ratcliff walked quickly away.

But he did not go far. He walked to the end of the building, and vanished round the rear of the inn premises.

"That's done it!" breathed Tom Merry, in dismay. "Ratty's gone to guard the back, and that beastly, sneaking rotter's guarding the front. Poor old Kildare's done!"

"How feahfully wotten!"

"I'd give a pension to get old Kildare out of this hole!" muttered Herries, gritting his teeth. "Can't we do anything—anything to spoil the game of those sneaking rotters, Tommy?"

"We're going to try!" said Tom Merry briefly.

He was watching Knox, his brows wrinkled into a thoughtful frown. Then he glanced along the street, and as he did so a gleam came into his eyes.

Strolling along towards them, but some distance away yet, were three boys, wearing Grammar School caps. And as he recognised them, Tom Merry made up his mind at once.

"You fellows wait here, and don't let Knoxy see you," he whispered. "I've got an idea. Gordon Gay and his pals are coming along. I'm going to get them to help; they will like a shot. You'll see presently. If Gay doesn't look like doing the job, you fellows can pile in and help."

And with these rather vague instructions, Tom Merry slipped from his hiding-place, and, keeping an eye on the sentinel-like figure across the street, he took to his heels to meet the three Grammarians. All day Tom Merry had been trying not to make Kildare's affairs his business, but now he was determined to make Kildare's affairs his business at whatever cost to himself.

CHAPTER 6.

No Go!

"IT'S dear old Tommy—"

"Merry old Tommy!" grinned Gordon Gay. "Like giddy old Daniel, he's shoved his napper pop into the lions' den. In this case we're the lions."

As Tom Merry ran breathlessly up, he found himself surrounded by the grinning Grammarians.

"Half a minute—no ragging, Gay!" gasped Tom Merry. "It's pax!"

"Oh, is it?" ejaculated Gordon Gay. "What cheek! I fancy it's for us to decide that, my pippin. What—"

"We want your help, Gay," said Tom Merry quickly. "We've helped you chaps on occasions, and—"

"Oh, if it's serious, old top, all serene!" said the leader of the Grammarians promptly. "No ragging, you chaps. What's the trouble, Merry?"

"You see old Knox there," muttered Tom Merry hurriedly. "We want you chaps to collar him—bowl him over before he spots you, and then shove something over his napper. We'll show you what to do, then."

"Great pip!"

The Grammarians blinked at Tom Merry. Though there was constant warfare between the juniors of the rival schools, it was good-humoured warfare, and there wasn't an atom of ill-feeling on either side. Indeed, when not engaged in "ragging" each other, Gordon Gay & Co. and Tom Merry & Co. were great chums. In matters of serious moment, either side were always ready to help the other.

But now the cheery Grammarians looked at Tom Merry blankly. Such a request was cool and unusual, to say the least of it.

"But—but—" gasped Frank Monk.

"I can't tell you exactly what the game is," said Tom, "but if you're game we'll be jolly grateful. Are you on?"

"Yes, but—"

"Look here," muttered Tom desperately, realising that every moment was precious, "there's one of our chaps in there. What he's doing there we don't know; but he's a good sort, and we don't want him to get nabbed. Knox is waiting there to nab him. Now do you catch on?"

Gordon Gay did. He nodded promptly.

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"Phew! Yes, rather!" he said. "We'll do it like a shot. We owe old Knoxy a few hard knocks, anyway."

"Good! Then listen!"

Tom Merry whispered a moment to the Grammarians, and then he slipped back to his chums. Knox had not moved from his position, and obviously he hadn't the slightest idea he was under observation.

But he soon did know.

The prefect certainly heard the footsteps on the pavement behind him, but he did not look round. He was too busily engaged. To tell the truth, Knox was not absolutely sure that the senior he had seen enter the place was Eric Kildare. But he meant to make absolutely sure, and he kept his eyes glued eagerly on the lighted doorway.

He fell an easy prey to the Grammarians. They came strolling casually up to him, and then, without warning, the three of them flung themselves upon him, and he went down with a yell of surprise—a yell muffled by a raincoat wrapped deftly round his head.

What happened next Knox of the Sixth never quite knew.

As the luckless senior went down, Tom Merry & Co. came dashing across the street, and the next moment the raincoat was swiftly replaced by a sack. It was a flour-sack which Tom Merry had snatched from a bread-van standing unattended close by, and before the startled prefect had regained his wits sufficiently to attempt to struggle, this was wrenched over his head and arms, rendering him practically helpless.

Luckily, the village street was deserted, save for themselves, and the rest was easy for the kidnapers.

Struggling feebly, and yelling furiously within the flour-sack, the hapless prefect was lifted and rushed to the unattended bread-van. The double doors at the back of the van were open and like a sack of flour Knox was slung inside. Then, as Frank Monk and Wootton major clambered in after him, Gordon Gay leaped into the driving-seat and whipped up the horse.

It was all over in a matter of seconds, and by the time the startled baker came rushing out of his shop, the commandeered van was vanishing up the village street in the wintry dusk.

But Tom Merry & Co. were not interested in the troubles of the baker. They knew Gordon Gay & Co. could be trusted to make things right with the tradesman, and they had the worst part of the business to do yet—or, at least, Tom Merry had.

"Now seat, you chaps!" whispered Tom. "Keep clear of Ratty, and I'll see to the rest."

"Yaas, wathah!"

The juniors scattered, and Tom Merry ran boldly into the inn. He had set himself an unpleasant and risky task, but he meant to see it through.

Once inside the evil-smelling place Tom glanced about him quickly. He was standing in a narrow passage—a passage leading straight to the inn yard, and with doors on either side. All these doors were open, save one.

Tom decided promptly. The closed door was the second on the left, and he walked quickly to it. It was unlocked, and he slipped inside in a flash.

Then he paused. He had judged aright. Kildare was there. He was standing, white-faced and tense, before a small, stone-slab table on which was a glass, and a little heap of banknotes. Behind the table was seated a man, and as Tom saw the fat, flabby features and beady eyes, he recognised him in a flash.

It was the man Kildare had knocked down in the woods some days ago. His flabby hand was closing over the heap of notes, the other hand was handing Kildare a letter.

Tom Merry took all this in, and then Kildare turned his head swiftly and saw him. His face flushed scarlet with angry surprise.

"Merry—you?" he said hoarsely. "What are you doing here?"

Tom ran to him, gripping his arm in his excitement. "Quick! Get out of this!" he panted. "Ratty's outside, and—"

"Wha-a-at?"

"He's watching the back," said Tom breathlessly. "You were seen coming in, Kildare. Knox saw you. He was guarding the front, but we've got him out of the way."

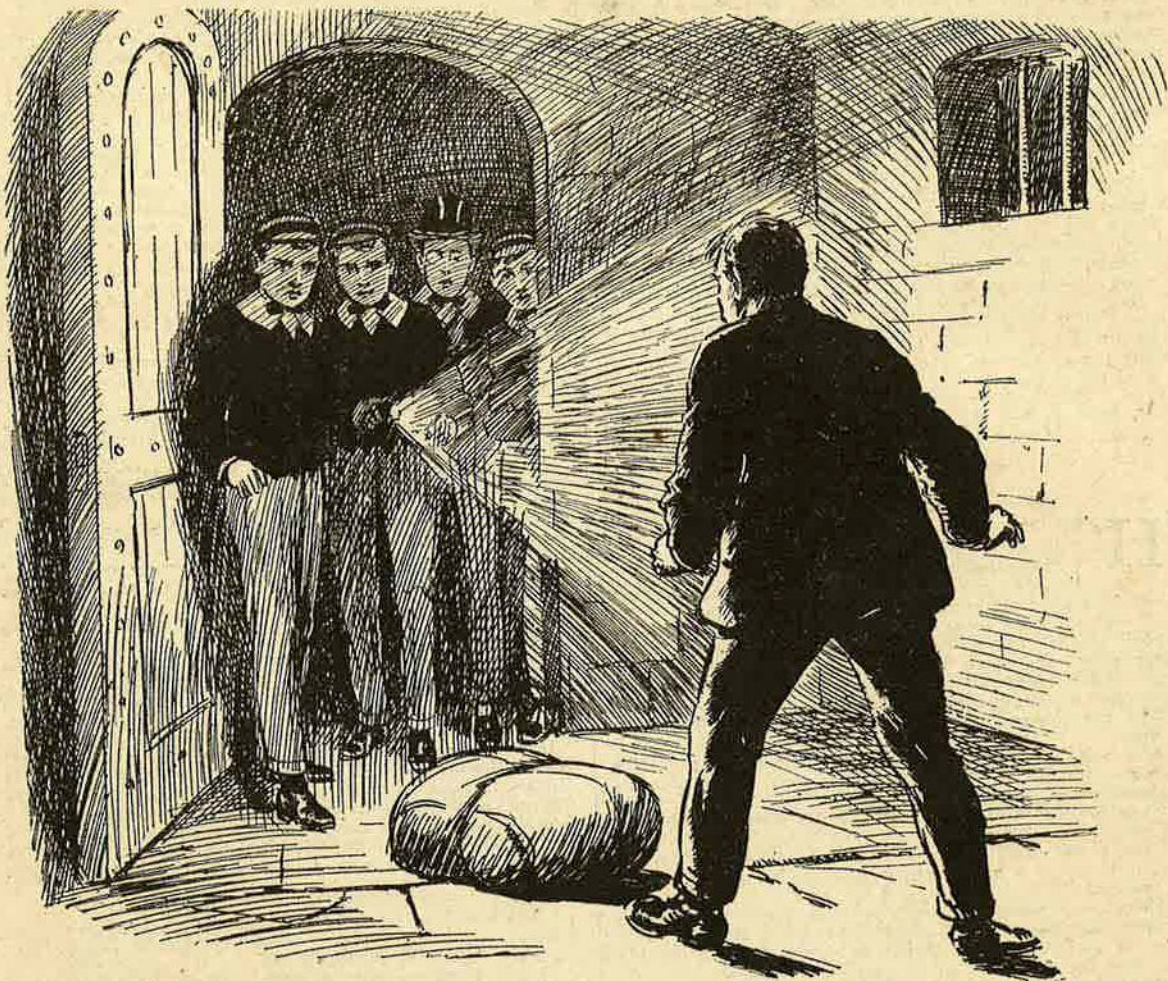
"You—you impudent young—"

"Quick!" pleaded Tom Merry. "Rush out now—"

Kildare shook his arm free with an angry wrench. His face was red with rage and humiliation. To be seen in that disreputable place, and in such circumstances, was bad enough. But the fact that a junior had found him there—moreover, had entered the place to save him, roused the senior's pride and anger.

He shook the junior angrily.

"You young fool!" he stuttered. "How dare you come here? How dare you tell me to sneak out like a cowardly worm? I shall walk out as I walked in. And you—get out! Get out while you're safe, you young—"



BEHIND LOCKED DOORS! As the great iron-studded door swung open Tom Merry & Co. found Flint crouching against the far wall, his face grey with fear. He came forward, blinking in the sudden light as the juniors entered. "Keep your distance," snapped Tom Merry, throwing the bundle down. "There's your bed. We'll bring your breakfast in the morning." (See page 16.)

The senior stopped abruptly, struck suddenly by the hurt look in the junior's pleading eyes. His bitter anger left him as suddenly as it had come, and his face softened.

"All serene, kid!" he muttered. "I didn't mean that. I know why you came, and—and I sha'n't forget. Now go—save yourself. I should never forgive myself if you were caught, Merry. I'll get clear all right!"

His grip tightened on the junior's arm—a warm squeeze that was more thanks to the boy than any words could have been. Tom Merry's face brightened, and he nodded. Then, without a glance at the staring man at the table, he slipped to the door and went out.

Kildare stared after him, motionless. He had entered the place boldly, because his conscience was clear; and he had intended to leave the place in the same manner.

But now he hesitated, his mind whirling with new thoughts and fears. Tom Merry had been right. He must save himself. He, a Sixth-Former, a prefect, the captain of St. Jim's, caught in such a beastly place!

The thought made him shudder now. He could imagine Knox's ill-concealed delight at his downfall, the thinly veiled sneers and satisfaction of the mean-minded Mr. Ratcliff at his capture. He could also picture the shock and distress of the kindly Dr. Holmes at the news. Dr. Holmes trusted him, respected him, and he valued the old Head's trust and respect above all—or nearly all.

Quite clearly now Kildare realised all that capture would mean to him. Certainly he had not entered the place for any shady purpose. But how could he prove that? His reasons were secret, and must remain his secret—for the present. He could not defend himself. Capture would mean disgrace, humiliation—perhaps expulsion!

He realised it now, and with the realisation came fear—fear that swept away pride and dignity. He was seized with

a sudden, desperate desire to get out of the place—to save himself.

With a sudden movement he snatched up the document on the table—the letter he had dropped on Tom Merry's entrance—and with fingers that trembled he slipped it into his breast-pocket. Then, with a curt nod to the man at the table, he darted from the parlour.

Out in the narrow passage he halted, undecided. In the little entrance hall-way, Tom Merry was still waiting, anxious on Kildare's behalf. But Kildare did not see him. He stood glancing up and down in agonised indecision.

What had the junior said? Was Ratty at the back or the front? Not for the life of him could Kildare remember.

With sudden decision the senior darted along the passage to the back. Tom Merry saw the unfortunate mistake too late. With a gasp, he ran after the senior, and glanced cautiously into the yard at the rear of the inn.

But he was too late to undo the harm. As he peered out into the dusky yard he caught sight of two figures standing under the lamp by the entrance gate. The lamplight streamed yellow on the sharp, acid features of Mr. Horace Ratcliff. Kildare's back was towards him.

"So—so it is you, Kildare!" the junior heard the master gasp. "Is—is it possible? Your fellow-prefect, Knox, reported that a senior boy had entered this disreputable hostelry, but—but I never for one moment dreamed that it could be you, Kildare!"

"Will you kindly take your hand from my shoulder, Mr. Ratcliff?" came Kildare's quiet voice. "I shall not attempt to run away, sir."

"Oh, yes, yes, Kildare; I am sure you would not!" said Mr. Ratcliff, a bitter sneer in his voice. "Nevertheless, I am afraid, Kildare, that I must ask you to walk with me back to the school."

There came no answer to that, but next moment the two walked away into the gathering dusk. Tom Merry watched them go with a sinking heart. Someone came out into the passage behind him, and, not wishing to enter the place again, the junior ran into the yard and made his way to the front of the building.

He found his chums waiting anxiously lower down the street, and Tom Merry soon related the dismal news.

"We thought something had gone wrong," said Blake miserably. "Oh, what rotten luck! After all our trouble, too!"

"Feahful luck, bai Jove!" groaned D'Arcy. "Poor old Kildare!"

"We did our best, anyway," said Tom. "And now, you chaps, let's get back. We don't want anyone to see us round here, and connect us with that Knoxy affair. Good job now we did get Gay and his pals on that job. If Knox spots any of them it'll only be put down to an ordinary Grammarian rag. But if we'd been spotted—well, they'd have guessed why we did it. It would have made matters worse for Kildare, and it would have meant a flogging for us."

And the juniors hurried home in a gloomy and depressed crowd. They had no desire for trouble now—though could they have helped Kildare by asking for it, they would willingly have gone through a dozen floggings.

CHAPTER 7.

Kildare's Secret!

"HERE'S Knoxy now!" whispered Tom Merry. "Jove, look at his chivvy!"

Tom Merry & Co. were standing together in the Hall, when Knox of the Sixth came striding through, apparently coming from the Head's study.

It was an hour since the juniors had returned to the school, and it was twenty minutes since they had seen Knox enter the school, his clothes and person smothered in flour, and his face full of smouldering fury. In that time Knox had evidently changed and proceeded to the Head to report the outrage upon his august person in Rylcombe Village.

And now he was returning. But what a change in his appearance! His eyes were gleaming with excitement; his features expressed smug satisfaction.

"Looks jolly bucked," remarked Manners, in surprise. "I should have thought—"

"Don't you see?" hissed Tom Merry. "I don't like the signs. If Knox is bucked, then you can bet old Kildare is in the cart!"

There were many curious glances at Knox as he came striding through, not only from Tom Merry & Co. There was an unusual number of fellows crowded round the big fire, and there was an air of subdued excitement over all. Many fellows had seen Kildare and Mr. Ratcliff enter the school and proceed to the Headmaster's study, and their appearance and behaviour had roused no little comment.

And then a strange rumour had filtered through the School House that Kildare had been caught "pub-haunting." He was even now in the Head's study, standing his trial. Who had started the rumour nobody seemed to know. Possibly Baggy Trimble could have told.

Of course, it was all rot—silly rot; everyone agreed upon that. But—but—

Something was wrong—there was no doubt about that. And as Knox came along from the Head's study the group around the fire ceased discussing the strange affair, and eyed him curiously. Knox saw the glances, and smiled. Then, quite suddenly, his eye caught sight of Tom Merry & Co. They were standing apart from the others, taking no part in the discussion, and as he sighted them Knox's expression changed, and he came across to them.

