

"Saved In Secret!" **"Two Aero Adventurers!"** **"Chums of the Iron Way!"**
By Martin Clifford. By Lester Bidston. By Roland Spencer & Francis Warwick.
AND SPLENDID SUPPLEMENT INSIDE.

EVERY WEDNESDAY.

The GEM 2^D

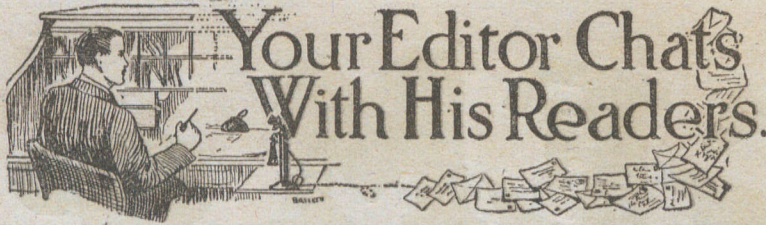
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A THIEF IN THE NIGHT!

Tom Merry, sleeping the sleep of healthy youth, did not stir as a shadowy figure hovered near his bed and thievish hands fumbled among his neatly folded clothes! (A gripping incident from the grand school yarn of St. Jim's, in this issue.)



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, — Christmas is coming! So is the Grand Christmas Number of the GEM. This Special Issue will be in your hands next Wednesday morning, and I am absolutely certain you will say it is the finest Christmas Number we have ever had. The weeks just prior to the festive season are gay with happenings and harbingers of the time of goodwill, and the GEM for next week is one of these foretastes of good old Christmas. It is just what you are looking for. Plant your orders early to make sure!

"GUSSY'S CHRISTMAS QUESTS!"

By Martin Clifford.

The famous author starts the whole thing off with a bang. Trust him for that! To do honour to the occasion he has written an extra-special story of the chums of St. Jim's, introducing our old favourite, Talbot. He will be welcomed with a three-times-three. There is not really much that I need say more than that concerning the tip-top treat for next week. Talbot has been asked for times without number by "Gemites." We have heard about the ups and downs of his life, and the cloud that hangs over his past. In next week's thrilling Christmas yarn, with all the merrymaking and jollity down at Lord Eastwood's grand house in the country, we hear again of this shadow of the bygone. Jim Dawlish appears once more. The sinister figure

of the cracksman is as unwelcome as Banquo's Ghost at the banquet given by Macbeth. Dawlish has had a sinister, even tragic, influence on Talbot's life. Other characters well known play their parts. We meet the stalwart John Rivers, who is now working for Scotland Yard, also pretty Marie Rivers and other friends. This is a Christmas yarn which you will read and read again. It goes right to the heart of Christmas, the time of forgetting and forgiving, and looking ahead into the light of the future. So mind you make certain of next Wednesday's GEM.

SPECIAL CHRISTMAS SUPPLEMENT!

That will be there all right! Safe as houses, only more so! The "St. Jim's News" plays up to the requirements of the cheery season in topping style. They do understand what Christmas means at St. Jim's, and the new supplement is crammed full of good things all most suitable to the occasion. Not a dull line in it!

"CHUMS OF THE IRON WAY!"

By Roland Spencer and Francis Warwick.

Of course, we shall have a nailing fine instalment of this railway serial. I receive every day heaps of tributes to the story. It is appreciated by GEM readers because of the wonderful pictures it gives of the inner working of the iron road. What's more, it shows you in such vivid fashion the

changes which have taken place since the first quaint old Puffing Billy creaked off down the track and got jeered at by wisecracks who had the neck to declare nothing could beat the old coach!

BEATING EVERYTHING!

That indubitably will be the case with a new grand GEM feature. This is simply IT!

GREAT "ERRORS" COMPETITION!

You will find all about this surprising offer in next week's issue of the good old GEM. The first prize is £10, the second prize £5, while I am also offering five prizes of £1 each and Six Footballs. Now, there is always plenty of fun in mistakes. It has been so since the giddy old Stone Age when the hammer hit the thumb of the welder. It is only when you sit on a nail and get told it is a mistake that you may fail to see the point. But our new Competition just shows you how errors may creep in and what to do about it. It is the most interesting and the jolliest competition ever put before you. All details in our next.

THE ROYAL NAVY!

Look out for this week's prime "Magnet" photogravure plate of a famous battleship. The "Magnet" set of pictures will make up a gallery you will be proud to own.

AND CHRISTMAS!

With all its excellent fare I take leave to say that the GEM Christmas Number will be worthy of the splendid season. It will remind you of a score of fine things connected with the spirit of Christmas—Christmas in the old days like one sees in the pictures with snow and the four-in-hand rattling up to the inn; also Christmas in the new times when everybody is out to lend a hand towards giving good times to others.

Your Editor.



Tuck Hampers and Money Prizes Awarded for Interesting Paragraphs.

(If You Do Not Win a Prize This Week—You May Next!)

All Efforts in this Competition should be Addressed to: The GEM LIBRARY, "My Readers' Own Corner," Gough House, Gough Square, London, E.C.4.

Cheshire Takes the Tuck!

SO MUCH FOR ITS VALUE!

Wilson was very fond of dogs, and he was always causing trouble buying every dog he took a fancy to. One day he ran across an acquaintance leading a beautiful retriever. "Fine dog you've got there," he said enthusiastically. "Don't want to sell it, I suppose?" "You can have the animal for ten pounds," said the friend. "Is he intelligent and clever?" "Clever! I should say so! Why, that dog knows as much as I do!" "Oh, is that so? Well, I'll give you ten bob for it!"—The Tuck Hamper, filled with delicious Tuck, has been awarded to Horace Sadler, 23, Mill Lane, Wallasey, Cheshire.

QUITE SAFE!

A man entered a crowded railway carriage and placed a heavy box almost as big as a trunk, on the parcels' racks. A nervous passenger, sitting underneath, kept looking at the bulky package, fearing it might fall on him. For some time he managed to keep silent, but when the train went over a point in the rails, and the box gave an ominous lurch, he turned to the owner saying: "Excuse me, but do you think the box is quite safe?" "Oh, yes," replied the other cheerfully. "It's locked, you know!"—Half-a-crown has been awarded to John Glaister, 10, Mountjoy Place, Newport, Mon.

FULLY EXPLAINED!

A ploughman was endeavouring to tell his workmates what a phenomenon was. "It's like this, mates. See that field of thistles o'er yonder? Well, that's no phenomenon." "No?" "But suppose you were to see a lark singing up in the sky." "Yes?" "Well, that's no phenomenon." "No, of course not." "But imagine there's a bull in the field o'er yonder." "Well?" "Even that's not a phenomenon." "No!" "But, look here. Suppose you saw the bull sittin' on them thistles whistlin' like a lark—well, that would be a phenomenon!"—Half-a-crown has been awarded to Frank Barnes, 26, Harry Street, Werneth, Oldham, Lanes.

TUCK HAMPER COUPON.

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

Finding Reginald Talbot a useless pawn to gain his selfish ends, Gerald Crooke turns his attention to Tom Merry. But Talbot is wary of his cousin's underhanded methods, and the trumped up charge made against the junior captain is met by a clever counterstroke!



SAVED IN SECRET!

A Grand New Long Complete
School Story of Tom Merry &
Co. at St. Jim's.

□□□□

BY

Martin Clifford.

CHAPTER 1.

A Task for Talbot!

TALBOT of the Shell Form at St. Jim's looked up as his study door opened without a knock. He expected to see Gore or Skimpole, who belonged to the study; but it was Crooke who came in.

Talbot frowned for a second; but it was only for a second. Then he smiled as genially as he could. Little as there was in common between the two cousins, Talbot of the Shell always did his best to keep on terms of civility, if not of friendship. Friendship, indeed, would scarcely have been possible between two fellows so utterly unlike.