"Merry," he snapped, glowering at the juniors, "were you in the village this evening?"

"In the village?" exclaimed Tom Merry innocently. "Why, yes. No harm in that, though, is there, Knox?"

Knox eyed each of the juniors fixedly. He was about to speak again, and then his lips met tightly, and he walked away.

It was the turn of Tom Merry & Co. to be eyed curiously. "Hallo!" remarked Cardew, grinning. "Old Knoxy's turned the merry old searchlight of suspicion on you chaps, has he?"

"Oh, rats!"

"Don't be modest, old beans, if it was you that flour-bagged the dear Knoxy-woxy," said Cardew. "If you chaps did it, I'd like to move a vote of hearty thanks from myself and the gentlemen present—and absent. The only pity is that—if you did it—you didn't finish the merry old job. It would have been a far, far better thing had you shoved a few bricks in the sack with him and pitched the lot into the giddy river—what?"

"Hear, hear!"

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Apparently Cardew's somewhat drastic way of looking at things met with universal approval in Hall.

"I say, you fellows," gasped Baggy Trimble, eyeing Tom Merry & Co. with wide-open eyes, "was it really you chaps who did it?"

"You really want to know?" queried Monty Lowther. "You'd like to know just how it was done, Baggy?"

"Yes, rather!" grinned Baggy.

"Well, it was done just like this," said Lowther.

And he laid sudden hands on the fat junior, and, wrenching his jacket upwards, he wrapped it round the fat head of the curious Baggy. After which he whirled the startled junior across to the big cupboard in the corner of Hall. The door happened to be open, and Monty Lowther slung the fat busybody inside like a sack of coals, and closed and locked the door upon him.

"That's how it was done," remarked Lowther, turning towards the grinning onlookers. "I hope Baggy's satisfied now he knows."

And, unheeding the muffled yells and thumps from within the cupboard, Monty Lowther followed his chums out of Hall. All were smiling now—but not for long. The troubles of Gerald Knox and Baggy Trimble were soon banished from their minds at thought of Eric Kildare and his greater trouble.

They strolled away from Hall, and almost unconsciously their steps turned towards the Head's study. Some distance from the sacred door they paused.

A senior was hovering outside, his face anxious and troubled. It was Darrell, Kildare's best chum.

Even as the juniors came near, the door opened and Kildare emerged. His face was pale, but he smiled at sight of Darrell.

"Kildare, old man," muttered Darrell, "what—what is the matter? Is it true?"

"It—it might have been worse," said Kildare, a trifle thickly. "It—it's not the sack, anyway, old chap. I—"

"Then—then it was true!"

"You don't know, then?" said Kildare. "Come along. I'll tell you in the study."

Darrell nodded, and the two came along arm-in-arm. Darrell hardly glanced at the juniors waiting there, but Kildare caught the looks on the juniors' faces. He stopped, obviously knowing why they were there.

"It—it's all right, kids," he said gruffly. "Look here, Merry," he went on quietly, glancing after his chum, "I suppose it was you who played that trick on Knox this evening?"

"Ahem!" mumbled Merry. "You—you see—"

"You need not be afraid of speaking," said Kildare, with a bitter, mirthless laugh. "I am a prefect no longer, nor am I the captain of St. Jim's."

"I say, I—we're sorry—frightfully sorry, Kildare!"

"That's all right," said Kildare. "I understand, kids. I thought I'd mention that Knox will make trouble about his affair, if he can. As yet he knows nothing; he has no proof. All he knows is that someone shoved him in a sack, and carted him to a quiet part of Rylcombe Lane, and pitched him in the ditch there. And when he crawled out he was alone. But—but I've good reason to know he suspects you kids. So, if you'll take my advice, you'll keep mum, and lie low for a bit. That's all."

And, with a nod, Kildare hurried on and rejoined Darrell. Nothing was said until they were inside Kildare's study, and then Darrell looked inquiringly at his chum.

"Yes, it was true, I suppose, what you heard, Darrell," said Kildare. "Ratty caught me red-handed in the Royal George in Rylcombe."

"Wha-a-t?"

"It's true," said Kildare quietly.

And he told his chum how he had entered the place, but not why—how he had emerged full into Mr. Ratcliff's arms, but nothing of Tom Merry's part in the affair. Darrell was a prefect, and it would be his duty to report the junior's conduct, whether he liked doing so personally or not. Darrell listened all through without a word.

"The Head was a brick," said Kildare huskily. "I admitted being there, and I refused to defend myself. But—but he wouldn't condemn me. He was upset, but he said his faith in me was still unshaken. He accepted my word that I was not there for a wrong purpose. He—he was awfully decent about it."

"But—but—" gasped the bewildered Darrell.

"He sacked me from my jobs—yes," muttered Kildare. "He could do nothing less, though. I've broken the rules of the school, and I've got to suffer, I suppose. I'm skipper no longer, nor am I a prefect."

"Phew!"

Darrell whistled loud and long, his eyes fixed curiously on Kildare's scarlet face. Kildare knew the question his chum was longing to ask.

"You—you want to know what I went there—why I entered the beastly place," he muttered. "I—I can't tell

you—no more than I could tell the Head. It—it is my secret!"

There was a silence. Darrell was looking deeply troubled, and his glance was still curious. Kildare could stand the silence no longer, and he jumped up from the easy-chair and started to pace the room restlessly. He stopped suddenly, and wheeled on his chum.

"Hang it all," he snapped, "why shouldn't I tell you, Darrell? You're my chum, and I know I can trust you. In any case, the whole world will know in a week or two. Listen! You had tea with my cousin, Desmond Kildare, the other day. What sort of a chap did he impress you as being?"

Darrell looked up, "Why, a jolly decent sort," he said promptly. "A white man. But—"

"That was my view of him also; in fact," said Kildare luskily, "he was always my hero. I was no end fond of him, and am now. But—but—"

He paused a moment. "Last night," he went on, "I met a man in Rylcombe Woods—a man who claimed to know my cousin. He made a serious charge against Desmond, and I knocked him down. Afterwards he showed me a letter—a letter written by my cousin. I recognised the handwriting at once. It was a confession, signed by my cousin, and it was addressed to the head of the firm he was leaving—people he had been with since leaving school."

Darrell was looking startled now. Kildare went on dully, his head sunk.

"The letter, obviously, had not been intended by Desmond to reach his old gov'nor before he had reached South America, and was well out of reach of the law. For in the letter Desmond confessed to having for years been embezzling sums of money belonging to the firm, and was now bolting before the crash came."

"Great Scott!" "You can imagine what a blow it was to me," said Kildare thickly. "In the letter he expressed contrition, and all the rest of it. But—but I had idolised him, remember. And now I found my idol had feet of clay. For years he had been a—a thief! And—instead of facing the music now, he—he flees like a coward!"

Darrell nodded silently. He was beginning to understand now.

"Well, that was the letter," muttered Kildare. "How this brute had got possession of it Heaven alone knows. But he had it. He—he offered to sell it to me for fifty pounds."

"Blackmail!" breathed Darrell. "Yes, blackmail. For fifty pounds I could have the letter. If I refused to pay, the rascal vowed to hand it to the police. In that case, of course, my cousin would either be arrested on the boat or on landing in South America."

"The hound!" breathed Darrell. "Well, there it was," went on Kildare quietly. "What could I do, Darrell? Others will call Desmond a scoundrel. But—but I can't—I simply can't think ill of him. To me he is just weak. And there is the family to be thought of. I detest the very word blackmail. But I had to do it. I paid the rascal all I had last night—three quid—and—"

"So that's what you wanted cash for, Kildare," said Darrell quietly. "I see now." "Yes. I got it all right. I sold my motor-bike to Blakott, in the village. He was very decent indeed—offered to sell it back to me within a month, if I wanted it back. Well, with that cash and what I managed to raise, I went to the Royal George, where the rotter is staying, and paid him—got the letter—to-night. You know the rest."

"But—but why didn't you send him the cash?" asked Darrell. "The brute wouldn't hear of it," said Kildare, gritting his teeth. "He was bent on making things as unpleasant for me as he could. He'd got me, and he knew it. And he meant to make me squirm, knowing I hated the very thought of entering that evil place. He said I must dance to his tune. Remember, I knocked him down. He was full of spite and vicious malice. I had to go. Anyway, there it is, Darrell. I know I can rely upon you to keep it mum, old man."

"Of course, you ass. But—but half a mo, Kildare!" exclaimed Darrell grimly. "Are you sure that the letter was genuine?"

"Certain," said Kildare, with a bitter laugh. "I know old Derry's fist too well to make a mistake. No; it's genuine enough, worse luck! Well, I've told you, Darrell; and I don't regret what I've done, now it's over. And now, if you don't mind, old fellow, I'd like to be alone. We'll talk it over again—eh?"

Darrell nodded, his face thoughtful and clouded. But he said nothing. He took Kildare's hand in a warm clasp. It was silent sympathy, and it told Kildare what his chum's feelings were far more than words could have done. Then Darrell went out abruptly.

When he had gone, Kildare took from his pocket a letter and read it through, once—twice. And as he read the look of gloom went from his face. It was the letter to gain possession of which Eric Kildare had risked all—had sacrificed his good name, his position, to save his cousin from arrest and prison.

With a deep sigh of relief the senior dropped it into the fire, and watched it burn to ashes. He felt curiously happy and relieved now. But even as the feeling took possession of him a new thought crossed his mind.

He had saved his cousin—yes. But what of himself and the family? Desmond had escaped arrest, but he could never escape dishonour, disgrace. And the disgrace, at least, was a family disgrace. Eventually the thing would be found out—the truth would become known. The whole world would know, St. Jim's would know, that Desmond Kildare, his cousin, the light-hearted, good-natured giant, and an old St. Jim's boy, was a criminal—a fugitive from justice!

The sudden thought struck Kildare like a blow. He stumbled to the table, and his head dropped on his arms. He sat there motionless for some minutes. But he sprang up as a knock sounded on the door. It opened to reveal Toby, the page-boy.

"Which it's a letter, sir," said Toby, handing over a crumpled envelope. "It was brought by a villidge boy, Master Kildare."

Kildare took the letter, and as Toby withdrew he tore the envelope open, and read the note rapidly. It ran as follows:

"Dear Sir,—Come to see me at the same place to-morrow night. Our little bit of business isn't finished yet."

"JAMES FLINT."

Kildare had never heard the name before, but he had no need to wonder who James Flint was. He knew. The curt insolence of the message made the senior grind his teeth with rage.

"The insolent brute!" he muttered savagely. "I'll see him hanged first! I've got the letter, and I've finished—"

He paused suddenly, and his face paled.

Had he finished with James Flint? He had the letter certainly. But—but supposing James Flint had a copy, and brought that copy to the notice of Desmond Kildare's old employers? And supposing they acted upon it—instituted inquiries and investigations? They would soon discover the truth. And then—

Kildare crushed the note in his clenched fist, his face grey. He knew instinctively that he had not finished with James Flint—yet. And with the thought a feeling of sickening despair took possession of the senior.

CHAPTER 8.

Tom Merry Decides!

"JUST one," murmured Monty Lowther, "one for his napper."

"But—but—"

"Only one—one each, I mean," grinned Manners.

"Mine's going for his hooked nasal organ. Don't be an ass, Tommy."

"And I'm going to give him an extra one for Kildare," said Blake grimly. "We'll teach the fat rotter to come playing his dirty games on our skipper. He needs tarring and feathering, and then boiling in oil."

"Yaas, watah!" agreed Arthur Augustus. "I am not a vengeful person usually, but I weally believe that no punishment is stwong enough for that feahful wottah, Tom Mewwy."

Tom Merry frowned.

With their chums of the Fourth, the Terrible Three were in ambush in a quiet corner of Rylcombe Lane. During the previous night there had been a fall of snow, and though there was not much left on the slushy roads, there was plenty in the ditch-bottoms. And it was in a ditch-bottom the juniors were crouching now, with piles of snowballs at hand. They had good reason to believe that Figgins & Co. of the New House would be along that way presently, and the ambush was intended for the juniors of the rival House.

And then, while they were patiently waiting, a familiar form had come in sight, strolling from the village—a fat man, with a flabby face and hooked nose, and wearing a big great-coat. It was Mr. James Flint, as he called himself—though the juniors did not know him as such; they only knew him as Kildare's enemy—and their own.

It seemed to the waiting juniors a splendid opportunity to get a bit of their own back. They wanted to, badly. They knew that he was to blame for Kildare's troubles—and their own. For since the previous evening quite a lot had happened. To fill the vacancy of skipper at St. Jim's, Darrell, Rushden, Baker, and several others had been offered the post in turn, but they had all refused it out of loyalty to Kildare.

Then Knox had been offered the post, and he had accepted it, to the general dismay. And as Knox had already begun to make his authority felt among the juniors they felt they had still another cause for resentment against Mr. James Flint.

And yet, though now they had the chance to get a bit of their own back—if only by pelting the rascal with snowballs—Tom Merry hesitated. In his view, the less they had to do with the scoundrel the better—for Kildare and themselves.

"Better not," he murmured. "I'm as keen to down the rotter as you fellows are, but it might—Hallo! We're too late, in any case. Here's old Kildare himself!"

It was. The juniors had been so engrossed in watching their quarry approaching that they had failed to hear footsteps in the slush. Almost before they knew it, Eric Kildare was abreast of their hiding-place, and the two met face to face.

Both stopped; but while Flint grinned a welcome, Kildare's face darkened.

"You?" he said thickly. "I thought—I was just coming to see you at—"

"I know you'd come up to scratch," grinned Flint. "As it happens, though, I've been thinking about you coming to see me. After last night I see it isn't safe—either for you or me. Trouble for you might make trouble for me—eh? Anyway, I've come along to meet you instead. Know a quiet place, I suppose, where we can talk?"

"What do you want?" snapped Kildare. "You can say what you've got to say here and now, you rascal! I imagined I had finished with you."

"What an imagination you've got!" sneered the fellow.

"The fact is, young fellow, I've come to the conclusion I sold you that letter too cheap—much too cheap. It's worth more to you than fifty quid. I'm not going to be hard—"

"You'll get nothing more out of me," said Kildare. "You—you utter rotter! I've got the letter now—"

"Which happens to be a copy," grinned Flint. "A copy I made myself. Handwriting is a speciality of mine. In any case the letter don't signify much. I've only got to drop a word to the police—or to Desmond Kildare's old firm—"

"You—villain!" hissed Kildare.

"Thanks! As I say, I've only got to drop a word in the right quarter that your precious cousin has been robbing the firm for years, and—well, you know what will happen then. They'll investigate, and before he lands—or when he lands—he'll find himself in quod."

"You—had fifty pounds last night—"

"And I want another fifty. You'll get it from home all right. I reckon. You got that fifty quick enough, anyway," said Flint coolly. "And it's got to be quick. It's no good coming to you after he lands in South America, is it? Now, what about it?"

Kildare stared at the man, white-lipped and trembling. It was as much as he could do to keep himself in hand, obviously. In the ditch-bottom the crouching juniors eyed each other queerly. They dared not move, knowing what Kildare's feelings would be if he knew they had heard his secret. But they one and all wished themselves well out of it.

As it happened, however, they were fated to hear no more. For just then footsteps and merry voices sounded up the lane. Kildare heard them, and muttered something to his companion. Next moment they were walking together towards St. Jim's. They had scarcely gone when the well-known figures of Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn came round the bend, chatting and laughing together.

"Let them pass; never mind them," whispered Tom Merry.

The juniors waited until the New House juniors had gone, and then they climbed out into the lane, all thoughts of ambushing their New House rivals gone now. What they had overheard was what they would have expected to hear. From that scene in the parlour of the Royal George they had already guessed that Flint was blackmailing Kildare, and that it was in connection with Desmond Kildare.

Now they knew for a certainty, and their faces were grim. "Well, my hat!" breathed Jack Blake through his teeth. "What a howling rotter that fellow must be. He's squeezed fifty quid out of poor old Kildare, and now he's after more."

"But he won't get it," said Tom Merry in a voice that made his chums look at him. "We're going to see to that, you chaps!"

"Bai Jove, Tom Merry—"

"Listen to me," muttered Tom slowly. "Old Gussy, this morning, when we were talking about this affair, said we ought to chip in—to take old Kildare under our wing, sort of thing. We laughed at him then. But—but it strikes me Gussy was right. It is up to us to help old Kildare, if we can. We're the only fellows, I suppose, who know anything about it."

The juniors said nothing, and after a thoughtful pause Tom went on.

"Well, I've just thought of a way in which we can help Kildare. It—it's a mad idea—a risky way. But desperate ills—

require desperate remedies. Kildare's desperate now—you can see it in his face. He's bound to give in to that brute, if we let him. We're not going to give him the chance to give way."

"What's the wheeze, Tommy?" said Lowther briefly. "Out with it," said Blake. "We're with you, whatever it is."

"Yes, rather!"

Tom Merry looked at the eager faces round him. "It's this," he said quietly. "You fellows heard what that scoundrel said? It's plain enough. Kildare's cousin's done something, so he claims—something that's put him within reach of the law. He's sailed for South America now. This blackmailing brute know it, and if Kildare doesn't toe the line he'll split before Desmond lands, and get him collared. You heard what he said himself—that it was no good him coming to Kildare after Desmond had landed and was safe."

"Yes, but—"

"Well, what we've got to do is plain," said Tom Merry coolly. "We've got to keep the rotter out of the way until Desmond Kildare lands in South America. See?"

"Great pip!"

Tom's chums eyed him as though they imagined he had lost his senses.

"You—you mean kidnap him?" asked Manners blankly. "Just that," said Tom. "We're not running much risk really, if we're careful. The rascal won't dare to bring the police into the matter—that's certain. I've thought it out. It ought to be as easy as pie."

"But—but where on earth—"

"I've thought that out, too," said Tom coolly. "What about the old tower? It's within the walls of St. Jim's; it's out of bounds, and nobody ever goes there. We could keep the rotter a year there, and nobody would know."

There was a silence, but from the gleaming eyes of his chums, Tom saw that the idea, mad and risky as it undoubtedly was, appealed strongly to them.

"We'll do it," said Blake grimly. "We're with you, Tommy. It'll be jolly cold for the merchant this weather, but—"

"No colder than a prison cell, I suppose, where the rotter ought to be," said Tom. "He's proved himself a thorough heartless scoundrel, and he deserves no consideration at our hands or anybody else's. But we've no need to be cruel. We'll supply him with blankets, grub, and plenty of other things. Well, now you've heard the plan, are you all game? It's risky, and—"

The answer was unanimous and prompt.

"We're doing it," said Blake. "I'd do anything to help old Kildare, and we owe his cousin something, too. He's a jolly good sort, and I don't believe what that brute said about him. He's straight, I'm certain. But that blackmailing brute's a swindler."

"That's my view," said Tom Merry. "He's fishy, and his game's fishy. Anyway, we've decided to do it, and there's no time like the present. It's dusk now, and it'll be dark soon. Come on."

"You mean—"

"I mean to do it now," answered Tom. "He's bound to come back this way. Seven of us ought to handle the flabby brute easily. With luck we'll get him to the ruins all serene."

And Tom led the way along the dusky lane, his eyes keenly alert for a sight of their quarry. He stopped presently at a spot where trees overhung the lane, and quite close to St. Jim's.

"Here we are," muttered Tom. "We'll wait here, and when I give the word—go for him."

They hid and waited, breathless with excitement. They had not to wait long. A step sound in the lane—a jaunty step—and a bulky form hove in sight. It was Mr. Flint.

It proved to be much easier than even Tom Merry had expected.

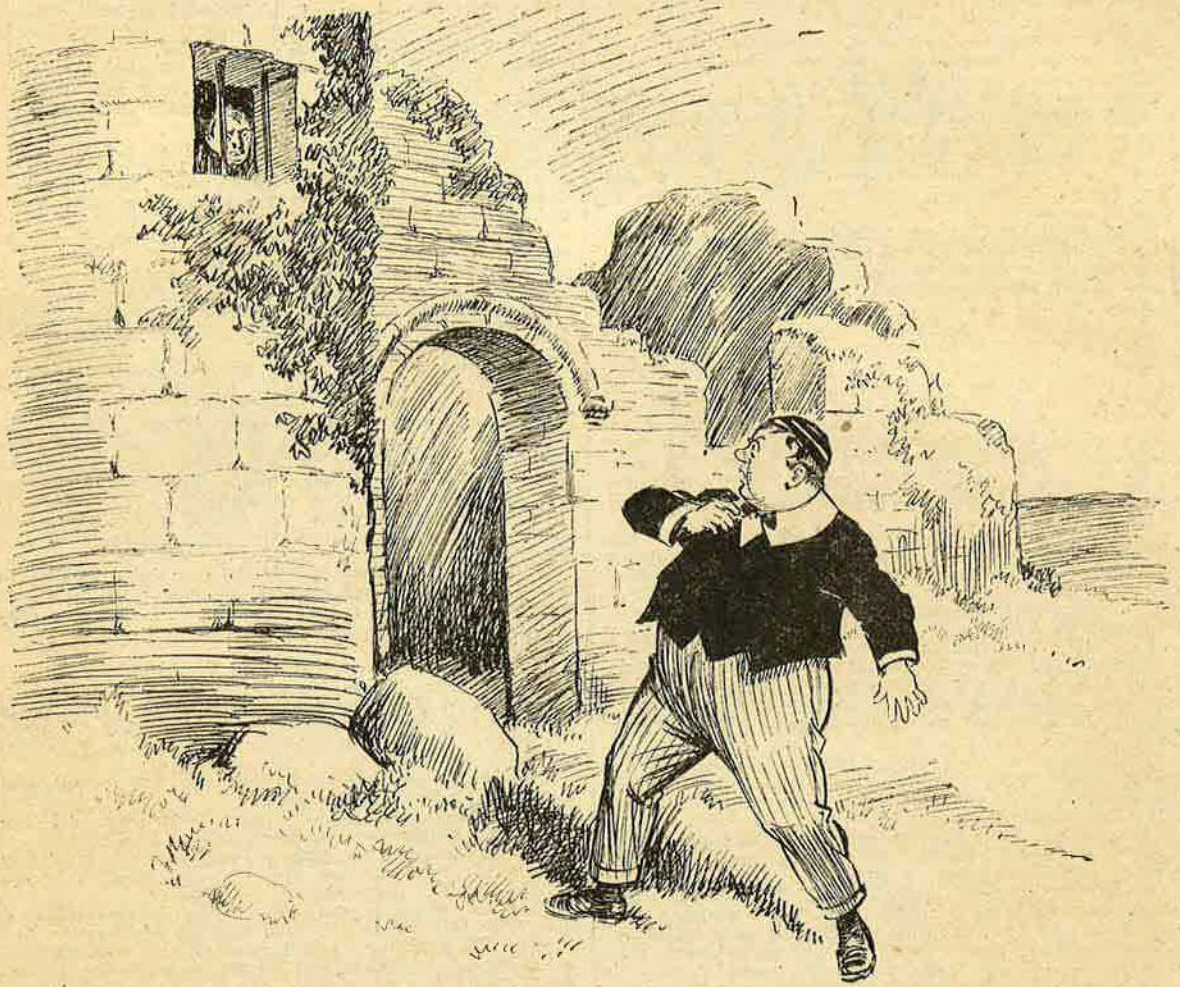
As he came abreast the hooked-nose man stopped to light a cigarette, and as Tom gave the word the seven juniors emerged from hiding with a rush.

Taken completely by surprise, the rascal had no chance whatever. The cigarette flew from his hand amid a shower of sparks, and he went to earth with the seven juniors sprawling over him. Save for one startled gasp, he got no chance to utter a sound. Within a minute he was safely gagged with handkerchiefs, his thumbs had been tied together behind him with string, and he was hauled through the hedge into a field beyond.

"Now, you fellows," whispered Tom Merry, "it's up to you to get him safely to the ruins. Cut across the fields, and then work round by Big Side, and the Chapel. You'll find me waiting with the key by the tower—with luck."

And with that Tom Merry dashed away through the slush. He knew where the key of the old tower was kept, and once inside the school gates he slowed down and crept cautiously up to the porter's lodge.

His luck was in. The lodge door was wide open, and a



THE FACE AT THE WINDOW!—Baggy Trimble jumped. His eyes had wandered to the little window high up in the towers, and what he saw there sent the colour ebbing from his fat cheeks. It was a face—a fat flabby face with glittering eyes. Baggy Trimble stood for a brief moment, rooted to the ground with surprise and terror. (See page 26.)

light streamed out from the tiny hall. From within the little parlour Tom could hear the deep, grumbling voice of Taggles, the porter.

Tom slipped inside and peeped behind the door. Hanging on a nail on the wall was a big, rusty key of quaint design. Tom took it down and ran out softly. Though within the walls of the school, the ruins were some distance away, and once safely round the tuckshop, the junior ran for it.

Though the dusk was falling rapidly, it was light enough to see, and Tom was soon threading his way among the masses of ivy-clad ruins. The Round Tower, like the rest of the old monastery buildings, was little more than a ruin, but one room at the top was still all but intact, and after stumbling up the broken stairway, Tom found a big, nail-studded oaken door facing him.

He fumbled in the gloom for some moments until he found the keyhole, and slipped the key in. After many tries the rusty lock gave, and the heavy door swung open. Then Tom Merry picked his way downstairs again to wait.

It was not a long wait, though it seemed ages to the junior before the deep, eerie silence of the ghostly ruins was broken by the sound of voices and soft footfalls. Then a dim group of figures came into view, picking their way cautiously in and out of the snow-covered piles of stone.

Tom Merry breathed a deep sigh of relief as he saw them. The worst and most dangerous part of their risky plan was accomplished—or almost accomplished.

CHAPTER 9. News for Kildare!

“**T**HAT you fellows?”

The figures came nearer, and as Tom Merry called out he was answered by the cheery voice of Monty Lowther.

“All serene, Tommy. The beggar’s given us some trouble, but he’s tame enough now. We had to frogs-march

him across the first field, but he soon got tired of that, and decided to walk after all. Here’s the merry old prisoner!”

The juniors crowded up to the old tower. In their midst was a fat, flabby, miserable-looking figure, dishevelled and covered from head to foot with glistening snow and slush. But Tom felt no pity for him.

Nor were his looks likely to excite pity. His flabby cheeks were white—what could be seen behind the gag, at least—with rage, and his small, beady eyes were glittering with hate and fear. At sight of Tom Merry and the open door behind him his eyes almost came out of his head with apprehension. From behind the gag came an inarticulate mumble.

“You’ve got him all serene, then,” said Tom, with satisfaction. “Good! Now, up the stairs with him!”

“Yaas, wathah. Up you go, you wascal!” exclaimed Arthur Augustus D’Arcy, giving the fuming rascal a dig in the ribs with the business end of his own walking-stick. “If you will play the wogue, you must expect to be treated like a wogue.”

But “up the stairs with him!” was easier said than done. As his destination was made clear to him Flint’s eyes blazed, and he refused to stir a foot. And then, as Blake and Manners gripped his arms, he lashed out with his feet in a fury of desperation.

Blake went lurching backwards from a vicious kick in the ribs, and Manners howled fiendishly as the blackmailing ruffian’s boot hacked his shins.

“Shut up, Manners, you ass!” hissed Tom Merry. “Do you want the whole school round our ears? All together, you chaps!”

He made a sudden rush at Flint, and clasped him round the waist. At the same moment D’Arcy, Herries, and Digby made a rush, and the brutal rascal’s kicks were soon brought to an abrupt termination. He went down on his back, with

Herries and Digby on his threshing feet, D'Arcy on his chest, and Tom Merry seated on his head.

Jack Blake staggered to his feet, gasping painfully. "Oh, my hat!" he panted. "The brute kicks like a mule. Hold him a sec, I'll soon settle his hash."

As he spoke Blake took from his pocket a length of cord, and deftly bound it round Flint's wriggling legs. In a moment the rascal was rendered helpless to do more than send glances of hate from his glittering eyes.

"Have to carry the brute up—nothing else for it," said Tom Merry. "Come on, we've lots to do yet, and it'll be quite dark soon."

They lifted the fuming, mumbling scoundrel up and staggered inside the tower with him. How they managed to carry the flabby weight up the broken, gloomy stairs they never knew; but they managed it at last, and as they dumped him down on the broad, flagged stone floor of the bare apartment Tom Merry gave a gasp of relief.

"So, far so good," he panted, looking down at their prisoner. "Now, listen to me, my pippin. We've got you, and we mean to keep you whether you like it or not. I expect you're wondering where you are—well, I'll tell you. You're within the walls of St. Jim's school, and within shouting distance of help. But if you'll take our advice you won't call for help. It'll mean inquiries, and the police. It'll mean something coming out that you, I fancy, don't wish to come out. I believe they give quite a long term of imprisonment to blackmailers.

"That's just a warning before I release you," said Tom, after a pause. "No; you needn't think I'm going to let you go—not much. We're keeping you here for a bit. And don't you attempt to try any more hanky-panky. We're one or two too many for you, my pippin. It isn't safe for one thing, and we've no reason to handle you gently if you start kicking again. Got that?"

Flint evidently had—he nodded in helpless rage. Tom Merry stopped, and tore the gag from his mouth. Then he severed the cords from his legs and from his hands. For a moment the rascal lay, moving his cramped limbs, and then he scrambled slowly to his feet.

For a moment he stood glaring like a wild beast, as if he contemplated making a rush. But as the determined juniors lined up, obviously ready for him, his shoulders drooped, and the fight went from his eyes.

"What—what does this mean—what's the game, you young hounds?" he panted hoarsely. "I suppose that young hound, Kildare, is at the bottom of this?"

"He is—but he doesn't know it," said Tom Merry coolly. "You've been playing a rotten game, you scoundrel. But—the game's up now. You had old Kildare—as fine a fellow as ever breathed—in your power, and you made him squirm. We're going to make you squirm now, you rotter."

"You—you can't keep me here!" gasped the fellow, as if he had realised their intention at last. "You—you can't—"

"We're going to, though," said Tom grimly. "This weather—it would kill me," groaned the rascal, his nerve giving way as he glanced round the bare, gloomy walls. "Have pity, young—"

"A lot of pity you had on Kildare, didn't you?" said Tom Merry, his lip curling as he roted the cowardly fear on the rascal's face. "But you needn't be afraid—we're not leaving you like this—much as you deserve it. You'll be as comfortable as you'll be likely to be in quod—where I hope you'll land soon. We're going now, but we'll be back presently with blankets and things. One last warning, though. Make a row—try to attract attention, and you'll have cause to regret it. That's all."

He motioned to his chums, and they went out, leaving the rascally Flint staring after them as if turned to stone. Tom Merry pulled the heavy door to, and locking it, put the key in his pocket. They felt their way cautiously down the treacherous stairway, and went out into the wintry mist.

"That's that," said Tom grimly. "It came off much easier than I expected it would. But we've got to walk warily. We'd better take turns to bring the prisoner his grub—but there must never be less than three or four of us. That fellow's a dangerous hand—if he is flabby."

"What's the next move?" asked Digby. "Tuckshop will be closed by now."

"We needn't bother about grub to-night—it'll do the fat brute good to miss a meal. We've got plenty to do without that now."

The juniors tramped indoors into the lighted hall-way of the School House, their clothes glistening in the bright light. They went straight to Tom Merry's study and started to work at once. From Nobody's Study a couple of spare blankets were raided, and Arthur Augustus sacrificed his travelling rug to the good of the cause. Between the lot of them a goodly supply of necessary articles—candles, matches, crockery, etc., were collected—and these were placed inside a blanket and tied in a bundle.

Then the greatest problem presented itself—how to get the stuff outside without being seen. It was Arthur Augustus

who solved the problem. At his suggestion a cord was tied to the bundle, the study window softly raised, and the whole lot safely lowered into the dark quod below.

Then the juniors strolled carelessly out through the lighted hall. Luckily it was prep time and nobody saw them go. And once outside they recovered the bundle and started out for the ruins.

This time they went armed with an electric torch, and once away from the school itself, Tom turned the light on, and the rest was easy going. As the great iron-studded door swung open they found Flint crouching against the far wall, his face grey with fear. He came forward, blinking in the sudden light as the juniors entered. Tom Merry waved him back.

"Keep your distance—we're taking no risks!" he snapped, throwing the big bundle down. "There's all you'll want for the night. We'll bring you breakfast in the morning, and your meals afterwards. With your big coat you ought to be comfortable enough."

Tom turned to the door. Flint gave a hoarse cry. "Stop!" he shouted hoarsely. "Ten pounds if you'll let me go—twenty pounds!"

"Not for twenty thousand!" snapped Tom. He slipped through the door after his chums as Flint ran towards him, his features drawn and desperate. Tom closed the door and locked it after him. They went down the steps, and out into the open air, with Flint's cries ringing in their ears. They made their way quickly back to the School House and as they entered the hall-way, Tom suddenly stopped.

"You fellows," he said quietly. "I can't bear the thought of old Kildare worrying his head off about this. He's no cause to now, but he doesn't know it. I'm going to drop him a hint."

"But—but—"

"I'll run along and see him," said Tom determinedly. He went along to Kildare's study and knocked at the door. There was no reply, and Tom opened the door quietly and looked in. Kildare was there. He had evidently not heard the knock. He was seated at the table, staring before him with unseeing eyes.

Tom Merry came into the room a step, and then Kildare sprang to his feet, and saw him.

"What do you want, kid?" he said, flushing. "I—I'm busy; don't bother me now, Merry."

"It's rather important, Kildare," said Tom calmly. "You know that chap you were with last night—that chap you knocked down in the woods—"

"I—I— What do you mean, Merry?" gasped Kildare, staring. "Have—have you seen him again? What—?"