"Come in, old man!" said Talbot cordially.

Crooke of the Shell lounged into the study.

He threw the door shut behind him carelessly with a bang. Then he came over to the table.

Talbot waved his hand to a chair, but Crooke did not sit down. He stood with his hands in his pockets, looking at Talbot across the table. There was a rather sullen, dogged expression on Gerald Crooke's face, and Talbot wondered whether he had come there for a "row." He was determined that there should be no offence on his side, at least, if he could help it.

"Busy?" asked Crooke carelessly; evidently not caring in the least whether his cousin was busy or not.

"Not very—only prep," said Talbot. "Finished yours?"

"Haven't touched it yet," said Crooke, shrugging his shoulders. "Bother prep!"

"Bother it, by all means," he agreed. "Only there's Mr. Linton to deal with in the morning, you know."

"Oh, blow Linton!"

Crooke shifted restlessly from one foot to another, and his eyes were shifty as he looked at Talbot. It seemed that he had come to say something, and found difficulty in giving it utterance.

"Tom Merry's playing you in the House match, of course?" he jerked out at last.

"Yes."

"Of course, you're indispensable in the footer," remarked Crooke, with a sneer.

Talbot made no answer to that.

"I've asked Merry to play me," went on Crooke.

"You?"

Talbot could not help uttering that exclamation of surprise. Crooke of the Shell, who hated football, and often had to be rounded up by a prefect for games practice, was the last fellow he would have expected to be ambitious of shining in House matches.

Crooke sneered again.

"Surprised you—what?" he asked.

"Well, you see—"

"Oh, yes, I see!" interrupted Crooke. "Junior football here is entirely in the hands of Tom Merry and his friends, and you're one of his friends. No outsider need apply."

"It's not quite like that," said Talbot mildly. "You've never seemed keen on the game before, Crooke. This is rather new, isn't it?"

"I'm not keen now," said Crooke, with a shrug of the shoulders. "I don't pretend to be a big man at games. I don't care a thump for House matches. But my uncle's coming down on Saturday, and you know how he rags me for bein' what he calls a slacker. I want old Lyndon to see me playin' for the House for once!"

Talbot knitted his brows.

Crooke referred to Colonel Lyndon as "my uncle," calmly ignoring the fact that he was Talbot's uncle as well. And the reference to the colonel as "old Lyndon" was not pleasing to Talbot's ears.

"A lot may depend on it," went on Crooke.

"I don't see how anything can depend on it," said Talbot abruptly. "You don't care very much for Colonel Lyndon's good opinion, Crooke. If you did, you would change some of your ways, I think."

"I don't care twopence for him or his good opinion, either," said Crooke coolly. "You're the favourite nephew, I know that. You've known how to get into his good graces—you've your own ways of managin' that, I dare say."

Talbot flushed.

"What's the good of quarrelling, Crooke?" he asked quietly. "We ought to try to keep on decent terms, as we're cousins. It's bad form for relatives to be at loggerheads. I don't want to row—but you know I can't listen to that sort of stuff. Drop it, there's a good chap!"

"What I mean is, I don't care twopence for my jolly old uncle, or what he thinks, in a general way," said Crooke. "But a lot may depend on his visit on Saturday, all the same. I'm hard up!"

"What?"

"I've had rotten bad luck," said Crooke, with a scowl. "I'm jolly nearly stony now. If I can make a good impression on old Lyndon on Saturday it may mean a good tip—a fiver, perhaps. See?"

"I see," said Talbot quietly.

"Last time he was here he gave me a royal jaw about slacking and all that—and forgot to tip me," said Crooke bitterly. "Well, if he finds me playin' football on Saturday he will think I've taken it to heart, and bucked up. That's where I come in!"

Talbot did not answer.

"I don't see why I shouldn't have a show in the matches, either," said Crooke. "I can play football, I suppose? I don't see why I should be always passed over, as if I were a fumbling ass like Grundy or Trimble."

"You'd have your chance if you had any keenness," said Talbot. "If you dodge games practice you can hardly expect to be picked out for matches."

"I didn't come here for a lecture."

"Well, what did you come here for, Crooke?" he asked. "Get it out, and get it over, before we lose our tempers!"

"I want to play in the match on Saturday, I believe I can put up a good game—anyhow, I'll do my best. House matches ain't the most important happenings in the universe—anyhow, the skies wouldn't fall if Figgins & Co. beat the School House on Saturday," said Crooke, with a sneer. "I think I ought to have a chance, don't you?"

"What I think doesn't matter very much, as Tom Merry is junior football captain. You must speak to him."

"I've spoken to him, and he says 'No.'"

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"Well, that ends it, I suppose."

"I think not," said Crooke, in the same surly, dogged way. "You've got a lot of influence with Tom Merry. He chums more with Manners and Lowther, but he values your opinion a lot more than he values theirs, especially in games. If you put in a word for me, it might make him give me a chance—in fact, I know it would!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Talbot.

"You've talked to me a lot about bein' friends, and all that, as we're relatives," sneered Crooke. "You've told me that old Lyndon would be pleased to see us on good terms. Well, now's the time to play up to it. Do me a friendly turn."

Talbot was silent, and his handsome face was troubled.

"I haven't treated you badly, either, if you come to that," added Crooke. "Lots of fellows in my place would have cut you dead. The fellows have almost forgotten what you were before you came to St. Jim's—you've lived it down. I haven't forgotten."

"You wouldn't!" said Talbot, with involuntary bitterness.

"Well, it's not pleasant for a fellow, is it, to have a cousin who was brought up among thieves and outcasts, and was a—what do you call it?—a cracksman, at an age when other kids are at a preparatory school," said Crooke. "That's what you were, when you were called the Toff, before my uncle took you up!"

Talbot's face was pale now.

"He is my uncle, too, Crooke!" he said, in a low voice. "And I never asked anything of him. He took me up, as you call it, of his own free will."

"Oh, I know all that," said Crooke roughly. "You've got your own ways of getting into people's good graces. Old

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Lyndon doesn't think a tenth so much of me as he does of you—and with all my faults, whatever they are, I never was a cracksman, and a pal of thieves and outcasts. I couldn't pick a lock to save my life; and you could pick any lock at St. Jim's, couldn't you, with your eyes shut?"

Talbot's hands clenched hard.

He looked steadily at Crooke across the table, and there was something in his clear, quiet glance that made the black sheep of the Shell quail and recede a step.

"I don't want to rub it in," said Crooke hastily. "It's all forgotten now, and as you're my cousin, I don't want it talked about, I'm sure. But as I said, I've treated you pretty well—I don't keep on throwing it up against you, as some fellows would."

"What are you doing now, then?" said Talbot bitterly.

Crooke shifted uneasily.

"Well, I don't want to," he said. "I dare say it wasn't your fault. I know you're straight now, anyhow."

Talbot winced.

"What I mean is, I think you ought to be willing to do me a good turn," said Crooke. "It will please old Lyndon no end to see me in the footer; and you've often advised me to take it up, instead of rotting about with Racke and Mellish and Clampe and that seedy lot. Well, I'm taking your advice. If I make anything like a show I may stick to footer for the whole season; and if you feel friendly you ought to feel glad to see that."

"I should be very glad to see it," said Talbot.

"Then help me in this," said Crooke. "Tom Merry will listen to you when he won't listen to anybody else. I'll put in steady practice all the week—I'll be glad of any tips you choose to give me. I'm not conceited—I know you can play my head off at the game, and you can teach me a lot if you like. I mean business. Will you help me to get into the House match on Saturday?"

Talbot of the Shell was silent for a full minute, while Crooke watched his troubled, thoughtful face anxiously.

He nodded at last.

"I'll speak to Tom Merry," he said.

"Good man," said Crooke with some geniality of manner. "I'll really play up, I promise you that."

"Don't take too much for granted, Crooke—it's for the football captain to decide."