"Yes, I've seen him," said Tom cheerily. "I thought I'd let you know that he's—he's sort of retired from business for a while. You know what sort of business he deals in, Kildare?"

Kildare gave a violent start. He stared blankly at the junior, and then his face flushed angrily.

"You—you cheeky young— You dare to—to—"

"I'd dare a lot—for you, Kildare," said Tom, grinning. "Sure you've got me? What I mean is, that fat brute's stumped—dished and done. He won't worry you again, Kildare. We've got him fixed. That's all."

The junior went out, and Kildare took a step after him, his face working.

"Stop!" he muttered. "Stop, you young imp! What—"

"Sorry, old top," said Tom, poking his head back into the room. "I'm in a hurry. You're not a prefect now, Kildare, and there's nothing doing. Ta-ta!"

The door slammed, and Kildare gazed at it, his face a picture of amazement—and his heart throbbing.

He knew that the junior's cheeky manner was only assumed—that there was deep meaning underlying it. And he knew how much Tom Merry knew. What did it mean? Merry was a decent kid—he wasn't the sort to talk idly, if impudently. Was it possible—

"He's a good kid," breathed Kildare. "And—and he's got a head on his shoulders. He knows something—something he daren't tell me openly. I—I wonder—by Jove!—I wonder!"

Kildare dropped into a chair again. But there was a light in his eyes now—the light of hope. Merry had said that Flint was "fixed!" And something told the senior that Tom Merry had good reason for saying that.

CHAPTER 10. Baggy Butts In!

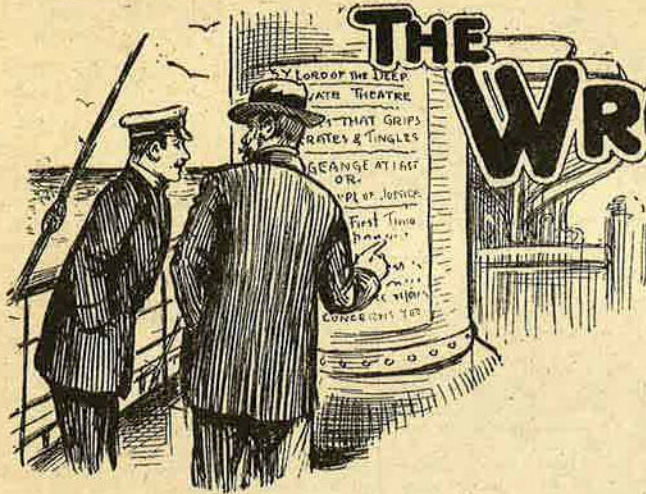
JACK BLAKE came into Study No. 10 in the Shell passage just before morning lessons the next day, and there was a gleam of subdued excitement in his eyes.

Tom Merry was alone in the study. He was busy cleaning his skates in hopeful anticipation of a spell of frost, but he looked up questioningly as Blake entered. It had been arranged that the two Co.'s should take turn and turn

(Continued on page 25.)

Ching Lung and Gan Waga
are too wide for—

—Prout, Maddock and O'Rooney,
who fairly get it in the neck!



THE WRONG FILM!

An Amusing Yarn of Gan Waga
and Rupert Thurston & Co.

By Famous

SIDNEY DREW.

CHAPTER I.

Barry O'Rooney's Wheeze!

MR. SEBASTIAN PARGLE was fat and jovial. A shining dress-shirt, with a diamond stud in the centre of it, covered his ample chest. He smoked large cigars and drank port wine and was a very popular and prosperous gentleman, for he was manager and part proprietor of that successful music-hall, the Porthampton Palace of Varieties.

Benjamin Maddock and his friend, Barry O'Rooney, had adjourned to the back of the dress-circle for a glass of lemonade during the interval, and here they had encountered Mr. Pargle, who gave them a hearty welcome.

"Well, boys, what do you think of the show?" asked the manager.

"A rattling good show!" said Maddock. "That's a good turn, souse me, those two fellows Chuckles and Chips! They started me cackling the moment they came on, and kept me grinning all the time. Funny chaps, Pargle; real good stuff!"

"Bedad, they're funny enough to make a china cat laugh at its tail off!" said Barry O'Rooney. "O'id loike to have them aboard the yacht van noight to give the bhoyas a threat. Oi expect they'd come for an hour av we made the figure big enough. Phwat?"

"Sorry, but it can't be done," said the manager hastily. "I've booked 'em for the week, and they aren't allowed to work for anybody else—not even to give a free show. If your boys want to see 'em, let 'em come here, Mr. O'Rooney. Business, my lad, is business all the time."

At that moment a heavy hand smote Mr. Pargle on the back.

"No, Chuckles," said Mr. Pargle, turning; "we have lots and lots of bananas, thank you, but buy your own drinks. As I've got to pay you about ten times more than you're worth, I'll see you shot before I chuck in free refreshments! Let me introduce you to a couple of my pals, Mr. Barry O'Rooney and Mr. Benjamin Maddock, sons of the sea, you know—fresh and breezy, free and easy, and all that sort of thing!"

Chuckles, without his grease-paint and wig, was a very ordinary-looking individual, with a round, sallow face. He was short and plump, and his mouth seemed to be a misfit, for it was several sizes too large for him. The manager was called away by a pagoboy, and

when Barry O'Rooney had invited the famous comedian to take refreshment a slight, clean-shaven man joined them.

"Behold my partner Chips," said Chuckles. "He's got a marvellous nose has Chips, especially for free drinks."

"He's welcome to the very best they sell," said Maddock generously—for Barry O'Rooney was paying—"so give it a name, Mr. Chips!"

Chuckles and Chips were quite good company. Their professional duties were over for the evening, and the time passed so quickly, that Barry O'Rooney and Maddock were quite surprised to hear the orchestra playing the National Anthem, and bade their new acquaintances good-night.

"Ut's a funny thing, Ben," said Barry O'Rooney, as they walked out into the busy street, "but Oi've seen somewan afore as loike that chap Chuckles as two glass marbles in a bag, but, for the loife of me, Oi can't name him. He's got the same kind of mouth, about a foot wide!"

"Souse me, you must mean Gan Waga!" said the bo'sun of the steam-yacht Lord of the Deep.

"Of coorse. Fancy not being able to think of that! Bedad, he is loike the Iskimo, only a soight handsomer. And bad luck to that same Iskimo, say Oi! Here's the harbour bus, Ben, so make a doive for ut, and get on top, for Oi'll choke av we have to sit inside!"

The yacht Lord of the Deep lay at anchor below the fort. They launched their dinghy, which lay safely on the slipway, and Maddock pulled out across the harbour, where the steam ferry-boats, well patronised by passengers, were still hurrying to and fro. There was a strong tide to pull against, and they had still nearly a mile to go when a big white motor-launch came along merrily.

"Hurroo! Here's luck, Ben!" cried Barry O'Rooney. "Ut's our launch! Hi! Howld on, you villains! For the sake of Moike, arise up and give us a tow! Is that you, Tom, ould darlint? Ut's Barry and Ben. Howld slow, bhoy, and throw us a rope."

"Go and eat coke!" roared a voice from the gloom. "Ho, ho, hoo! Yes, we have no tow-ropes! Good-bye! Ha, ha, ha, haa!"

Leaving the dinghy dancing and rocking on her wash, the launch sped away.

"A dirty thrick, Ben!" growled Barry O'Rooney. "Oi couldn't see who was aboard, but that oil-swallowing, yellow-faced haythen of an Iskimo was

sheering! 'Go and ate coke!' Bedad, Oi'd loike to shoot a ton of coke over him, soak ut wid petrol, and set ut aloat! Bastes! Wouldn't chuck us a loine, and a toide loike this agin us! Put some beef into ut, man, for the sake of Moike, for we're not moving!"

"If you want to do this job, shift over and do it!" said Ben. "If you ain't going to do it, sit still and don't grouse at me, or, souse me, I'll give you a rattle across the top of the head with the blade of an oar!"

"Av Oi had a shocking bad timper loike yours, Ben," said Barry O'Rooney, "Oi'd buy a gallon of prussic acid and drink the lot!"

"Oh, dry up!" said the bo'sun. "Save your money and get a gallon of the stuff for that Eskimo. He wouldn't be off alone, and nobody would have him with a gift, except Prince Ching Lung or Mr. Thurston, souse me! They regular spoil that fat savage."

"Abso-bally-lutely!" agreed Barry O'Rooney. "Av he hadn't the prince or Mither Thurston to run to, bedad, the party flowers would have been blooming on that same Iskimo's grave long ago, Ben. But there's no accounting for tastes. Oi wunce knew a man named Mike Cassidy who had a pet frog. He used to take that ould frog into the bath wid him every morning for a swim, and Oi'm not sure that the reptile didn't go to bed wid him. And when you think of ut, Ben bhoy, Gan Waga is very similar to a frog, specially about the mouth, only that a frog has a more pleasant smoil and not so many teeth. Say the word, Ben, and Oi'll take the sticks."

"I can do the other bit standing on one ear," said the bo'sun.

They made the dinghy fast to the launch, which was tied to the boom, and went aboard. Down in the booby-hutch, a secluded little apartment, they discovered Mr. Thomas Prout, who was, to all intents and purposes, skipper of Mr. Ferrers Lord's yacht and the ship's carpenter. Both these gentlemen were asleep. They had been listening-in, and the music they had heard must have been of a drowsy nature, for they had forgotten to remove their head-phones.

There was cold beef on the table, part of a loaf, and a bottle of pickles. Without awakening the sleepers, Barry and the bo'sun sat down to supper.

"Oi can't help thinking of those funny rascals, Chuckles and Chips, Ben," said Barry O'Rooney. "Oi wish we could

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bring 'em to give a show. They finish wid Pargle on Saturday noight, so he couldn't object. Oi wondher av they'd come av we axed them?"

"They might if you offered them a champagne supper."

"That's aisy enough," said Barry. "Mr. Thurston would pay for that av ut was to amuse the bhoys. Bedad, ut's just wondherful how loike Gan Waga the fat fellow is! Oi'm going to think this over. There's something simmering in the back of my head—"

"Don't take any notice of it; it's only hot air," said the bo'sun. "Stick your head in a bucket of water and cool it down."

At that moment Prout and the carpenter awoke.

"So you're back, are you, by honey!" said Prout, ridding himself of the head-phones. "The police didn't lock you up, then."

"There ain't enough police in Porthampton to do ut, my bhoys," said Barry O'Rooney. "They'd have to double the force av they wanted to run Ben and me in. You and Joe ought to go and see ould Pargle's show, Thomas. Them comedian chaps, Chuckles and Chips, are wan big yell."

"A regular scream, souse me," said Maddock. "We just roared. They've got a song about a sailor. Chuckles is the sailor."

"And he has whiskers loike yours," added Barry O'Rooney; "only, av corse, betther wans. He's supposed to come ashore and have a beano. He sings about phwat he'll do to the police av they interfere wid him, just as you do whin you're out on the jamboree."

"And then the little chap, Chips, hops on, dressed as a policeman, souse me," grinned the bo'sun; "and don't Chuckles fairly wilt when he gets a few bashes over the head from the little fellow! We couldn't help thinking of you, Tommy. His whiskers came fair unstuck, like yours did that night when the police were after you in Singapore. Don't you remember?"

"I don't, my lad," said Prout, clenching his big fist; "and neither do you! And don't you suggest that I ever ran away from a policeman, unless you're looking for a long holiday in Porthampton Hospital, for I'll jolly soon make you come unstuck in about twenty different places. Perhaps you'll tell Joe next that he ran away from a policeman. Say it, and we'll both set about you."

"Pace, pace!" said Barry O'Rooney. "The poet says, 'Let not your angry passions roise, unless the feller's half your soize.' Niver go to slape, Tom, till you're snug in your bunk, for Oi notice you always wake in a bad temper. And don't let's talk about the police, for ut's a painful subject."

Someone came along the alley-way whistling, and as if by instinct Barry O'Rooney clutched what was left of the loaf. Gan Waga entered the booby-hutch, arrayed in a dress-suit and patent-leather shoes. He met the dark scowls of Barry and the bo'sun with a radiant smile.

"I so sorryness we not able to stops and give you a tow, old dears," said the Eskimo. "Me and Chingy in a bigness hurry to see a mans about a dog. I just came to tell yo' that yo' needn't eats that coke ifs yo' not want to."

The heel of the loaf left Barry

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O'Rooney's hand. It bounced back harmlessly from the closed door, for Gan Waga was an expert at dodging missiles.

"Bedad," said Barry, "av Chuckles was darcker, and had the same black, oily hair, he'd be that murdering Iskimo's twin brother! And Oi've got an oidea. The last of the O'Rooneys is going to do a bit of thinking, and whin he does that, things happen. Will you lind me fifty pounds, Tom?"

"I might if you had a different face, souse me!" answered Prout. "With the one you've got, I wouldn't lend you fifty farthings."

"Nothing doing," added the bo'sun and the carpenter.

Barry O'Rooney glared at them reproachfully, and then clenched his brow as if a spasm or a brain-wave had seized him.

"You're a mane, suspicious bunch of boneheads," he said. "Oi don't believe the three of you could raise enough cash to buy a rope to hang yourselves wid. The only gentleman in the company is now going to bed. And afore he closes his swate blue oies he'll think some. Good-night, assassins!"

CHAPTER 2.

Prout, Maddock, and O'Rooney Break Out in a Fresh Place.

MR. PARGLE helped himself to more champagne and chuckled. He had crossed over to Ching Lung's table in the restaurant.

Most of the patrons of the restaurant were naval officers, and it was rather crowded.

"Funny dogs, your highness—funny dogs!" said Mr. Pargle. "Perhaps it's not quite fair to give them away, but there you are. They've got you taped. You see, they wanted to get Chuckles and Chips to give a show on the yacht, but that wouldn't do. Contracts are contracts, and I can't have 'em busted. It wouldn't have mattered on Saturday night, but Chuckles and his partner want to get back to London. Oh, the funny dogs!"

"Have a cigar," said Ching Lung. "There's nothing wrong with it, for it's the brand I smoke myself."

"Thanks!" said the music-hall manager. "I believe it was Mr. O'Rooney's idea. Oh, they've got you taped, you and your Eskimo friend!"

Prince Ching Lung and Mr. Pargle were not new acquaintances. The Lord of the Deep was frequently moored in Porthampton Harbour. The yacht had a small but pretty theatre, and frequently Mr. Pargle had been called upon to provide scenery and costumes for private theatricals. Ching Lung was the leading spirit in these affairs, and the manager found them profitable, and that probably was why he was confiding in the prince.

"So they've got us taped, have they?" said Ching Lung. "I've been wondering why they were ashore so often. How have they taped us, Pargle?"

"You'd better come and see," answered the manager. "They've got Chuckles and Chips to impersonate you and the Eskimo gentleman. I let 'em rehearse in the hall three or four times. Tomorrow afternoon they're having it filmed at my brother's place at Ricklechurch, about four o'clock. Your highness had better come and see it. My brother is shooting part of another film, and there'll be a lot of supers about in costume. We'll lend you a costume and a mask, and you'll never be noticed. Shall I pick you up, or will you drive over in your own car?"

"They might recognise my car if they

didn't recognise me," said Ching Lung. "I'll be back here at three sharp."

"Right," said Mr. Pargle briskly. "I think your highness will be amused. At three sharp, then."

Ching Lung waited for Rupert Thurston, who was chatting with a couple of friends.

"Pargle has just told me that there is a conspiracy afoot, Rupert," said the prince. "The conspirators are our friends O'Rooney and Maddock, aided and abetted by those cheerful comedians Chuckles and Chips. Prout may be in it, too, for he's been ashore a lot the last day or two. They're conspiring against Gan Waga and myself, and you may also be one of the victims. They've gone into the cinema-line."

"They're capable of anything," said Thurston. "But when and how?"

"That's what I intend to find out, my son," said Ching Lung. "Evidently they mean to show the film in the theatre aboard, and give the crew a few wide grins at our expense. Chuckles is impersonating Gan Waga, which he ought to be able to do finely, for he's just Gan's build, and I presume Chips will caricature me. Anyhow, keep yourself open for to-morrow afternoon, and we'll investigate."

Mr. Pargle kept his appointment to the second. The prince and Thurston had just entered the car, when Gan Waga, who had the eyes of a hawk, ducked down. A taxicab was passing on the other side of the road—a slow and ancient vehicle that long ago ought to have been scrapped.

"There they go, the old rascals!" he said. "They in that cab, Chingy. I see Barry O'Rooney and Tommy Prout, Chingy."

"We'd better go round, then, for if they sight us they'll smell a whole cart-load of rats," said Ching Lung. "We'll be there first if we go miles out of the way. By the look of that rotten old box on wheels, they'll all have to get out and push at the first hill."