"I know; but he will take your advice," said Crooke. "I know that all right. I'm really obliged to you, Talbot. Ta, ta!"

And Crooke of the Shell, with quite a friendly nod, lounged out of the study, much relieved in his mind.

CHAPTER 2.

Nothing Doing!

TOM MERRY drew a bunch of keys from his pocket, in Study No. 10 in the Shell, and jammed one of them into the lock of his desk. Manners and Lowther stood and watched him, quite anxiously.

It was indeed an anxious moment.

In that old oak desk Tom Merry kept his money—when he had any. On one never-to-be-forgotten occasion a ten-shilling note, overlooked and forgotten in a little recess, had turned up unexpectedly—had turned up when the Terrible Three were stony—turned up like corn in Egypt in one of the lean years. That stroke of luck had never been forgotten in No. 10 in the Shell; and when Tom was short of cash—a thing that was bound to happen sometimes—he would look through the old desk, in the faint hope of finding some coin of the realm that had been overlooked.

The chums of the Shell were in financial straits at the present time. They had had tea in Talbot's study as honoured guests; but it was now near supper-time. A little supper in the study seemed to them quite a good idea; and though Talbot certainly would have been glad and willing to stand supper as well as tea they felt a delicacy about landing themselves in No. 9 for two consecutive meals. Hospitality in No. 9 was unbounded; but these things were not "done."

In case of some coin of the realm turning up, Lowther undertook to get the necessary supplies from the tuckshop. True, the school shop was closed; but Lowther engaged to draw the supplies from Mrs. Taggles after hours. He was sure that Dame Taggles would listen to the voice of the charmer, provided the charmer came with cash in hand.

All depended upon whether there was any cash in the desk. Tom Merry's opinion was that there was none; but his chums reminded him of the undoubted fact that he had once overlooked a ten-shilling note there. So the captain of the Shell prepared for a treasure-hunt through the recesses of the old oaken desk—though with little hope of unearthing bullion.

Click!

The desk opened.

It was full of various odds and ends, such as schoolboys'



Tom Merry was about to speak to Talbot when the door flew open and Gerald Crooke rolled headlong into the study. Monty Lowther followed him in, grinning. "You fellows been confabbing about something private?" he asked. "No. What——" "Anyway, whatever it was, Crooke knows all about it," grinned Lowther. "He was so busy with his keyhole stunt that he didn't see me coming!" (See page 6.)

accumulate—of no value to anyone but the owner, and probably of very little value to him!

Tom pulled out the little money drawer. Its emptiness leaped to the eye, as it were. There was no cash there.

"Go through the papers," said Manners.

"I'm pretty sure——"

"You see, you've done it once," said Manners. "You may have left a pound note among all that rubbish."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Pound notes aren't quite plentiful enough to get mislaid without being missed," he said.

"Well, even half-a-crown would see us through," said Monty Lowther.

"Well, I'll look."

Tap!

The door opened, and Talbot of the Shell looked in. The Terrible Three glanced round and smiled cheerily as they saw who the visitor was.

"Trot in, old top!" said Tom.

"If you're occupied just now——" said Talbot, pausing.

"We are—we is!" said Monty Lowther. "It's a giddy treasure-hunt; we're on the track of the hidden treasure—at least, we hope so."

Talbot looked puzzled.

"That ass Tom may have left some cash in his desk," explained Manners. "We're making him go through it to see."

"Oh! Stony?"

"Just that!"

"Well, you duffers, you can raise a loan easily enough," said Talbot, with a smile. "You've only to ask in the next study."

"Good man!" said Monty Lowther. "But we'll go through the desk first. If a half-crown turns up, all right. If not, we'll stick you for two-and-six, and settle on Saturday."

"Right!" said Talbot, with a laugh.

"Take a pew, old man, and look on."

Talbot sat down, with a cheery smile on his face. Tom Merry sorted through the papers in the desk, and turned out several little drawers and pigeon-holes. But nothing in the nature of cash came to light.

"Done!" said Lowther sorrowfully. "We shall have to sponge on Talbot. Saturday certain, old man. Shell out."

"Right-ho," said Talbot. "As much as you like."

"Only two-and-six—more than that would have to be left over till next week, and this study never gets into debt," said Lowther. "The fact is, we're all up against it in the financial line, and our allowances are mortgaged ahead. Manners has been wasting money on films for his wretched camera——"

"You've been blowing money on new tyres for your bike, you mean," said Manners.

"And Tom has been extravagant," said Lowther. "Chucking money away right and left with both hands——"

"Oh, draw it mild!" said Tom.

"Wasting his substance on the poor and needy," said Lowther severely. "You'd hardly believe, Talbot, that with the whole study in this stony state, that born idiot gave his last half-a-crown to a blind beggar."

"I can quite believe it," said Talbot. "It's just like Tom."

"Just like him, isn't it?" said Lowther. "Next time I take him out I shall keep him on a chain. Thanks for this, giddy coin, old man—Saturday for certain. Now I'm going to dodge out of the House, and try my eloquence on Dame Taggles at her window—like Romeo interviewing Juliet. Ta, ta!"

And Monty Lowther strolled out of the study.

Tom Merry crammed the papers and other lumber back into the oak desk, slammed the lid, and jammed the key into the lock. It turned with a click, and Tom put the bunch of keys back into his pocket.

"Anything special, Talbot?" he asked.

"Yes. I came in to speak to you about the footer," said Talbot. "About the House match on Saturday."

"Don't say you want to beg off," said Tom. "I'm relying

on you to knock spots off the New House. Figgins & Co. are in great form, I believe, but, of course, the School House is going to win."

"Oh, of course!" said Talbot. "You know my uncle, Colonel Lyndon, is coming down to St. Jim's on Saturday. I think I told you?"

"Yes, I remember. But the jolly old colonel won't mind your playing, surely? Isn't he rather keen on games? He won't want you to chuck a football match just to talk to him."

"Oh, no! I don't want to cut the match," said Talbot. "It isn't that, at all, Tom."

"Good! If it's not that, go ahead," said Tom Merry, smiling. "Anything else I agree to in advance."

"I won't hold you to that, though I'd like to," said Talbot. "The fact is, I want to ask you to give my cousin a chance, if you can."

"Your cousin?" repeated Tom.

"Crooke, you know."

"Oh, Crooke! Blessed if I ever think of him as your cousin," said Tom. "Of course, he is so. I know that. But are you joking, Talbot? Crooke would be a passenger in a House team—no good at all. I shouldn't care to play him in a practice match with the Third, really."

Manners looked curiously at Talbot. It was no affair of his, and he made no remark, but his expression indicated plainly enough what he thought of Gerald Crooke's quality as a candidate for a House football team.

Talbot coloured a little.

"I understand that he's taking up footer, and he's willing to put in regular practice this week, Tom," he said. "I'd do my hardest to get him into form for the match."

Tom Merry smiled as he regarded Talbot of the Shell.

"Talbot, old man, if you recommended a man to me, as a player, I'd doubt my own judgment if it disagreed with yours," he said. "But you're not recommending Crooke as a man likely to help us beat the New House, are you?"

Talbot coloured more deeply, and was silent.

"Has he asked you to put in a word for him?"

"Well, yes."

"I thought so. I can't say I'm keen on obliging Crooke, but I'd oblige you if I could," said Tom. "But there's nothing doing."

"I should jolly well think not," said Manners. "Why, Tom's leaving me out. He thinks he's got better men. But there would be a row in this study if he put in a dud like Crooke, and left me out."

Talbot did not speak, he sat in great discomfort. He wanted very much to serve Crooke if he could. He felt that it would help to bridge over the gulf of repugnance between them. He knew how old Colonel Lyndon would have liked to see Crooke turning out a more manly fellow, and he was very keen on pleasing his uncle. But he realised very clearly that he was asking more now than the football captain could grant.