Mr. Pargle's car was a fast one, and by cutting through a few side-streets they quickly drew ahead of the taxicab. Ricklechurch was a pretty little village some six miles north of Porthampton, and well away from the smoke of that busy town. It was a sunny afternoon, and Ricklechurch seemed to have gone back a century or two, for outside the village inn cavaliers with long hair and long swords, and feathers in their hats, were drinking ale in a most friendly fashion with their avowed enemies the Cromwellian soldiers. An Italian gentleman playing a barrel-organ, and a motor-lorry loaded with scenery rather spoiled the old-time effect.

"I'll fix you up as cavaliers, your highness and Mr. Thurston," said the music-hall manager. "They'll never spot you in a couple of those big flapping hats, if you pull the brims down. I don't quite know what to do with Mr. Gan Waga. He's a bit wide round the waist to get into a breastplate."

They drove in through a gate in a high wooden fence just as a bugle-call summoned the cavaliers and roundheads to drink up their ale, put out their pipes and cigarettes, and come and fight. Mr. Pargle's brother passed them on to the wardrobe man, who quickly transformed Thurston and Ching Lung into a couple of dashing cavaliers. Being an ingenious person, even Gan Waga did not beat him.

Squeezed into a tin breastplate and backplate, boots with enormous tops, and a helmet on his head, Gan Waga as a roundhead soldier was enough to scare a whole regiment of cavaliers. They took no part in the show, of course, but

sat under a tree on a packing-case and looked on.

It was a stirring scene. There was a castle which looked quite the real thing, and a moat filled with real water. Heedless of shot and shell and the cannon that belched smoke and flame, Cromwell's soldiers rushed to the assault. There was much slaughter and much tumbling into the moat, and a tremendous banging, before the gate of the castle was blown in. Then it was fired, and amid the smoke the hero appeared on the ramparts with the unconscious heroine in his arms, and, finding it too hot up there, he took the—that is to say, the camera stopped clicking for a moment while hero and heroine got out of sight, and then a couple of dummies hurtled down and plunged into the icy water.

"Ho, ho, hoo!" laughed Gan Waga. "That fine stuff, hunk, Chingy! But why he not jumps off, hunk? It not far to drops."

"I presume the lady didn't want to get her hair wet, and nobody will know the difference on the screen," said Ching Lung.

"I hope they not be longs, Chingy, for I jolly tight round the chests," said Gan Waga. "This rotten old tin waist-coat's a lot too small."

Just then a motor-car drove in, and Mr. Chuckles and Mr. Chips alighted from it, very smart in their grey overcoats and white spats. Behind the car came the ancient taxicab, and out stepped Mr. Barry O'Rooney, Mr. Benjamin Maddock, and Mr. Thomas Prout.

"The gathering of the clans," said Ching Lung, as the five marched off together. "Shall we pursue, brother cavalier?"

"I'm a bit doubtful of Gan Waga," said Thurston. "He's a bit difficult to camouflage. There's no hurry yet, so we'd better get hold of Pargle."

Mr. Pargle assured them that there was very little danger of being recognised. They were shooting another episode in the theatre, and plenty of people were looking on. The big stage was divided into two halves. One half was in complete darkness, the other brilliantly lighted, and here, at a table, sat Mr. Oliver Cromwell waiting for the captured hero to be brought before him. Had it been the real Oliver Cromwell, the producer would have lost his head in about five minutes, for he was positively rude to the great man.

"Don't sprawl in the chair, looking like a bag of hay," he said, "but sit up. And don't look at the door as if you expected the brokers. Shove your silly hat on straight! That's a bit better, but not much. Now then, there! Bang on the table with your fist."

Up went the lights in the other half of the stage, and Ching Lung, Rupert Thurston, and Gan Waga took no further interest in the doings of Oliver Cromwell and his prisoner. The scene was the deck of a ship, and there was Mr. Thomas Prout, as large as life, sitting in a deckchair. In another deckchair sat Mr. Barry O'Rooney. There was a table between them with a bell on it, which Prout rang in a languid way.

"Oo-er! Well, I nevers!" said Gan Waga in a strangled voice.

Gan Waga saw his own double. As the camera man turned the handle, Gan Waga saw his double crawl across the deck on hands and knees, and grovel at the feet of Barry and Prout.

"Champagne, you fat worm!" roared Prout and O'Rooney, though the camera did not record it. "And cigars, you oily rogue!"

Trembling violently, the fat worm

kissed Prout's boot and then O'Rooney's boot, and crawled away again. He returned with a bottle of champagne, glasses, and a cigar-box, which he placed on the table. The two mariners stood up.

"Turn round!" they bellowed. Mr. Chuckles, who looked the living image of the Eskimo, obeyed, his fat legs quivering with intense fear. Prout and Barry O'Rooney lifted their boots and kicked. They kicked so hard that they lifted the Eskimo clean over the rail into the deep blue sea beyond, and, to make the effect more real, someone threw up the contents of a pail of water to represent spray.

Mr. Prout and Mr. O'Rooney seemed very amused. They laughed heartily, shook hands with each other, clicked their glasses together, and laughed.

"I say, don't hang it out too much, for you're using a lot of film," said the camera man.

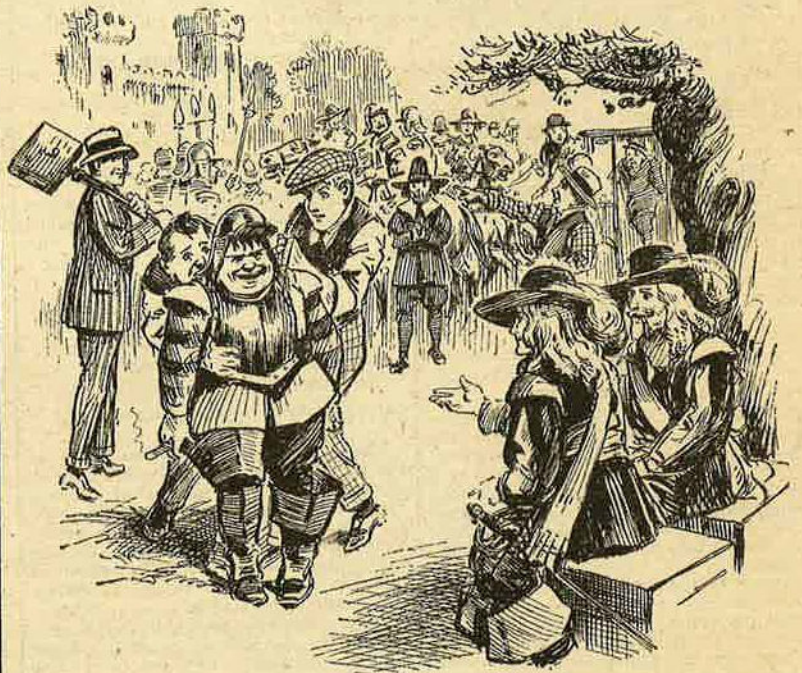
"Pardon me, O'Rooney," said the prince haughtily, "but remember to whom you are speaking! What has got to stop?"

"Why, backing up this Eskimo in all his pranks and japes and capers, by honey!" said Prout. "Life ain't worth living aboard the yacht with that reptile! The time's come for some plain talk, sir. He wouldn't worry our lives out, only he knows he can always run behind your back for protection. If it wasn't for that, we'd have tarred and feathered and keelhaunched him long ago! And it's got to stop, by honey—stop!"

"And, pray, fellow, who will stop it, if you please?" asked Mr. Chips, with a still more haughty air.

"We will!" thundered Prout and O'Rooney. "Where are you, Ben?"

As Barry and Tom Prout pounced on Ching Lung, the bo'sun came striding across the deck, carrying a bucket, a brush, and a bolster. It seemed a pity



Squeezed into a tin breastplate and backplate, boots with enormous tops, and a helmet on his head, Gan Waga as a Roundhead soldier was enough to scare a whole regiment of Cavaliers.

"And, bedad, we're paying for ut, my lad!" said Barry O'Rooney. "Ha, ha, ha! Kape on laughing, Tom! That's the sthuff to give that oily Eskimo!"

The real Gan Waga wasn't laughing. Under the peak of his tin hat, his little black eyes were protruding from his head.

"Keep quiet!" said Ching Lung, gripping his arm. "Don't make an ass of yourself, and spoil things!"

"I can't stand it, Chingy!" growled the Eskimo. "I murders them, Chingy! Me kisses their boots and grovels, Chingy, to that rubbishes! Ow! I scalp them!"

Then Ching Lung appeared, as good as a full-length oil-painting of himself that had come to life and stepped out of the frame. Prout and O'Rooney rose, and saluted with great respect. Then they winked at each other, and, in order to be natural, they pattered.

"Bedad, we want to lay a complaint about that blubber-chewing Eskimo of yours, sor!" said Barry O'Rooney. "Wid all due respect, sor, this has got to sthopt!"

to spoil the nice suit Mr. Chips was wearing. Ching Lung dropped on his knees, his face transfigured with horror, and raised appealing hands and appealing shrieks as Maddock dipped the brush into the bucket of tar and transfigured the prince's face a good deal more with a dab of it.

He broke free and fled, pursued by Prout, Maddock, Barry O'Rooney, the bucket of tar, and the bolster; and the camera man took a rest.

"Ho, ho, hoo! Dears, dears! Oh, that too funnyness!" laughed Gan Waga.

"Yes, you can see the funny side of it and cackle merrily when it isn't you, my lad!" said Ching Lung, with a grin. "I'm rather glad we came, Rupert, aren't you? Jovial souls! This knock-about stuff will make the crew roar, but it's not very dignified for me! That's the sort of thing I get, Gan, for standing between you and many a well-deserved rope's-ending! Silence, or that laugh of yours will sell us!"

Again the camera began to click.

Evidently they had waited for Mr. Chips to put on an old suit before they did the tarring and feathering.

Gan Waga almost choked with mirth, and burst his breastplate wide open as a horrible scarecrow came bounding across the deck and did a step-dance in the middle of the stage. The tarring and feathering had been done very effectively behind the scenes.

Prout, O'Rooney, and the bo'sun held their sides. They chased the scarecrow round the deck, and then what Rupert Thurston expected to happen did happen. Gan Waga came on in a great hurry, and ran fairly and squarely into the scarecrow's arms.

Before the two had finished rolling about the deck, fighting and biting each other, Gan Waga had picked up so much tar and so many feathers that he was a second scarecrow and a fatter one.

"That's all I want to see," said Ching Lung. "Oh, Gan—Gan, this is what I have to suffer for your sake! Lead me away somewhere, and let me weep!"

Rupert Thurston was highly amused. "It's a bit like high treason, and I've known men to be shot at dawn for less, Ching," he said; "but certainly you have asked for it. You do back up Gan Waga outrageously. What do you intend to do about it? Are you going to let them show it, or will you offer to buy it from them?"

"Leave all that to me, sonny!" said the prince. "Yes; we have no monkey-nuts to-day, but we have lots of tar and feathers! Go and tell the chap to take Gan Waga out of his tin suit, and wait for me there. For a start, I want to find Pargle's brother, and take him to look at those three guys!"

CHAPTER 3.

A Rude Awakening!

CHING LUNG found Mr. Pargle, the producer. Mr. Pargle, the producer, was all brisk business. He passed the prince on very promptly to Mr. Bleet, a pale man with long, drooping mustaches, who looked very like a walrus that had been kept on short rations. Mr. Bleet did the make-ups.

Barry O'Rooney and his brother conspirators had either finished or were taking a rest. At any rate, they were taking refreshment with Chuckles and Chips, who had pulled off the masks and gloves that had protected their faces,

hair, and hands from the tar and feathers, and were drinking champagne.

"It's those three sailor chaps I want, Mr. Bleet," said the prince. "Can you manage it?"

Mr. Bleet nodded.

"Easy," he said—"quite easy. Sorry, but I'm very busy just now. I'll make an appointment with you any time to-morrow you like to name."

"I shall be along about two," said Ching Lung. "Good afternoon, and thank you, Mr. Bleet!"

Prout, Barry O'Rooney, and Benjamin Maddock were anxiously awaiting the arrival of the postman who made the round of the vessels anchored in the harbour in a motor-launch. The earlier post had brought certain handbills and posters. There were two posters. One of these hung on the wall of the booby-hutch, obscuring the photographs of certain pugilists and a racehorse, for the decorations of the booby-hutch were of a sporting nature. Barry O'Rooney was the author of the poster, and he gazed at it with pardonable pride.

"S.V. LORD OF THE DEEP
PRIVATE THEATRE.
A FILM THAT GRIPS, VIBRATES,
AND TINGLES.
VENGEANCE AT LAST,

OR
THE TRIUMPH OF JUSTICE!

Shown for the first time. See how three oppressed but gallant sailors rose against their tyrants and tormentors, and crushed them flat. See and rejoice for

THIS CONCERNS YOU!

Crushed and oppressed three sailormen, With vengeance in their eyes, Did up and smite those tyrants base, To their grief and sad surprise.

And it was some smite, boys, not half! Saturday, at three. Admission quite free."

The second poster was to be pasted on the yacht's funnel to apprise the crew of the treat that was in store for them. Maddock hurried down from the deck, and the length of the bo'sun's face intimated to Barry O'Rooney and Thomas Prout that he was not the bearer of joyful tidings. It was Friday afternoon, and nearly four o'clock.

"The postman's alongside, but there's nothing for you, Barry," he said. "Never a thing, souse me, I believe old Pargle has sold us a pup."

"Cheerful, bedad," said Barry. "He promised me that film first thing this morning. Oi didn't see it, but the chap who developed ut towld me ut had come out foine. D'ye say the postman is hanging on, Ben?"

"Yes," answered the bo'sun. "I asked him to wait a bit, for I thought you might want to send a wire."

"By honey, you'd better," said Prout; "for if we don't get the film first thing, we sha'n't get it till Monday. Monday is the day for shore leave, and half the crew will be off. And we've got them bills printed for Saturday. Wire him a stinger, Barry. Tell him that if the old film isn't aboard first post to-morrow, you'll fire it back and refuse to pay for it."

The three had already discovered that filming is highly expensive, for Mr. Chuckles and Mr. Chips had not given their services exactly for nothing at all. Still, the mariners had good pay and very few expenses, and they thought the jape well worth the cost. And they had no qualms about Prince Ching Lung, for they knew that he would join in the laugh against himself.

But Gan Waga would boil over with fury, for the Eskimo liked to do all the laughing.

"By honey, we've got the blubberbiter this time, Ben," said Prout, when O'Rooney had gone to write the telegram. "He'll just squeal and froth at the mouth. He ain't such a bad sort of a heather, bless him, but he don't like being giggled at. The rotten part of it is that he generally does get all the grinning. Anyhow, we've got him corked and bottled this time. Won't the boys fair shriek their heads off?"

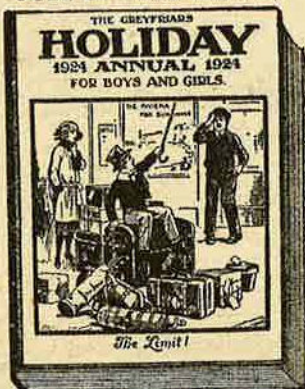
About six o'clock Barry O'Rooney received a wire. The wire in itself was satisfactory, but Mr. Pargle had absent-mindedly omitted to pay an extra fee for delivery by boat, and as Barry had to pay it himself, he made some disparaging remarks about Mr. Pargle.

"The film will arrive by messenger about two to-morrow.—PARGLE," was the message.

"That's leaving it a bit late, souse me, but it will give us time to run it through," said Maddock. "Mr. Thurston is fetching a couple of films back with him, and that will spread it out a bit. I told him the chaps were asking for films, but I didn't mention our masterpiece."

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"Then Oi suppose ut's safe to put the poster out and hand round the bills," said Barry. "He won't play us up on top of that telegram."

When Ching Lung and Thurston were taking a stroll on deck the bill was pasted on the funnel.

"Beautiful," he said, as the sailors made way. "That's the handiwork, or, rather, the headwork of the brainy Barry O'Rooney. He ought to do another like it and then be shot. Fancy Gan Waga and your humble servant being oppressors and crushers, Rupert. And what price the three gallant sailors with vengeance in their eyes? Bow-wow! They did up and smite those tyrants base, did they, the saucy haddocks? It wouldn't be Barry without some rotten fragment of verse in it. Bow-wow, again! Much to their sad surprise, is it?"

"It probably will be if you've fixed things properly," said Thurston.

"Don't you doubt it," said Ching Lung. "Everything's fixed as hard as cement. There'll have to be a little more bribery, for I don't want them to get near the machine, for they'll be mad enough to wreck it. To tell you the truth, Rupert, I haven't quite worked out this little stunt. There's been a lot of bribery and corruption. I knew all about that bill before O'Rooney sent it to the printer. I have a spy in their camp who knows their darkest secrets, and his name is Joe, the carpenter."

"And you have also bribed and corrupted the cinema people, I suppose, Ching?"