"It's too thick," said Tom, rather warmly. "Crooke had no right to ask you to speak for him. And, dash it all, Talbot, the fellow's no friend of yours, though he's your cousin."

"I'd like to make a friend of him, if I could," said Talbot.

"I—I can't say Crooke's the man you want to help you win. But I'm sure I could help him into something like form, and he's keen enough, for the present, at least. And—and I'd like my uncle to see him playing for the House on Saturday. Crooke wants to play up while the colonel is here, if you give him a chance."

"Is he going to stick the colonel for a tip?" asked Manners caustically.

Tom Merry laughed. He was not a suspicious fellow, but he could not help thinking that Manners had hit the nail on the head.

Talbot's colour deepened still more.

"Really, Talbot, old man," said Tom, "it's too thick. House matches can't be fooled with like this. Look here, if you tell me that you think Crooke is well worth a place in the team I'll take your word for it."

"Of course, I can't tell you that," said Talbot.

"Of course you can't!" said Tom. "But if you can't, old man, how the merry dickens can you ask me to play him?"

Talbot looked deeply troubled, but he did not reply.

"Mind, I'd stretch a point, if I could," said Tom. "You know there's no fellow I'd rather oblige than you, Talbot, and Crooke jolly well knows it, too; that's why he's pulling your leg. If he'd put in some weeks at games practice—But dash it all, only last Wednesday he got out of gates, and was lined for cutting practice. It's sheer neck to ask for a place in the House team a few days after that. I told him so when he asked me."

"I know you're right," said Talbot. "You can't do it—it's not reasonable. I oughtn't to have asked. But—well, that's all."

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He broke off uncomfortably.

Before Tom could speak again there was a sudden crash at the door of the study. The door flew open, and Crooke of the Shell rolled in headlong, and Monty Lowther followed him in, grinning. Crooke sprawled on the study carpet and roared.

CHAPTER 3.

Crooke Asks For It!

TALBOT sprang to his feet.

"What—"

"What the thump—" exclaimed Manners.

Tom Merry stared at the sprawling Crooke, and then at Monty Lowther. Lowther had a parcel under his arm, which looked as if his mission had been successful, and Dame Taggles had listened to the voice of the charmer. He was grinning cheerily.

"Oh!" gasped Crooke, sitting up breathlessly. "Ow! You rotter—"

Lowther chuckled.

"You fellows been confabbing about something private?" he asked.

"No. What—"

"Whatever it was, Crooke knows all about it," grinned Lowther. "I found him at the study door as I came back. He was so busy with his keyhole stunt that he didn't see me coming."

"Oh!"

Crooke, panting for breath, flushed crimson under the glances of scorn that were turned on him.

"So I trod up quite softly and gave him a sudden hoist," grinned Lowther.

"So you were listening at the door, Crooke?" said Tom Merry with a curl of the lip.

Manners shrugged his shoulders contemptuously. Talbot was silent, and his glance avoided Crooke.

The cad of the Shell picked himself up with a look of hatred at Monty Lowther. Without a word he stalked out of the study.

Monty Lowther closed the door after him.

"You're staying to supper, Talbot?" he said. "There's going to be sosses and chips. Trot out the frying-pan, Manners."

"I—I think I—I'll be going!"

"You won't!" said Lowther. "Sit down, supper won't be long. I say, you're not stuffy because I hoisted Crooke, are you? Blessed if I remembered that he was a relation of yours. You should bring up your cousins better, old man."

"No, no!" said Talbot with a faint smile. "I—I think Crooke was rather anxious to know the result of what I was asking Tom. I'm sure he wouldn't listen at a door as a rule."

"That's no excuse," snapped Manners.

"I—I know. But—"

"And what the thump were you asking Tom that Crooke was so keen to know about?" asked Lowther.

"Crooke wants a place in the House team for Saturday," said Tom. "He's got Talbot to put in a word for him."

Sniff from Lowther.

"You're an ass, Talbot."

"Thanks."

"Not at all—you're welcome to my opinion. There would be a row if Tom played a fumbling slacker like Crooke in a House match, I can tell you," said Monty Lowther warmly. "Might as well play Grundy—he's keen, at least, and not much worse than Crooke. Wash it out!"

"Well, it's washed out now," said Talbot. "Let it drop."

"I'd do anything I could, old chap," said Tom Merry, with some compunction. "But—"

"I know you would, old fellow. It's all right. Can I help with the cookery?" asked Talbot, evidently anxious to get off the subject, now that it was clear that there was "nothing doing."

"The cookery, dear man, is in my own fair hands," said Monty Lowther. "But you can help lay the table. The salt's in the inkpot on the shelf—the cloth is in the book-case—and the pepper is where one of those silly asses put it—goodness' knows where. Pile in."

Talbot smiled and piled in. There was soon a cheery fragrance of cooking in Study No. 10; and the four Shell fellows sat down to supper when all was ready.

It was a cheerful supper-party; though Talbot was rather thoughtful. He was in no hurry to see Crooke and tell him of the result of his application to the junior football captain. Crooke had already heard the result at the key-hole.

That incident had had a depressing effect on Talbot; it always seemed inevitable that, when he renewed his hope of getting on better terms with his cousin, some act of baseness on Crooke's part would occur to prove that friendship between them was impossible.



"You rotter, Talbot!" sneered Crooke. He caught Tom Merry's eye turned upon him, and raised his voice. "Don't talk to me—you outsider—you outcast—cracksman and thief not so very long ago, and very likely the same still, for all I know!" There was a sudden hush in the room. Every ear had heard—and all eyes were upon the cousins. Tom Merry's face was flaming. (See page 8.)

And yet Talbot repeated to himself that he had no right to judge Crooke, or indeed anyone.

His own past, though almost forgotten by the St. Jim's fellows who knew anything about it, was not forgotten in his own mind. Crooke's talk that evening had freshened the remembrance that was growing dim. What right had he, the fellow who had fallen among thieves in childhood, who had once been known as the Toff, the prince of cracksmen, to sit in judgment on anybody? Talbot of the Shell, one of the most popular fellows at St. Jim's, was also one of the humblest, in his judgment of himself.

Talbot forced himself to cheerfulness; but Tom Merry noted the expression in his eyes—the subdued black look that Tom had often seen there before, though seldom of late. He knew that the past was in Talbot's mind again—the past with its undying shame; and he could guess that it was Crooke who had revived the thought of it. Tom's feelings towards Gerald Crooke were not pleasant just then.

But supper in Study No. 10 finished cheerfully enough; and the four Shell fellows went downstairs together, to join the other fellows in the junior Common-rooms for a chat before dormitory.

Crooke was in the room when the chums of the Shell arrived there, talking to Aubrey Racke in a corner.

He glanced round as the four came in.

Blake & Co., of Study No. 6, in the Fourth, were there also. They were keenly discussing the coming House match. It was Blake's opinion that the team on Saturday would not be complete without all four members of Study No. 6 in it—an opinion in which his comrades heartily concurred. But Tom Merry did not see eye to eye with Jack Blake on that point—whence arose many arguments. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the graceful ornament of Study No. 6, came sailing over to the Shell fellows as they came into the Common-room.

"About the match on Satahday, Tom Mewwy," he said.

"Yes—what about it?" asked Tom cheerily.

"I twust my name is goin' down."

"Your trust is well-founded," said Tom Merry gravely.

"It's going down. I hope you won't go down, too, when the New House get going."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Blake, too," said Tom; "and we shall want Herries in goal."

"What about Dig?" asked Arthur Augustus.

"I'm saving up Dig for a rainy day," said Tom.

"Weally, you know—"

"Well, I think—" began Jack Blake, while Robert Arthur Digby grunted.

"You do?" ejaculated Lowther, with an air of surprise.