"It's so easy to make a little mistake, my friend," said the prince. "There are two films to be delivered here just at three o'clock to-morrow, one addressed to me and one to Barry O'Rooney. And to err, you know, is human, just a trivial error. Barry O'Rooney will get the wrong one, that's all."

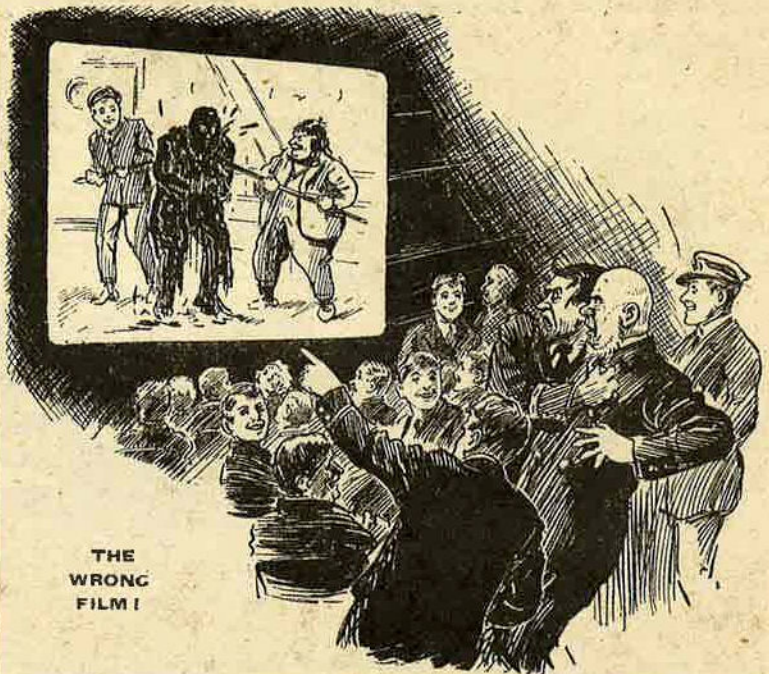
Just before three o'clock next day, the yacht's pretty little theatre was filled with sailors, stewards, and stokers. The operator led off at once with a Yankee film of the hair-raising type, where the hero and heroine, chased by a horrid villain, fall out of an aeroplane on to the roof of an express train. The train is unlucky, for as it is crossing a bridge, the bridge is blown up. As they have no railway tickets, this is fortunate for the hero and heroine. After being blown up they naturally come down again, and fall into a motor-boat, but the bonehead who owns the boat has forgotten the rudder, and the boat is whirled away by the torrent and goes over a waterfall. This is rough on the heroine, who loses all her hairpins and gets very wet.

The villain and his accomplices, mounted on fiery mustangs, are still hot on the trail, and the damp heroine and the moist hero look like going through it, when the friendly Redskin chief, Drink Firewater By The Barrel, and his dusky warriors arrive in their war-canoes and do some rifle-shooting.

Ching Lung, who was sitting at the back of the theatre with Rupert Thurston and Gan Waga, saw Barry O'Rooney rush in.

"He's got the film, Rupert," said the prince. "Pargle has sent it along. Don't start giggling yet, Gan, you silly. Show a bit of sense."

Mr. Thomas Prout and Mr. Benjamin Maddock heaved sighs of relief, for they had been trembling in their shoes, thinking that Mr. Pargle was going to play them up. Barry passed the film to the operator. Just a close-up appeared on the screen, depicting the wet hero clasping the wet heroine to his breast, with Drink Firewater By The Barrel smirking



"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the audience. "Go it, Gan. Give him more tar." Prout's eyes opened wide as he gazed at the horrid scene on the screen. Ching Lung and Gan Waga were dancing round him grinning and prodding at him with long-handled tar-brushes.

behind them, and a landscape sprinkled with the corpses of the villain and his myrmidons as a cheerful background. And then O'Rooney, Prout, and the bo'sun rubbed their hands and sat down to enjoy themselves.

The report had spread through the yacht that the three mariners had broken out in a fresh place, and were starring as film actors, and when the title was thrown on the screen it was greeted by loud and prolonged applause.

"By honey, Ben," grinned Prout. "I'll bet you a pound of baccy to a button, that the prince and the blubberbiter bolt without seeing it through."

Buttons being fairly cheap and tobacco dear, the bo'sun accepted the bet though he did not expect to win it.

"Thunder and foire-irons, phwat's this?" asked Barry O'Rooney, in a ghastly voice. "Tell me phwat ut is, for the sake of Moike."

Prout and the bo'sun did not oblige, but sat dumb and frozen. On the screen they saw the shadows of Prout and Barry seated at the table, but when they summoned Gan Waga to bring the cigars and wine something went wrong. Instead of crawling, the Eskimo entered with a jaunty air.

"Bring champagne and cigars, you oily worm!" said the lettering. "Quick, dog, or we'll biff you!"

It was the wrong film. The real Gan Waga was acting the part, but Mr. Bleet had provided and cleverly made-up the two gentlemen who took the parts of O'Rooney and Prout. And instead of kissing their boots and obeying orders, the oily worm, with a quick right and left, knocked Barry and Prout over the backs of their deck-chairs, and the little theatre re-echoed with cheers and laughter. Gan Waga's thunderous "Ho, hoo, hoo-oo-oo!" ringing loud above all the rest.

Prout, Barry O'Rooney, and Benjamin Maddock rose and staggered to the door. They had been betrayed. Some base rascal, probably Pargle himself, had sold

their secret to the prince, and wangled a wrong film on them, the exact opposite of their own, with Ching Lung and Gan Waga triumphant all along the line, and themselves the wretched victims. All they wanted was to crawl away and hide.

But it was not to be, for Ching Lung had arranged that. As they reeled out, with shouts of mirth deafening their ears, strong hands gripped them, and the burly sailors who had been lying in wait for them, hustled them back into the theatre in spite of their struggles.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!" laughed the audience. "Go it, Gan! Give 'em more tar and feathers! They like it. Oh, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!"

Prout, Maddock, and O'Rooney shut their eyes tightly. On the screen they were horrid sights, with Ching Lung and Gan Waga dancing round them, grinning and prodding at them with long-handled tar-brushes. When they were nicely black and sticky, a snow-cloud of feathers descended on them, more and more feathers, until they were lost to view under a great pile.

Out of the heap they crawled, three ghastly apparitions, and knelt at the feet of Ching Lung and Gan Waga. Then came a dust-cart, drawn by a powerful horse and escorted by two burly dust-men, who picked the ghastly apparitions up and mercifully dumped them into the rubbish cart.

Prout, Barry O'Rooney, and Maddock broke away from their captors and fled, and amid howls of laughter the lights went up.

"Ho, ho, hoo! I think we gotted them that time, Chingy," grinned Gan Waga. "Fairly in the neck, my son," answered Ching Lung.

THE END.

(Plucky Paul Mannering shines as a member of the Indian Secret Service in "THE DIAMOND OF GHAZIABAD" the magnificent adventure yarn which will appear in next week's GEM. Don't miss it, chums!)

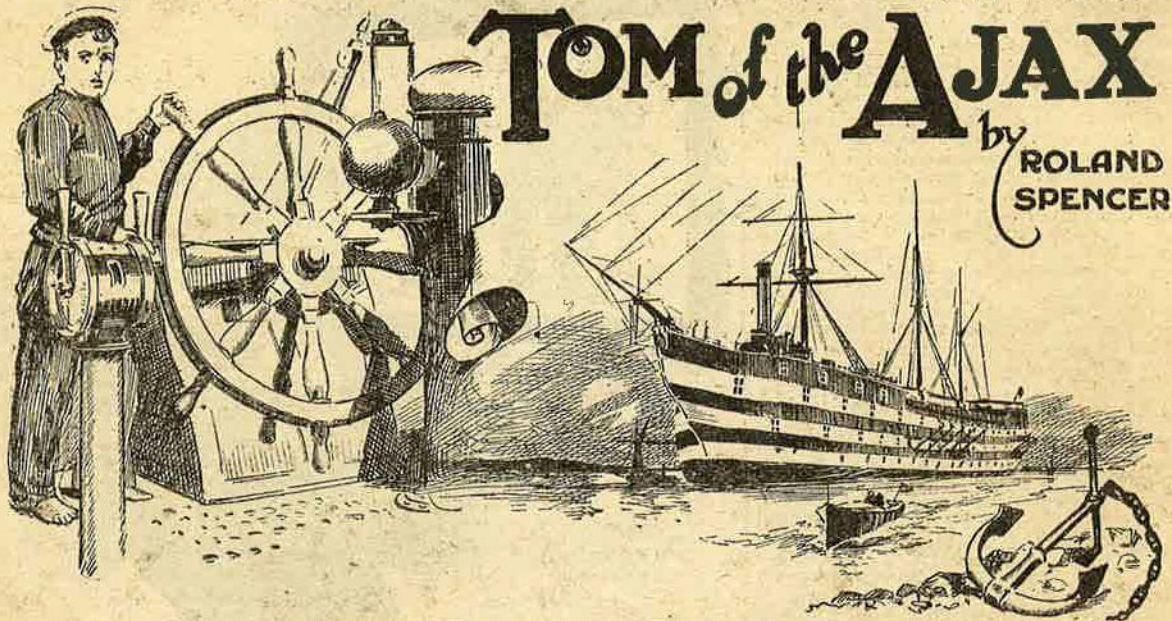
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Hounded by the sinister figure
in the green spectacles—

—Tom Gale makes the acquaintance
of Avalanche Hume, detective!

TOM of the AJAX

by ROLAND SPENCER



A Thrilling, True-to-Life Training-Ship Story.

Avalanche Hume.

THE lone fighter at the break of the poop was in need of help, and Tom Gale dashed over to lend his aid in capturing the man with green spectacles, Tom's own assailant in the adventure in Black Dell Lane when returning from his enforced trip to Yarmouth in the coasting ketch.

So the lone fighter's enemy was also Tom's! That was enough for the boy. Burr forgotten, the young Hood leapt aft across the deck with a swift cry of anger, and promptly joined in the fight.

Side by side Tom and the stranger fought the desperate men at the break of the poop. Now and again a low chuckle broke from the stranger, and this, chiefly, when the enemy seemed to be gaining the advantage. This determined, desperately hard hitter was evidently a very cool person indeed.

Fists flashed here and there in the darkness, and the dull thud of blows sounded out. Tom was so nimble on his feet that he prevented any of the blows of the desperate, cornered men from getting right home. Had the lad guarded or dodged a fraction of a second too late, so that one of the blows landed, he would undoubtedly have

been out for the rest of the night. But young Gale was wary, and the broad-shouldered stranger noted it with satisfaction.

Dodging, leaping back, and as suddenly springing in again, Tom rendered very valuable aid in the fight. Throughout his own part of the business he found opportunity to glance at his companion now and again out of the corner of his left eye. The big man's

keen grey eyes were glinting dangerously, but there was also in them a curious twinkle, a dancing light which seemed to denote that he was enjoying himself thoroughly.

One of the ruffians in the shadow of the poop sprang suddenly at Tom, and the young Hood felt that for him the fight had at last come to an end. But, as the man towered above the lad, the huge clenched fist of the stranger flashed before his eyes and the ruffian went crashing back against the poop ladder, his breath leaving his body with a gasping hiss.

Tom was about to spring in to deliver a finishing blow at the winded man when another form leapt out from behind the poop ladder and crashed heavily into the lad. Tom, his eyes darkening with rage, slipped violently sideways, and the person who had rushed him sprang across the deck, heading for the ladderway leading down to the decks below.

It was Stoniky Burr!

The fight had not been in progress for more than five minutes when the man with green spectacles and his confederate received a reinforcement. This new man came leaping into the fray. He threw himself at Tom and the broad-shouldered stranger, attacking them from behind, and sent them

hurting into the arms of their antagonists.

"Quick! Never mind Avalanche!" gasped the man with green spectacles swiftly to his confederate. "Grab the brat and make for the boat!"

A strong grip closed on Tom's shoulder, and a big, hard-skinned hand was pressed over his mouth. The lad felt himself jerked in the direction of the ladderway; but a low chuckle sounded to his left. Then he was suddenly released as the form of the man who held him went flying backwards. Tom then saw the broad-shouldered stranger, laughing lightly, standing with legs astride close by.

But the advantage was really with the villains, for, with a low cry of fury, the man with green spectacles and the newcomer both dashed at the man they had called Avalanche and engaged him while the third man leapt to his feet again and closed with Tom.

The boy felt like a child in the great iron-hard arms of the man. He fought like a tiger, but he was slowly but surely forced towards the side of the ship. What was the reason? To throw him overboard? Was it a fresh plot against him?

The young Hood felt that this time the fight was really finished, but a loud shout from the ladderway in the middle

of the upper deck sent a wild wave of joy surging through his breast. The noise had been heard! The alarm had been given! Rescuers were even now leaping up the ladderway, springing over the senseless form of the officer of the watch to the aid of their shipmate.

"Break for it! Run for it!"

Tom heard the man with green spectacles give his orders with a hiss as the broad-

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE!

TOM GALE, a sturdily-built youth and chief petty officer of the starboard watch aboard the famous old training-ship *Ajax*, which is moored near the southern bank of the River Thames a quarter of a mile down the river from Fleetville, falls foul of **STONIKY BURR**, C.P.O. of the port watch, a bully of the first water.

DICKY WEST is a cheerful ginger-headed youth and a staunch chum of Gale's. Trouble arises when Tom Gale is detained, together with Stoniky Burr, as a hare in a cross-country hare-and-hounds that is to take place. Hot words and a fight follow, and Burr is thrashed and left. It is then that a mysterious, sinister man in green spectacles approaches Burr. He gives his name as **KALCHE**, and he enlists the aid of Burr in a plot against Tom Gale, without, however, giving any reason for this.

Tom is missing the whole thing out in his hammock at night, when he is startled by a rending crash, and he feels the *Ajax* quiver from stem to stern. The next moment he utters a startled cry as a jagged hole

appears in the ship's side, torn like paper by the stem of a huge red-rusty steamer which crashes into the *Ajax*. In the ensuing melee a pair of hands grip at Tom's throat, and he recognises the face of Burr. Before Tom can recover he is sent hurtling off the ship into the water. He escapes, however, and is returning to the ship when he is waylaid by Kalche. His cries for help are answered, and a crowd of the *Ajax* boys rush to the rescue.

Tom then resolves to keep his eyes wide open for any further trouble from Kalche.

Further trouble follows, for, falling an easy prey to a trick of Burr's, Tom gets disoriented. That same night he is awakened by footsteps, and through the dark shadows he discerns Burr, whom he follows to the upper deck. Here his eyes open wide, for he finds the officer of the watch lying in a huddled heap and three figures fighting and awaying in the dark.

What did it all mean?

(Now read on.)

shouldered stranger was sent crashing backwards towards the approaching officers and training-ship boys.

Tom was released, and as soon as he could regain his breath he yelled: "To the gangway! A boat's there! Officer of the watch knocked out! Follow down the gang-ladder!"

The charging rescuers turned sharp back towards the ladderway. This, of course, resulted in a terrible jam. Tom was about to yell out further directions for using the Jacob's ladder which hung down over the port side from the upper deck, when he felt his arm gripped as in a vice.

He turned in alarm, only to laugh with relief into the pleasant, strong, square-jawed face of the man alongside whom he had been fighting so desperately.

"Boy," said the stranger in his quick, pleasant voice, "that man—the one with the green spectacles—must be captured. Lead some of the lads after me to man one of the gigs riding from the outrigger boom. They'll follow you if you call out and give a lead, I imagine."

"Ay, ay, sir! They will!" said Tom. "But—"

Just at that moment an officer stepped up to them. "I heard your words," he said crisply. "What's the trouble? And please to remember that it's the officers who give the orders on this ship!"

The stranger's steady grey eyes twinkled. He turned to the officer with a smile, and thrust a card into his hand. Tom stood by, listening.

The officer turned the card towards the moon and read aloud:

"Mr. John Hume, New Scotland Yard." Not—not Avalanche Hume, the detective?" he added with a gasp.

"Yes," replied the stranger. "I'm sorry I tried to give orders on my own

lines. "You saw where they went, I suppose?"

"Yes; I noted the direction," replied the Scotland Yard man in his quick, incisive way. "But there are wisps of fog about. However, we'll catch them at this pace if we can spot them."

"Lick into it, you lads!" encouraged the coxswain. "Bend your backs to it, and pull—pull—pull! Steadier stroke starboard, there! No excitement!"

The boys, faces set and tense, pulled as if their lives depended on it. Here was a real adventure for them. No Wednesday afternoon gig race, this, but real, hard, sailor's work, chasing what all now recognised to be desperate criminals striving to make a get-away.

For ten minutes they strained at the oars, many of them now labouring for breath. The Scotland Yard detective was standing up in the stern-sheets, his deep-set eyes searching the wisps of fog that hung about here and there on the river. "There, there! To the left. We'll have 'em!"