"Yes," roared Blake, "I think—"

"Oyez! Oyez! Oyez!" shouted Lowther, with a shout that made every fellow in the Common-room glance round. "Blake thinks! At least, he says he does! Gentlemen, the question now arises, what does Blake do it with—the usual apparatus, in his case, being absent?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You silly ass!" bawled Blake.

"Weally, Lowthah, you funnay idiot—"

Crooke of the Shell left Racke, and came over to Talbot, who moved away from his friends, as they entered into a more or less serious dispute with Study No. 6.

Talbot was not feeling in a mood for rough-and-ready badinage. Neither was he in a mood for a talk with Crooke, for that matter; but he had no choice on that point. As he moved rather restlessly into the big window recess Gerald Crooke followed him there. He had to speak to Talbot, and he did not want the other fellows to hear.

"Well?" he said questioningly.

"I've done all I can," said Talbot. "But—you know already, Crooke—you heard what was said in Tom Merry's study."

Crooke had the grace to blush.

"I wanted to know," he muttered. "This is jolly

important to me. I've been getting a ragging from my father for not getting on better with old Lyndon—and the mater has been at me, too—she thinks a lot of old Lyndon, as he's her brother. There's one way I can get into his good books—he thinks a fellow ought to slave at games. But, of course, it mayn't suit you for me to get into his good graces," added Crooke, with a sneer. "It may make a difference in his will."

Talbot's eyes gleamed.

"You know I've never given my uncle's money a thought, Crooke," he said.

"I don't know anything of the kind—I know I've thought about it a good bit myself," said Crooke coolly. "But if that doesn't worry you, all the more reason why you should help me on a bit. It would make a lot of difference if the colonel found me playing for the House—it would be a big surprise for him, and he'd talk about me a bit differently next time he sees my people—and it might be worth a tenner to me as a tip on Saturday. He shells out all right when he's stroked the right way."

Talbot made a gesture of distaste.

"It won't make any difference to you if he stands me a tenner," said Crooke sullenly. "It won't come out of your pocket. You'll get your whack just the same, whether he shells out to me or not. You needn't worry."

"Do you think I'm thinking of that?" said Talbot, unable to conceal his scorn.

"Well, if you're not, help me on as I've asked you."

"You heard what was said—I said all I could. You should have taken this up before, Crooke—it's too late now. If you play up in practice, and give up slacking, you'll have a chance later. But this week the thing's not possible."

"It's only this week that I want it."

"Well, Tom Merry's captain—and you heard what he said."

"Yes, I heard," said Crooke. "I heard him say that he'd agree in advance to anything you asked."

"He didn't know then—"

"That makes no difference—you could hold him to that."

Talbot compressed his lips, and did not speak.

"And he said he'd play me, if you recommended me as a man good for the place," said Crooke.

"I couldn't do that, could I?"

"Yes, you could—we're relations, and you could stretch a point. Take him at his word, and he can't refuse to play me," said Crooke.

"It's impossible."

"You won't do it?"

"I can't."

"You mean that you won't?"

"Well, won't, then, if you prefer it that way," broke out Talbot impatiently. "Let the matter drop!"

Gerald Crooke gave him a bitter, evil look. He had counted on success as a certainty, when he had enlisted Talbot of the Shell on his side. His disappointment was bitter.

"You never meant to help me," he muttered. "You were

fooling me all along. You want to keep me in old Lyndon's bad books—you've got an eye on his money. You pushin' rotter, the money would have been all mine some day, if you hadn't turned up from nowhere, and humbugged the old fool into takin' you up."

"That's enough, Crooke," said Talbot, in a choking voice. "The less we talk together the better."

He turned away.

But Crooke, in his angry bitterness and disappointment, was not satisfied. His whole scheme had fallen to the ground, and he chose to lay the blame of failure upon his cousin.

"You rotter!" he exclaimed, in a voice that was heard by a good many fellows in the room. "You could have done it for me if you'd liked. Why couldn't you refuse at once, instead of drawing me on? You wanted to make me beg favours of you—you, a fellow that a decent chap wouldn't speak to, except out of kindness."

"You'd better shut up, Crooke!" muttered Talbot, his face crimson.

"I'll please myself about that!" sneered Crooke. He caught Tom Merry's eye turning upon them, and raised his voice. In his bitterness and savage anger he did not care what he said. He was glad that Tom should hear the insults that were thick on his evil tongue. "Don't talk to me, you outsider, you outcast, cracksmen and thief not so very long ago, and very likely the same still, for all I know!"

There was a sudden hush in the room.

Every ear had heard, and all eyes were upon the cousins. Tom Merry's face was flaming.

Talbot's hand clenched hard, his eyes burned at Crooke. But he did not raise his hand. With a white face, he turned away quietly and walked out of the Common-room.

Crooke broke into a mocking, insulting laugh. The next moment his laugh changed to a yell of rage and pain as Tom Merry's hand struck him across the face.

CHAPTER 4.

Thrashed!

TOM MERRY'S eyes blazed at the cad of the Shell as he reeled back from that sudden smack.

"You rotter!" he shouted.

Crooke spluttered.

"Bai Jove! You insultin' cad, Crooke!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "You f'rightful outsidah!"

"I—I—I—" spluttered Crooke furiously. "Hands off, Tom Merry, you rotter! Hands off, I say!"

Tom Merry advanced on Crooke as he retreated.

"Put up your hands, you cur!" he shouted.

"I tell you—"

"Oh, draw it mild, Tom Merry!" exclaimed Aubrey Racke. "It's for Talbot to play up if he doesn't like what Crooke said to him."

Tom Merry did not heed.

Talbot's patience under Crooke's bitter insult would have

led most of the fellows to suspect funk had they not known Talbot's qualities as a fighting man, and had it not been obvious that the sturdy Shell fellow could have knocked out Crooke with perfect ease. It was haunting conscience, black remembrance of the past, that made the one-time Toff so strangely patient. But if Talbot cared to let the insult pass unpunished, Tom Merry did not. It was but seldom that Tom Merry, the best-tempered fellow at St. Jim's, lost control of his temper, but his face was scarlet with rage now.

"Put your hands up, you cur!" he repeated. "By Jove, I'll knock you flying if you don't put up your hands!"

"I'll answer to Talbot, not to you!" muttered Crooke, with a livid face.

"Because you know Talbot won't touch you. You counted on that!" said Tom between his teeth. "Will you put up your hands?"

"No, I won't!" hissed Crooke.

"Perhaps that will make you!" Smack!

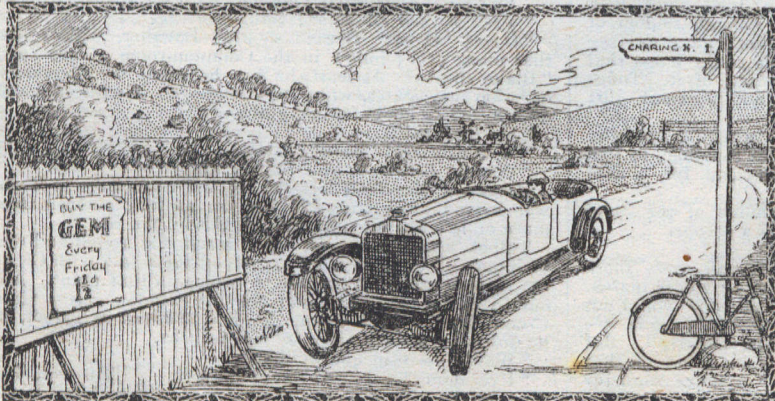
Crooke staggered again under the impact of an open hand across his face.

That was too much, even for Crooke. He had little courage,

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but he was not quite a coward; and he well knew that he could never hold up his head in the school again if he allowed that to pass unresented.

His hands came up slowly and reluctantly.

"Go on, Tommay!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus. "Give the feahful wottah a feahful thwashin', deah boy!"

"I'm going to!" said Tom grimly. "The cur has got to learn to keep his tongue between his teeth!"

"Yaas, wathah!"
"A ring!" shouted Grundy of the Shell. "Shut the door, somebody. We don't want Kildare in here now!"

The door slammed. There was a buzzing, excited ring of juniors round Tom Merry and Crooke almost in a moment.

In the centre of the ring Crooke stood up to the captain of the Shell with a furious face but a sinking heart.

But he was "for it" now. He had to fight. There was a thrashing for him in any case, and ever Crooke preferred to take it fighting.

He was a slacker, and slacking and smoking had made him weedy and puffy. But in build he was a bigger fellow than Tom Merry, and once his courage was screwed up to the sticking-point he had a chance.

He faced the captain of the Shell doggedly.

Grundy took out his watch. "Two-minute rounds, one-minute rests," he said. "Go it!"

"Give the rotter beans!" growled Kangaroo of the Shell. "Go it, Crooke!" called out Racke; but Aubrey Racke's was the only voice that gave encouragement to Crooke. The feeling of the whole crowd of St. Jim's fellows was against him.

Tom Merry, with a set and savage face—a face so savage that his chums hardly knew it—attacked putly.

Crooke put up a fight that was unexpectedly good. He was feeling bitter and savage and evil, in more of a fighting mood than he often found himself, and he was encouraged by finding that he was able, at least, to stand up to Tom Merry's attack.

In his anger, Tom attacked hotly and incautiously, and Crooke succeeded in getting home a blow that sent him staggering back. With gleaming eyes, Crooke followed it up, driving in right and left on Tom's flushed face, and almost sending him to the floor. There was a murmur among the onlookers.

But Tom recovered himself. For the rest of the round he was stalling off Crooke, and the call of time came as a relief to him.

But at "time" again, Tom Merry came on hotly, though more carefully. Crooke, hoping for a repetition of his success, met him half-way, fighting hard. But he was driven round the ring under a shower of blows, and he finished the round on his back.

"All sewene, deah boys!" Arthur Augustus sagely informed his chums. "Tommy is goin' to knock him out all right!"

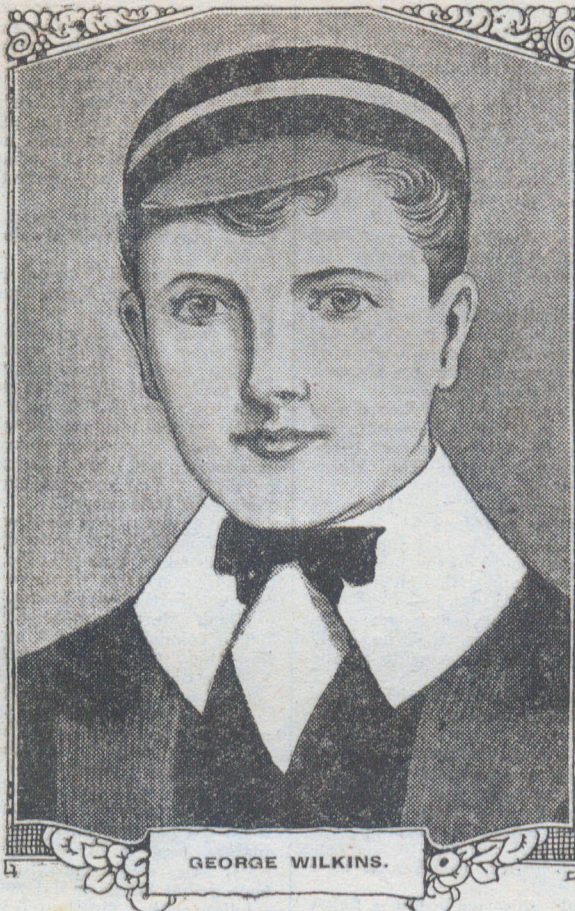
"Crooke's got some stuff in him, though," remarked Cardew of the Fourth. "More than I ever suspected, by gad! He's got a chance, if he's got the courage to stand up to it."

"He hasn't," said Levison.

"Well, he's goin' strong at present."

Crooke was fighting desperately in the third round. He had almost forgotten, in his excitement and fury, that he was afraid, and he longed with intense bitterness to beat Tom Merry. In the third round it was, as Ralph Reckness Cardew critically remarked, anybody's game.

A FAITHFUL HENCHMAN OF G. A. GRUNDY.



GEORGE WILKINS.

Shares Study No. 3 in the Shell passage with George Alfred Grundy and William Cuthbert Gunn. Wilkins is a real good fellow in his way, although Grundy treats him with a superior air of patronage. The great George Alfred is allowed to have his head in this respect as he keeps the study cupboard so well laden with good things. Wilkins is a steady worker, a good scholar, and a very fair sportsman. The names of Grundy, Wilkins, and Gunn invariably occur together.

But in the fourth round fitness told. Crooke had bellows to mend, and Tom, in spite of some hard handling, was as fresh as paint. And he was cooler now, and coolness served him well. Crooke was driven round the ring, and knocked right and left, and went down once more.

"Time!"
Gerald Crooke did not rise to the call of time. He had no fifth round left in him.

He lay on the floor, where he had fallen, with black rage and bitterness in his damaged face. One of his eyes was shut, and blackening; his nose was swollen and streaming red. He panted, and panted, and panted for breath.

"Time!" repeated Grundy.

"I'm done!" snarled Crooke.

"Rot! You're not done yet! Get up and let Tom Merry colour your other eye!"

snapped Grundy.

"Hang you, I'm done!"
Tom Merry stepped back.

"If you're done, Crooke, I'm done," he said. "But another word like those you spoke to Talbot, and you've got another fight on your hands the same minute! Keep that in mind."

"Hang you!" panted Crooke.

The door opened.

"Cave!" sang out Julian of the Fourth. "Prefect!"

Kildare of the Sixth came in. It was half-past nine—bed-time for the Shell and the Fourth.

"Now, then—" began the captain of St. Jim's.

Then his eyes turned on the combatants.

"You young rascals—fighting here! And without gloves, too! Tom Merry, you know better than this!"

Racke helped Crooke to his feet. His aspect, as he stood leaning breathlessly on Aubrey Racke, was rather startling. Seldom or never had Crooke received so severe a thrashing, and it was likely to be a long time before he lost the signs of it.

Kildare eyed him.

"I think you've got enough, Crooke," he said. Then he fixed his eyes grimly on Tom Merry. "You'll take five hundred lines, Merry."

"Very well, Kildare," said Tom quietly.

"Now clear off to dorm."

Crooke bathed his face in the Shell dormitory before turning in. But when he lay in bed, aching from his exertions, sick from the reaction, he could not sleep. He knew that Tom Merry was sleeping soundly enough, and the knowledge added to his bitterness. He knew, too, that his face would be marked for a long time—that he would have a black eye to show to his uncle on Saturday—that he would be feeling sick and seedy for days. Every evil feeling ran riot in Gerald Crooke's breast as he lay sleepless, turning from side to side in ceaseless discomfort—and his thoughts concentrated on vengeance.

CHAPTER 5.

The House Match.

COLONEL LYNDON stepped from his car, at the School House, on Saturday afternoon—a tall, soldierly figure, with brown, rather gaunt and grim, yet not unkindly face. From a window in the House above two furtive eyes were on the colonel's massive form—Crooke was watching him from the window of the Shell passage.

Black and bitter was Crooke's expression as he looked down. Five or six Shell fellows, with coats and mufflers over their football garb, had gone out of the changing-room door, and the colonel stopped to speak to them before entering the House. Among them was Talbot of the Shell.

Crooke's bitter, jealous eyes noted the light that came into the old soldier's brown, grim face as he greeted his nephew. Why did the old fool like Talbot so much, Crooke wondered. Crooke had never supposed him to be an affectionate man—he did not look it. Certainly he had never seemed to overflow with affection for Crooke himself.