Tom shipped the big rudder of the gig, arranged the yoke-lines, and yelled to the other boys to stand by with the oars.

"Mr. Hume aboard?" the lad cried.

"Ay, ay, boy! Coming aft!" returned the detective, scrambling over the thwarts of the gig with three of the Ajax's officers.

Tom surrendered the yoke-lines and slipped on to stroke's seat.

"Give way, port!" cried the officer coxswain, and the port oars flashed in the moonlight. "Now—all together, give way!"

The boys bent their backs to it, and the blades of the long oars lashed the water to spray. The big, heavy gig began to forge forward.

"You tell me where to steer, Mr. Hume," said the officer at the yoke-

lines. "You saw where they went, I suppose?"

"Yes; I noted the direction," replied the Scotland Yard man in his quick, incisive way. "But there are wisps of fog about. However, we'll catch them at this pace if we can spot them."

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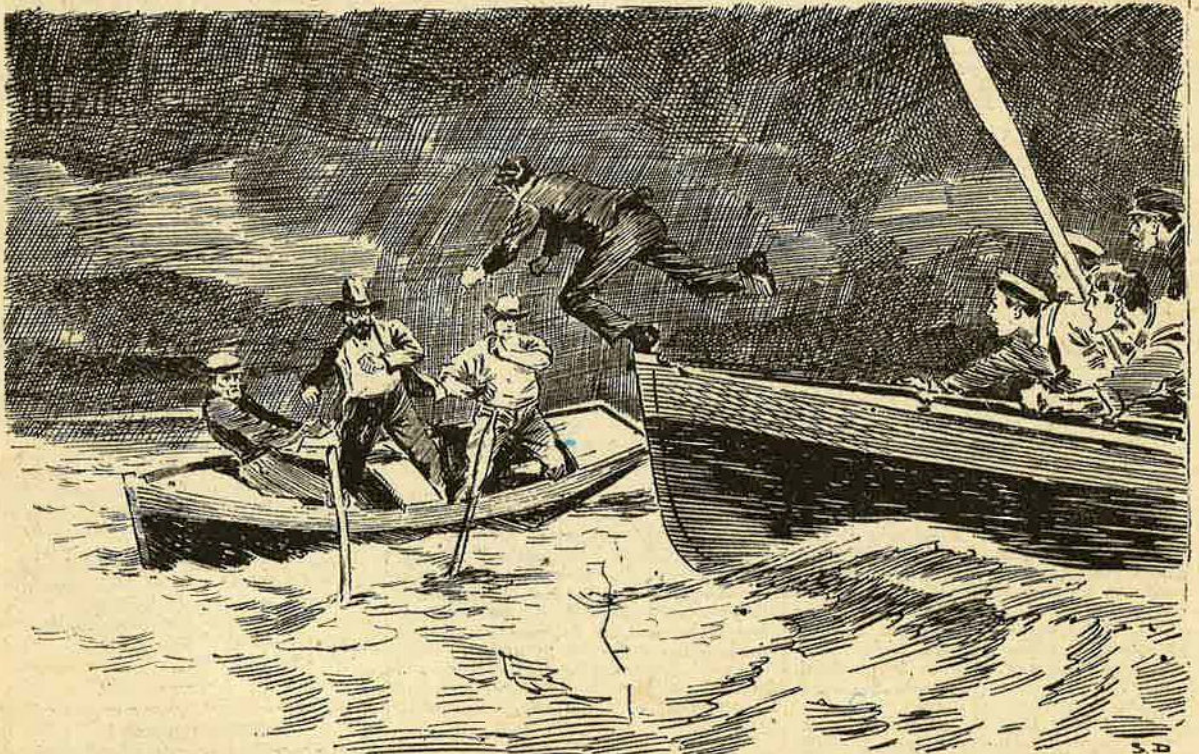
The Peril of the Tide.

"EASY starboard!"

The officer coxswain's voice rang out, and was punctuated by a heavy bump on the starboard bow as they came alongside the runaways' boat.

"Look out, lads, up for'ard!" again voiced the coxswain, his cry risen to a shrill crescendo. "Defend yourselves! By thunder, the villains are fighting!"

The detective had sprung forward over the thwarts of the gig, right into the middle of the struggling boys, who were doing their best to defend themselves from the flailing of the paddles of the



Leaping clear of the gunwale of the gig the detective landed in the middle of the row-boat containing the runaways. The frail craft heaved and rocked, and two gleaming green eyes, cat-like and sinister, were seen to flash towards the detective.

small row-boat containing the runaways. But John Hume was on the spot in an instant, and, with a low chuckle, he leapt clear of the gunwale of the gig and landed dead in the middle of the row-boat.

The frail craft heaved and rocked, and two gleaming, green eyes, cat-like, sinister, were seen to flash towards the detective. Then the pair, detective and criminal, were locked in a death-grapple in that swaying and pitching row-boat, while Tom and a few of the other training-ship boys, led by an officer, leant over the side of the gig and tried to lay hands on the other two ruffians.

To the horror of all, however, the row-boat was successfully shoyed clear by the men, and before the coxswain of the gig had completed his order: "Stand by to give way all!" the two desperately struggling men were seen to sway sideways and then fall into the water with a mighty splash.

As they went over, all heard distinctly a low chuckle come from the throat of the detective. Then the struggling pair disappeared from view below the yellow, curdling water of the river.

"Keep your eyes skinned, there!" cried Tom. "Note where they sank!" Anxious eyes searched the water, but no heads came to view. The row-boat began to speed away, the two men left in her rowing in frantic haste. But the officer in charge of the gig would not follow them, since he had two lives to save hard by.

"Give the word, first boy to see them in the water!" shouted the officer. "Over there it'll be—"

"There you are, sir, on the edge o' that wisp of mist! There! Ah, they've disappeared again—"

"Give way, port! Now, then, starboard. All together—pull—pull—pull!"

The gig forged along through the water and entered the patch of mist into which the two struggling men had disappeared.

"Easy all!" called the officer at the lines when the gig was about over the spot. "Now search again. We'll get them this time. They can both swim well, evidently."

But a steady search that became a frantic lashing about in the gig, here, there, and everywhere, could not reveal the whereabouts of the combatants. To the north, south, east, and west searched the gig, and Tom felt something very much like a lump in his throat when he realised that there was precious little chance of their drawing anything but a blank now.

"Listen!" at last cried Tom swiftly. "Listen, sir! Water gurgling in the fog over there. Chains grinding, too. It's—it's the lighters! We're being swept right under their prows—"

"Give way, all!" cried the officer. "Give way, for your lives! Steady and strong—pull—pull—pull! Once let the tide drive us under those upturned prows, and we'll be rolled under! Give way, there! Pull—pull—pull!"

"Easy enough to guess where that detective and that cat's-eyed villain are now," said one of the other officers to the cox, as he glanced in the direction of the gurgling sound of the tide sluicing under the upturned prows of the lighters, moored five abreast as they were.

The gig was very close to them indeed, and Tom felt sick as he laid his hands on stroke's oar to lend his aid.

The young Hood's breast felt hollow with fear. His heart seemed to stop, then suddenly pound heavily against his ribs. It was fear, Tom knew, but it was not on account of their imminent danger. The fear had been engendered by the words of the officer beside cox: "Easy

enough to guess where that detective is now!"

He was being dashed to death by the tide, rolling him over and over under the bottoms of those awful lighters, of course. There would be no grip for a swimmer under the smooth, upturned prows. He would be forced down under the water. Even now his dead body might be swirling in the curdling wake of the great iron boats, tossed out by the triumphant tide after its cruel work had been all too well finished.

Tom still felt sick and hollow, although the gig was now drawing out of danger—although the cheery voice of the officer-cox shouted:

"Take it easy, all! We're clear!"

The truth of the matter was, Tom felt, somehow, that in the loss of that steady-eyed, square-jawed man, with the quick, pleasant voice and the crisp, short-cropped black hair he had lost a firm friend.

Was it because the detective's enemy was the lad's, too? Was it because Hume, with his perfect coolness and nonchalance, his low, chuckling laugh and confidence-inspiring manner was, somehow, mixed up in the mystery that was tormenting Tom day and night now?

Tom did not know. The fact remained that their failure to find Hume—Avalanche Hume the officer had called him—had almost stunned him and left him dazed.

The gig swept up to the boom out-rigger of the Ajax before Tom realised that they were back to the ship. As in a dream, the lad worked his way along the boom back to the doorway in the side of the vessel opening to the lower deck. There the first person to greet him was Dicky West, his red head bobbing about in great excitement.

"You lucky beggar, Tom!" cried Dicky. "Wish I'd been able to go in the gig. But how on earth did you get up to the top deck so quickly?"

Tom laughed, and shook off the feeling of utter dejection that had gripped him on account of the tragedy under the lighters. Dicky continued quickly:

"Was there much of a scrap out there? Did you get those rotters? It wasn't the man with the green spectacles, I suppose?"

"That's just who it was, Dicky," replied Tom, as brightly as he could.

"And if you'll give me half a sec to explain, I'll tell you that I followed Burr up on deck, and plumped right into a scrap on the upper deck before the alarm was given. That's how it was I was one of the first in the shemuzzle. But there's been an awful tragedy out there, Dicky. Here, come to our favourite corner, and I'll tell you about it."

Tom, alone with Dicky, related the adventures of the gig. He shuddered as he mentioned the moored lighters with the ebb tide sluicing under the upturned prows with a power that was resistless, ruthless.

The young Hood told Dicky, too, all he had noticed about John Hume, the Scotland Yard detective, how he was evidently called "Avalanche" Hume, and how well the nickname fitted him. The lad mentioned the low chuckle when things seemed blackest, the perfect coolness of the man, his terrific strength and overbearing onslaught in attack. And, above all, Tom mentioned the occasional kindly twinkle in his deep, grey eyes and the softening of his shrewd, hard mouth at times.

"Crumbs, Tom, he must be a fine chap," said Dicky. "But those detective chaps are wonders at getting out of tight corners, or so I've read. Don't be too sure that he has been drowned with that rotter with the green windows. He may be safe and sound ashore even now."

Tom shook his head, and Dicky could see the gloom once more settling on his chum's features. So the red-headed youngster said brightly:

"Anyway, cheer up, Tom lad! Breakfast as usual, and I've to see all Hoods turn up, despite the night of alarms. There's to be no 'lying in,' but hammocks to be rolled and stacked as usual."

"That's a hint to me, Dicky," grinned Tom. "All right; throw the heavy chief petty officer stumt as much as you like. I'll get my hammock down right away. Some of the chaps are inclined to cheek me now I'm disrated, but I'm still boss on the footer-field, as they'll find out this afternoon. Golly, Dick, I am glad that you've been made chief petty officer of the Hoods! I don't mind being disrated half so much now."

Dicky grinned in return, and the two lads moved off up to the wash-houses just as the first streaks of daylight filtered in through the orlop deck window-ports.

At breakfast the boys seemed strangely quiet. But half-way through the meal an officer appeared on the ladderway of the mess-deck and shouted for silence. Then he bawled out, throwing his voice to starboard and to port so that all could hear:

"Routine as usual! Chiefs of divisions will detail deck squads. The football-match between port and starboard watches will take place this afternoon, as already arranged!"

The training-ship lads seemed to cheer up considerably at the announcement that all work would be continued as usual. Tom, himself, made a great effort. After all, what was the good of being bent down like a broken reed at the night's tragedy?

Tom was required for the inquiry into the night's adventures, as well as the recovered officer of the watch and the lads who had been on searchlight duty. Tom, however, said nothing about Burr. Something seemed to tell the lad that he ought to keep quiet about the bully's share in the business. And, later on, Tom had every reason to be glad he had not denounced the bullying chief petty officer of the Blakes.

As the chums went ashore, when on their way to the playing-fields for the football-match that afternoon, Tom turned things over in his mind.

"What beats me, Dicky, is where on earth I come into this rum business!" he said, as they walked up the causeway from the boat that had landed them. "Why should that chap with green gig-lamps be keen on getting at me?"

There was a thoughtful frown on Tom's face as he and his chum strode along Black Dell Lane towards the football-field belonging to the Ajax. The two were wearing their footer togs—the green shirts and blue shorts of the starboard watch.

Dicky nodded.

"I'm puzzled, too, Tom. It's about as rum a business as I've heard of. But there must be something big behind it all—something mighty big, and that's a fact. I wonder—"

They were turning a bend in the lane, and suddenly Tom came to a standstill. His hand gripped Dicky's arm as he gasped, his voice tremulous half with surprise and half with joy.

"Avalanche Hume!"

Hume Explains!

THE detective was coming towards them down the lane with swift, easy strides. He heard Tom's exclamation, and a smile appeared at the corners of his firm mouth. His

face was very pleasant when he smiled. A strong, bronzed hand was held out towards them as he drew nearer.

"Why, hanged if it isn't Tom Gale!"

The deep, incisive voice was keen with pleasure. Tom grasped Hume's hand eagerly, and introduced Dicky.

"Then—then you weren't drowned, sir?" cried Dicky.

Hume laughed.

"Doesn't look like it, eh?" he said. "No; I flatter myself I've got nine lives, like a cat. I can tell you, it takes a good deal to knock me out! But I say, this is a bit of luck, meeting you! Gale, you are the very chap I was on my way to see!"

Tom stared incredulously into the forceful grey eyes. Avalanche Hume smiled.

"I mean it. I've a good deal I want to talk about." He glanced down at their footer togs. "I suppose you've no time to come along and have some tuck with me in Fleetthithe? It's rather important."

Tom shook his head.

"Awfully sorry, sir," he said apologetically. "That would have been ripping, but we are on our way to play in the match—Starboard against Port, you know. There'll be no time for that."

"Right you are," returned Hume. "Look here, there's no one about; seems we've got the lane to ourselves. I had wanted to talk to you alone, Tom, but I know your chum will be all right. It's serious business I'm on—mighty serious! Suppose we jaw as we walk; I'll come along with you to the ground, if I may. How far is it?"

"The other end of this lane—about a mile," said Tom, looking curiously into the other's eyes. What could Avalanche Hume wish to say to him? Then a thought struck him, and he added swiftly: "Last night—did you get him—the chap in green spectacles? We rowed round, but couldn't find a trace of either of you!"

Hume shook his head as he turned to walk with them.

"No; he got away. I was pretty sick when I had to land without him in my loving grip, I can tell you! I lost him in the dark. Still, better luck next time!"

By the way, I suppose you know all about me?"

"Yes, rather! We know you are Avalanche Hume, of course, from Scotland Yard. But how do you know my name, sir?" Tom added.

"I've good cause to!" answered Hume. "It was you who were the cause of my being aboard the Ajax last night, when you came to lend me a hand so toppingly."

Tom stared, his eyes fixed on those in the forceful face of the man beside him.

"It's like this, Gale," explained Hume incisively. "I may be able to explain one or two things that have been puzzling you. I only wish to goodness I could explain 'em all!" he put in, as though to himself.

"This man, Kalche—the man with the green spectacles—I'm after Kalche, and before long I shall get him. I was after him once before, years ago, and I caught him then. In fact, he's only been out of prison a couple of years from the stiff sentence he had to serve. But now that he's out again, he has got busy again at the very same business."

"What's that?" asked Tom.

"Kalche is the head of a big criminal organisation, Gale—one of the biggest things the Yard has come up against! They play for big stakes, too—blackmail on a vast scale, to put it roughly. I dare say you think it queer, my telling you all this. But, you see, somehow or other, you are mixed up in it all."

"But—but how—"

"Don't ask me that!" A grim smile played for a moment at the corners of Hume's lips. "Do you think I wouldn't give my eyes to know the answer to that riddle myself? All I know is that for some reason Kalche is after you, and I believe that in that fact lies the key to the whole affair. Through you, I mean to lay my hands on him, though up to now he's slipped through my fingers like an eel at every turn. It's mysterious—mighty mysterious, I grant you. But there it is. What I want to know is just that—what's the cause of this queer interest he's taken in you?"

Tom shook his head hopelessly.

"Goodness only knows! All I can tell you is that he attacked me here in this very lane one night, and would have

shipped me aboard his car, the swab, hadn't Dicky here and some other chaps from the Ajax turned up at the right moment. Before that, I'd never set eyes on him, as far as I know."

Avalanche Hume nodded thoughtfully.

"Well, I'll get the answer to the problem some day," he said. "I've had a talk with your Commander—Commander Boyce—and he's given me permission to come aboard the Ajax whenever I like. So I expect we shall see a good bit of each other before we've finished, Tom."

He strode on in silence. Then Dicky chuckled.

"You know, sir, you've properly upset our ideas of detectives," he grinned. "I always thought of tees as chaps who went about spotting finger-prints through magnifying glasses. Aren't you afraid of Kalche recognising you, sir? I mean to say, if you were disguised and all that. Also, does Kalche wear his green starboard lamps as a disguise?"

Hume laughed good-humouredly.