The cad of the Shell did not realise how a manly, straight nature appealed to another of the same sort—how the colonel, greatly as he would have liked to care for his sister's son, had an inward repugnance to Crooke's mean and tortuous nature, an instinctive rather than a reflected knowledge of the black sheep's low nature and base thoughts.

Considering the kind of fellow Crooke was, and the colonel's keen insight into his character, the old soldier was tolerant enough to him—more tolerant than he would have been but for the claim of blood.

Tom Merry was among the footballers, and Crooke noted how Colonel Lyndon shook hands with the captain of the Shell, with a kind smile. Even for Tom, no connection of his at all, he seemed to have more regard than for his own flesh and blood—in the person of Gerald Crooke.

Crooke passed a hand over his swollen and blackened eye. He owed that to Tom Merry—and Tom's friendship for Talbot. At that moment Crooke felt that he almost hated his uncle, and quite hated his cousin; but for Tom Merry his feeling was much more vindictive.

In spite of his bitter words and insults, Crooke knew, at the bottom of his heart, that Talbot had done his best for him in the matter of the House match. He had done more than any of Crooke's own friends would have thought of doing. Somehow he could not hate Talbot, though he tried to think that he did; somehow he could not help feeling a grudging admiration for the grave, quiet junior, grave beyond his years. He even felt, sometimes, that he could have liked Talbot, had not their ways been wide as the poles asunder.

But no such compunction entered his heart with regard to Tom Merry. His hatred for the captain of the Shell was pure and undiluted.

Tom Merry was keeping him out of the match on which his heart had been set and on which so much depended for him. Tom had refused even to gratify his own chum when he asked such a favour for Crooke. Tom had taken up the quarrel which Talbot had refused to take up, and resented the insults which Talbot had suffered in silence—insults which Crooke, to do him justice, would soon have regretted uttering.

Tom Merry had marked him like this—made him a figure of derision; made him ashamed to meet his uncle in the open quad. Upon Tom's head all Crooke's bitterness and evil were concentrated—his resentment towards his uncle, his bitterness towards his cousin—his anger and evil and discontent generally—all had found a scapegoat in the captain of the Shell.

At this time there was very little that Crooke would have stopped at to compass vengeance upon the fellow whom he chose to pick out as his special enemy. For days and days, since the fight in the Common-room, Crooke had brooded on vengeance, half formed plans and schemes flitting through his mind, to be abandoned one after another but not quite forgotten.

He watched the colonel chatting with the footballers, the grim old face relaxed and kindly. Then Tom Merry & Co. walked away towards the football ground—it was close on time for kick-off. Colonel Lyndon entered the House and disappeared from sight.

Crooke lounged away to his own study in the Shell passage.

He expected his uncle to see him while he was there; though, in his bitterness, he would not have been surprised had the colonel forgotten his existence. He was sure that 'old Lyndon' would make it a point to witness the House match, or part of it; he would not miss seeing Talbot play for his House. He might have seen Crooke play for his House, too, but for Tom Merry. Crooke gritted his teeth at that thought. Now he was to figure in his stern old uncle's eyes as a slacker and shirker, as usual, and it was not his fault this time!

Crooke loafed at his study window. Racke, his study-mate was out—occupied on the half-holiday on one of his customary shady expeditions. From the study window Crooke had a partial view of the playing-fields. On Big Side Kildare and his men were playing a match with a senior team from Rylcombe Grammar School, and the game had already started. On Little Side the School House junior footballers had gathered with Tom Merry; and the New House men, with George Figgins of the Fourth. Crooke, with a scowling brow, saw the ball kicked off, and idly watched the progress of the game, wondering when—and whether—he would see his uncle.

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With his black eye, Crooke disliked appearing in public, and he had skulked in private as much as possible for some days. He disliked intensely letting his uncle see that eye; but that could not be helped. Not that the colonel was likely to censure him for a schoolboy fight—he was more likely to be surprised to find that Crooke had had the courage to enter into a hard contest. But Crooke had been licked—he knew that the colonel would know that he had been licked, and he could not pretend anything else. And he knew that that was what his uncle would expect to be the outcome of any contest in which his nephew Gerald engaged.

There was a heavy tread in the Shell passage presently and a knock at the study door. It opened to admit Colonel Lyndon.

Crooke stepped forward to meet his uncle.

Colonel Lyndon shook hands with him cordially enough, his keen eye resting on the signs of damage on Crooke's puffy face. He smiled slightly.

"You've been in the wars, Gerald."

"Yes, uncle." Crooke flushed red, his heart beating.

If the colonel discovered the cause of the fight—and either Tom Merry or Talbot could have told him—

The colonel's expression was quite genial.

"I don't approve of quarrelling and fighting, Gerald, as you know; but I like a lad to be able to take his own part," he said. "You seem to have been through it, my boy. I hope in a good cause."

"Oh, just a row in the Common-room, uncle," said Crooke uncomfortably. "Fellows do row, you know."

"I know," assented the colonel. "Tell me about it, Gerald." He sat down in Racke's armchair. "I've not seen you in the wars before. Who was the victim?"

"Tom Merry," muttered Crooke unwillingly.

The colonel raised his eyebrows. He did not need telling, then, that Crooke had been the party to blame. Neither did he need telling that Crooke had been licked.

He dropped the subject at once.

"I suppose that is why you did not come down to meet me," he said, referring to the black eye. "Well, well, never mind. I'm going to see the game the young fellows are playing, and I thought of asking you to walk down to Little Side with me, Gerald. You can watch a game if you cannot play it!" There was an unconscious tinge of scorn in the words. "But I take it that you are not anxious to show off that eye in public."

"It looks rotten enough," muttered Crooke, with a bitter feeling that his uncle did not want to walk in the quad with a fellow with a discoloured eye.

The colonel rose from the armchair again.

"Well, I must not miss the match," he said. "I half-hoped to hear that you were playing, Gerald, when I heard that there was a match on to-day. But I suppose it is not in your line."

"I've tried to get into the team," muttered Crooke. "Tom Merry keeps the places for his friends."

"That's nonsense!" said Colonel Lyndon brusquely.

"Merry is not the fellow to keep out a good man—and I'm afraid you've never tried to be a good man at games, Gerald. That would not matter so much, if you were trying to be good in class; but, from what I hear from your Form master, that is not the case, either."

Crooke gave a sort of wriggle; he was prepared for the usual lecture on his shortcomings.

"But we won't go into this," said the colonel, rather unexpectedly. "I've talked to you about it often enough, and I'm your uncle, not your father; and probably you think it's no business of mine."

"That's what we had the row about," said Crooke. "I thought it was unfair to keep me out of the footer—"