"What's the use of a disguise?" he laughed. "It's just a straight fight between this fellow Kalche and myself, and he knows only too well I'm on his heels. There's something curiously wrong with his eyes. A white light—sunlight, moonlight, artificial light, etc., would eventually blind him." He turned abruptly to Tom. "That boy who was on deck last night—the boy who was in his nightshirt and trousers like you, and who knocked into me and then disappeared—who is he?"

"You mean Burr!" cried Tom quickly.

"What! You don't mean he may be in it, too? He hates me, though I can't say just why. That's how it was that I was on deck last night. I had spotted Burr going above, and he looked a bit fishy, so I followed to see what the game was. He—"

Tom hesitated, and Hume glanced at him inquiringly, keenly.

"Well, sir," said Tom half reluctantly, "I think I'm right in saying Burr has tried to do for me twice lately."

(Look out for another thrilling instalment of this powerful serial next week, chums.)



**"ERIC KILDARE'S
SECRET!"**

(Continued from page 16.)

Southampton this morning, has been delayed owing to the breaking of a propeller shaft. The breakage is expected to delay the sailing several days, and in the meantime the majority of the passengers will be accommodated at local hotels."

Tom Merry glanced quickly at the date of the newspaper. It was dated three days previously.

"By jingo!" he breathed. "The—the Valparaiso was the boat Desmond Kildare was to sail on. Then—then—"

"Desmond Kildare is in England still. In his hotel, I guess," said Blake. "Old Kildare ought to see that, Tommy. That bit of paper was wrapped round a loaf I got from Mrs. Taggles. I only spotted the paragraph by chance."

"A jolly lucky chance, I fancy," said Tom grimly. "I'm off to show Kildare this, Blake."

"Half a minute!" said Blake. "There's something else I want to tell you, Tommy. We've got to be jolly careful when we visit the tower again."

"Why?"

"When we left it this morning we found that fat frog, Buggy Trimble, mooching round the ruins just outside," said Blake. "That's why we were so long. We had to wait until the little cad had sheered off. I'm wondering if he spotted us going there? You know what a curious busybody he is."

"Phew!" muttered Tom Merry, in alarm. "If—if that fat rotter's suspicious, then the fat's in the fire."

"I don't know," grunted Blake. "But it looks like it. Anyway, we'd better watch him."

The juniors went out together, and Tom Merry went along to Kildare's study. He found Kildare outside the door chatting with Darrell, a fact Tom was thankful for. He knew

about at taking the prisoner in the Round Tower his meals, and Blake & Co. were taking the first turn.

As he sighted Blake's face, Tom knew at once that something unusual had occurred. Blake & Co. had been gone since breakfast, and the Terrible Three had been wondering rather uneasily what had delayed their return.

"Anything gone wrong?" he queried anxiously. "Has that brute—"

"All serene—that is, as far as the merry prisoner's concerned," said Blake. "He was sulky and a bit abusive, but he took his grub like a lamb and seemed jolly glad to get it."

Blake grinned, and then he became suddenly serious again. "It's not that, Tommy," he said. "I've got something to show you. Look at that!"

He took from his pocket a crumpled piece of newspaper, and pointed out a paragraph. Tom read it, and whistled. It was headed:

"SOUTH AMERICAN LINER DELAYED," and ran as follows: "The s.s. Valparaiso, which should have left

Kildare would never tackle him about his visit the previous night before Darrell.

"I thought this would interest you, Kildare," said Tom meekly, handing the senior the crumpled paper. "That is, if you've not already seen it."

Kildare took the paper carelessly enough, but as he read the paragraph he took a deep breath.

"I hadn't seen it, Merry," he said quietly. "This—this alters matters. I—"

He stared at the paper a moment, and then his face set with decision, and he handed the paper to Darrell.

"I'm off to the village, old man," he said, his voice thrilling with excitement. "If anyone wants me I've gone to send off an urgent wire. Merry, where—"

But Tom Merry had gone. He had not heard Kildare's last words, and he had not stopped to see how Kildare would deal with this new development. He went into the Shell Form room with a worried brow. As a matter of fact Tom Merry could not get Baggy Trimble out of his mind. If the fat Nosey Parker of St. Jim's was on the track—

In the Shell Form room Tom Merry gave the problem of Baggy Trimble a good deal of thought that morning, as indeed did Blake & Co., in the Fourth. Several times during lessons Blake glanced across at the fat junior, only to meet Baggy's curious eyes fixed upon him. He reported this to Tom Merry as they met at the close of second lesson.

"Well, it can't be helped," was Tom's gloomy comment. "We'll have to take more care, that's all. When we take that rotter his grab you chaps can keep an eye on Baggy. Anyway, we've got to go and get him his dinner now."

And, for the moment, Tom Merry dismissed Baggy Trimble from his mind. But could he have seen the fat junior at that moment he would never have dismissed him from his mind so easily.

For Baggy Trimble of the Fourth was on the trail, very much on the trail. He had seen Blake & Co. purchase a loaf of bread and other things from the tuckshop that morning, and this alone, so early in the day, had made him suspicious. He had followed them, and become more suspicious still on seeing them enter the ruins.

Baggy had hovered about on the fringe of the ruins, and only the fear of being late for lessons had made him give up the trail. But only temporary, then. For immediately lessons were over the fat junior's footsteps were turned towards the ruins again.

This time Baggy did not content himself with staying on the fringe. The ruins were strictly out of bounds, but when on the trail of anything to eat Baggy often reeked nothing of rules and regulations.

And he did so now. In a short time the fat junior was standing—just a little nervously—looking up at the ruined tower. It was a lonely, desolate spot, even in the daytime, and Baggy was no hero.

"It's rummy, jolly rummy!" mused the fat junior, shivering slightly. "Those chaps are up to something, that's certain. Beasts! Never think of sharing a feed with pals. Now, I wonder— It can't be a blessed barring-out. And if it was a feed they wouldn't come to a beastly cold place like this. But they come with a pile of grub, and they went away without it. I wonder— Mum-my hat!"

Baggy Trimble jumped. His eyes had wandered to the little window high up in the tower, and what he saw there sent the colour ebbing from his fat cheeks.

It was a face, a fat, flabby face, with glittering eyes. Only for a second did Baggy see it, and then it vanished abruptly.

Baggy Trimble stood for a brief moment rooted to the ground with surprise and terror. Then he bolted, yelling. Slipping on the half-frozen slush, stumbling over snow-covered stones, he fled as if a hundred fiends were on his heels.

CHAPTER 11.

Bowled Out!

"WHAT—"

Biff!

Baggy Trimble came rushing round the corner of the chapel like a shot from a gun, and went full-tilt into a tall form in mortar-board and gown.

It was Mr. Railton. He went staggering back from the impact, and only just in time did he stretch a hand out to prevent the frightened Baggy from rushing off again, still yelling.

"What—what— Trimble, how dare you!" thundered the Housemaster angrily. "How dare you rush about the grounds like—"

"Ghosts!" yelled Baggy wildly. "I saw it, I tell you! Ghosts! Lemme go! He's after me!"

"What?"

"Ghosts!" shouted Trimble, twisting round in the master's grip, and glancing fearfully behind him. "I saw his face, and—"

Baggy broke off with a relieved gasp as he saw that he was not, after all, pursued. Apparently he had imagined that the face, or, rather, its owner, had left the window to come in chase of him.

"You utterly foolish boy!" said Mr. Railton, shaking the fat junior. "What is the matter? Ghosts! How absurd!"

"I tell you I saw it!" stammered Baggy. "A face. At the window of the Round Tower. It—it was an awful face. I—"

Baggy shuddered.

Mr. Railton fairly blinked at him. Trimble was well known as a romancer, with a remarkable imagination, but his fright was obviously genuine now. The master realised that Baggy had indeed seen something which had frightened him badly.

"The ruins are out of bounds, Trimble," he said sternly. "If you have— However, come with me!" he ended abruptly.

Quite a number of fellows of all Forms had been attracted to the spot by Baggy's shrieks, and as Mr. Railton and Baggy walked away towards the ruins they followed wonderingly, many of them grinning. They expected to see something interesting.

And they did. Something much more than interesting, in fact.

By this time Baggy had completely forgotten why he had gone to the ruins in the first place. He was still shaking with fright, and the nearer they got to the tower the nearer Baggy got to the tail-end of the little procession.

Mr. Railton's face was grim, and he did not hesitate. He believed that Baggy had seen something, and that something he believed to be caused by some practical joker larking in the tower. Hence his grimness.

With the grinning crowd at his heels he marched into the tower, and tramped up the stairway. He reached the oaken door and tried the rusty latch. The door was locked, and Mr. Railton was just turning away, when a slight sound within reached his ears. Surprised, he stooped and peered through a crack in the old door.

Then he gave an exclamation of utter amazement.

"Bless my soul!" he ejaculated. "There actually is a man in the place. Extraordinary!"

He turned to Talbot, who happened to be nearest.

"Talbot, kindly bring Taggles here without delay, and ask him to bring the key of this place," he said. "If you see any seniors, you had better tell them to come here also."

"Yes, sir."

Talbot departed. Like the rest of them, he was keenly interested, and he wasted no time. In a couple of minutes he was back again, Taggles, the porter, hurrying and grumbling at his heels. Taggles never liked being disturbed from his dinner. Baker, Rushden, and Darrell came along after them, looking very surprised.

"Which the key of this 'ere room's gone!" grunted Taggles sourly. "It ain't whereittortterbe."

"Then we must break down the door," said the master grimly. "What a truly extraordinary thing! A man, a stranger—apparently a prisoner—within the very walls of the school! There is a big balk of timber in the basement, Darrell—"

Darrell and several others hastened to get the balk of timber from the basement, and next moment it was crashing against the big door. After several crashing blows the lock gave way and the door swung open.

The next moment the startled onlookers were staring dumb-founded at the equally startled James Flint. He crouched against the farther wall, his features white with fear—a different fear now. He remembered Tom Merry's warning, and he saw the prison walls looming before him—or thought he did.

Mr. Railton stepped into the gloomy apartment and faced the rascal. But he had no chance to speak. Even as he stepped in, Flint made a desperate bid for liberty.

With a mad rush he was past the master, and then he went through the startled onlookers like a knife through butter, scattering them to right and left. He arrived at the bottom of the stairway in a heap, but he picked himself up and dashed away. There followed a sudden cry outside, and sounds of a violent struggle.

Mr. Railton was the first outside. He was amazed to see the form of James Flint flat on his back, and seated on his head, his chest, and his legs, were Merry, Manners, Lowther, and Blake.

"You—you've got him, I see!" cried the master.

"Oh crumbs!"

Tom Merry & Co. blinked in utter dismay as Mr. Railton

ran up to them, followed by a horde of fellows who poured from the tower. Flint seemed oblivious of them, however. He lay glaring up at his captors, fury and bitter hate glistening from his eyes.

"You—you little rats!" he hissed. "I—I'll swing for you yet. I'll make you sorry for queering my pitch, and sorrier still for keeping me in that hole all night. Hang you—"

"What ever is the fellow talking about?" exclaimed the astonished Housemaster, struck by something in the juniors' faces. "What does—"

He paused. His eyes had fallen suddenly on something in the shush close by. It was a parcel, the paper of which had burst open, showing a tin of pressed beef, a packet of biscuits, and other articles of an edible nature. The fellow's savage words, the alarmed looks on the juniors' faces, and the sight of these articles seemed to make things clear to the keen-witted master.

"Is—is it possible, Merry," he ejaculated, "that you were bringing those things to the tower—that you have been keeping this man a prisoner there?"

The juniors said nothing.

"Answer me, Merry!" snapped Mr. Railton angrily.

Tom Merry almost groaned aloud.

"Ye-es, sir," he stammered. "It—it's true enough."

"Bless my soul!"

Mr. Railton stared aghast for a moment, and then he motioned to Darrell.

"Take charge of that man, Darrell," he said, his face setting sternly. "This extraordinary affair must be inquired into without delay. Bring him to the headmaster's study. You, Merry, and the three boys with you, will follow me also."

The procession—greatly augmented now—started out for the School House. The juniors tramped after Mr. Railton with heavy hearts. They were oblivious of the curious glances around them. Their thoughts were of Eric Kildare. It was all up now. Instead of helping their hero, they had only succeeded in bringing matters to a hopeless climax.

That miserable walk seemed endless to Tom Merry & Co., but at last they found themselves standing in the Head's study. Dr. Holmes was at lunch, but he soon put in an appearance, and his eyes opened wide as they rested on the assembly. They opened wider still as Mr. Railton gravely explained.

He was astounded—as well he might be. He looked first with obvious disfavour at Flint, who, with Darrell and

Rushden holding him fast, looked remarkably like a caged rat. Then he looked at Tom Merry and his miserable chums.

"You have heard what Mr. Railton has said?" he asked gravely. "What explanation have you to offer, Merry? Who is this man?"

Tom Merry set his lips hard. He was determined to say no word that would bring Eric Kildare's name into the affair.

But, as it happened, he had no need to do that. For even while the Head waited a reply a knock sounded at the door, and Kildare himself entered. And behind Kildare was the big figure and genial, good-natured face of—Desmond Kildare.

There was a silence. The sight of Desmond Kildare came as a surprise—a big surprise—to the Head, Mr. Railton, and to others, believing, as they did, that Kildare's cousin was on his way to South America. But it came as a shock to the rascally Flint. He went grey to the lips, and with a sudden wrench he made another bid for liberty.

"Hold the scoundrel!" cried Kildare, jumping forward. "Hold him fast!"

But there was no need for Kildare's help; Darrell and Rushden easily held the squirming rascal. The face of the kindly old Head was a picture.

"Kildare!" he gasped. "I—I hardly know what to say. Do you know this man?"

"I have very good cause to know him, sir," said Kildare quietly. "I have just heard where and how he was found. And I know why these juniors held him prisoner. It was for me—for my sake. And—and I beg of you, Dr. Holmes, to let me take all responsibility for what they have done."

"But—but, Kildare—"

"I will explain, sir."

And he did. He told the story, from his meeting in the wood with Flint, to the arrival of his cousin a few moments ago in response to his urgent wire to Desmond's hotel, in Southampton. He finished at last, and as he did so the faces of all, startled and curious, turned to Desmond Kildare. That gentleman smiled, and stepped forward.

"You all appear to be expecting me to finish the story, so I will," he said, looking at Flint, who now appeared more like a caged rat than ever. "Or, at least, I will finish it with the aid of our friend Flint, there. No, I am not a thief, nor likely to be one, I hope. In the first place, the letter, the precious confession to gain which my cousin sold his worldly goods and suffered no end of worry, is a rank forgery. It was never written by me, but by our friend Flint, who was

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once—for a brief, a very brief time, in my office. In short, the whole thing is a lie—a swindle. Now let's hear Flint finish the story. Is it a swindle, Flint?"

The trapped rascal licked his lips feverishly. But he was silent. Desmond Kildare crossed to the phone, and his hand dropped carelessly upon it.

"Better tell the truth, Flint," he said gently. "You can either tell it to us here and now, or to the police at Rylcombe. Well?"

The blackmailing scoundrel did not hesitate long. The next moment he was stammering out the truth. He admitted—he could do nothing else—that the whole thing was false—a swindle. As he finished Desmond pointed to the door.

"Get out!" he said, a hard note in his voice. "Only our desire to avoid publicity has saved you from prison, you rascal."

And Flint went. He crawled from the room, and his hurrying footsteps died away. The Head drew a deep sigh of relief, and, rising to his feet, he held out his hand to Kildare.

"I am thankful, deeply thankful, Kildare, that I did not condemn you for your fault the other night," he said. "Only your reputation, your integrity, and sterling character saved you from disgrace, if not expulsion. I am thankful, also, that your popularity has earned you the loyalty and devotion of these juniors who have risked so much for your sake."

He turned to Tom Merry & Co., and eyed them thoughtfully. Then he spoke.

"For the present you may go, my boys," he said. "You have done wrong—very wrong. But—but— However,

I will discuss the matter of your punishment with Mr. Raitton."
And Tom Merry & Co. went.

It was a matter of regret to Tom Merry & Co. that the rascally Flint had escaped so lightly—for, as it happened, he did not escape scot-free. There was still a quantity of snow remaining in the quad, and as a crowd of indignant juniors were waiting when Flint emerged from the School House, he got the benefit of what there was, and he departed from St. Jim's with snowballs bursting all over him.

Desmond Kildare lunched with the Head, but he had tea with his cousin and Darrell, and it was at his request that Tom Merry & Co. were invited to the function. It was rather undignified and unusual for the skipper of St. Jim's—for, of course, Kildare got his positions again—to have juniors to tea, but Kildare could afford to be undignified and do unusual things for once. And a right jolly meal it was.

During the rest of that day—and the days following—Tom Merry & Co. waited rather anxiously for their punishments to be announced, but evidently the incident was forgotten, for nothing more was heard.

THE END.

(Another topping yarn of Tom Merry & Co. next week, chums. "A VENDETTA AT ST. JIM'S!" By Martin Clifford. Do not miss it.)

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