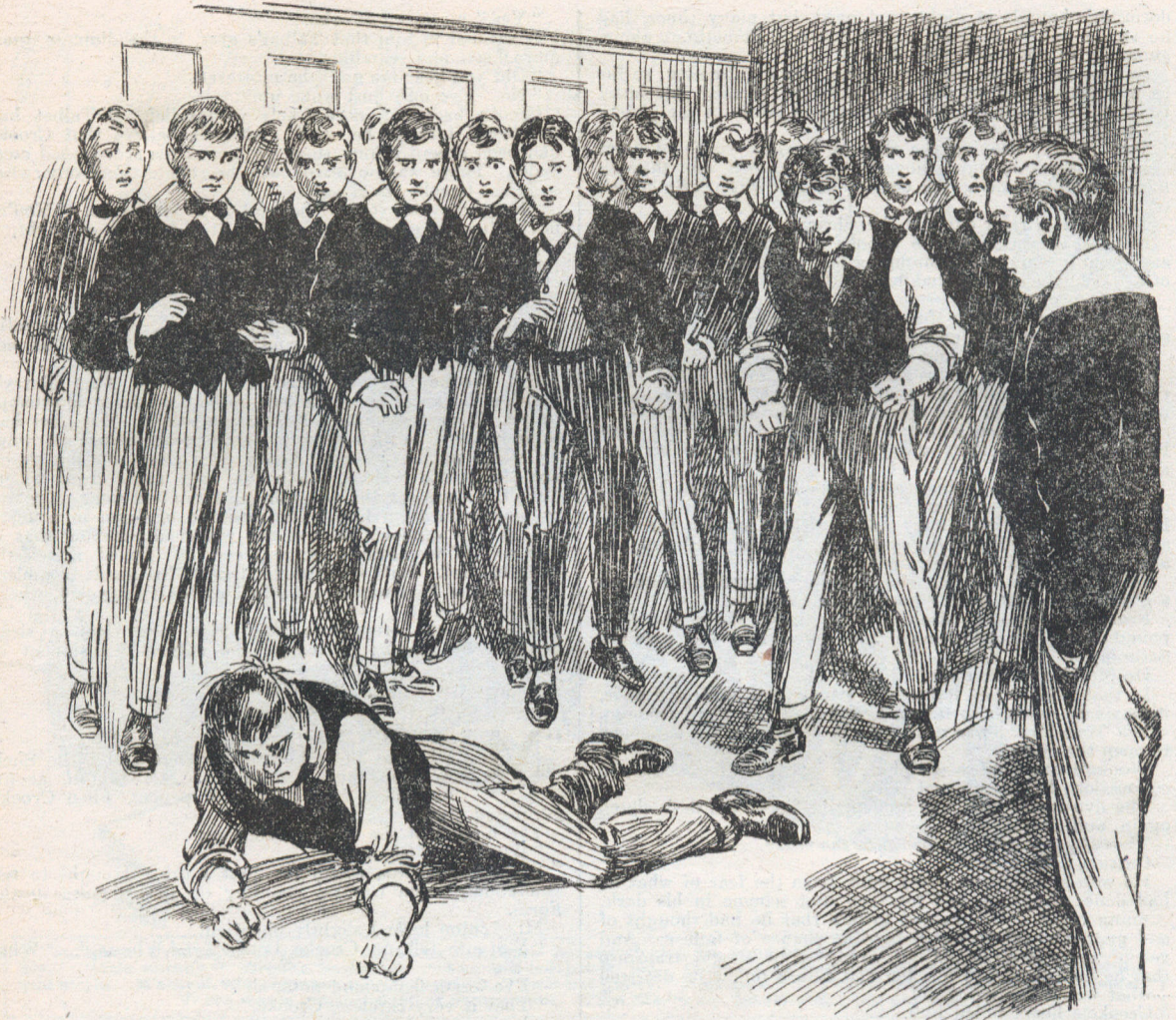
"Well, at least, you must have shown some pluck to stand up to a lad like Merry, right or wrong," said Colonel Lyndon. "I'm glad of that. I'd rather see you friends with him—he is the kind of lad whose friendship would do you good, Gerald, if you could only see it. But pluck is pluck, even in the wrong place. Good-bye, Gerald! I shall have to catch my train immediately after the football match!"

Colonel Lyndon shook hands with his nephew again, and, to Crooke's surprise, left a five-pound note in his hand. Then he left the study.

Crooke closed the door and scowled.

He had been "tipped" after all, and tipped generously. He wondered whether it was because the colonel intended to "tip" his other nephew, and did not care to fail in impartiality between the two. He wondered, too, whether it was the fact that he had had courage enough to "stand up" to Tom Merry that had softened the colonel a little.

He crumpled the five-pound note in his hand. It was little enough, after all, from a rich uncle; and it would have been a tenner, at least, he considered, had the colonel been gratified by finding him playing for his House.



Gerald Crooke did not rise to the call of time. He lay on the floor, where he had fallen, with black rage and bitterness in his damaged face. "I'm done!" he snarled. "Rot! You're not done yet!" snapped Grundy. "Get up and let Tom Merry colour your other eye!" Tom Merry stepped back. "If you're done, Crooke, I'm done," he said. "But be careful what you say to Talbot in future!" (See page 9.)

There was little of gratitude in Gerald Crooke's composition. He shoved the five-pound note into his purse with a scowl. His uncle had spent five minutes in the study—not that Crooke desired him to stay any longer. He was going to stand for an hour watching the junior football match—because Talbot was playing. Crooke lounged to the window again. He saw the colonel walk down to Little Side with Mr. Railton, the Housemaster of the School House. The two gentlemen—old comrades-in-arms in the War—stood together for some time, watching the game, and then Mr. Railton returned to the House.

But the colonel still stood there, his keen eyes on the game, and more than once he joined in the cheering. He stayed there, a tireless figure of bronze, till the final whistle went, and the footballers trooped off the field—School House the winners by two goals to one—a goal each to Tom Merry and Talbot. Crooke, savage and malicious at his study window, watched Talbot walk with the colonel to his car—watched the warm handshake with which they parted; and the car rolled away, the colonel apparently forgetful of the fact that he had another nephew at St. Jiji's.

It would have been very different had Crooke been able, like Talbot, to throw a coat over his footer shirt and shorts after a football match, and walk from the field with his uncle. Very different—but for Tom Merry. Crooke passed his hand over his discoloured eye, and gritted his teeth. How he hated that fellow, with his careless ways, his sunny smile, his easy popularity—the fellow who had knocked him out, and whom he could not touch. But perhaps there were ways—ways and means—

In Tom Merry's study a cheery crowd of footballers celebrated their victory in the House match; while Crooke of the Shell, in his dark and malicious mind, revolved schemes of underhand vengeance.

CHAPTER 6.

Like a Thief in the Night!

"YOU fellows asleep?" It was a whispering voice in the Shell dormitory. Crooke was sitting up in bed, peering to and fro in the shadows. It was several days since the House match, and Crooke's eye was resuming its normal hue; but his feelings had undergone no change. During those days he had made it a point to resume his old footing of civility with his cousin, Talbot of the Shell—and Talbot had been willing to forget offences, and let him have his way. To Tom Merry he had spoken no word—but he had never at any time had much to do with the captain of the Shell, and Tom had almost forgotten the fight in the Common-room. Win or lose, Tom was not the fellow to bear malice after a fair fight, and it did not even occur to his mind that Crooke nourished a deep and undying grudge. Still less would he have suspected the black sheep of the Shell of scheming vengeance. Of his sullen, secret schemes, Crooke was careful to utter no word, even to his chum, Aubrey Ræcke, who would have sympathised. In the tortuous plotting which now engaged Crooke's whole thoughts he realised that he could not be too secret.

No answer came to his whisper in the sleeping dormitory. It was past midnight, and the Shell were fast asleep.

Crooke slipped silently from his bed. In the darkness he half-dressed himself, and put on a pair of rubber shoes that had been placed under his bed in readiness.

Had any Shell fellow awakened, and discovered him, it would have caused no surprise. Crooke was one of the few fellows in the Shell who considered it sporting to break

dormitory bounds at night; not once, but many times, had he stolen out of bounds after lights out, sometimes alone, generally in company with Racke.

But no one awakened. Crooke finished his dressing, so far as it went, and stood for some minutes listening, his heart beating fast and thick, his face strangely white in the gloom. He stirred at last.

Tom Merry, sleeping the sleep of healthy youth, did not stir, as a shadowy figure hovered near his bed, and thievish hands fumbled among the clothes he had left neatly folded on a chair.

There was a faint clink in the silence.

Faint as it was, it made Crooke start with guilty terror and stand listening with thumping heart—Tom Merry's bunch of keys clutched in his shaking hand.

But silence followed.

Crooke moved away from the door at last, opened it silently, and stole out of the Shell dormitory.

The House was dark and silent.

Silent as a spectre, in his rubber shoes, Crooke flitted along the passage, and softly descended the stairs. A few minutes more, and he was in Tom Merry's study, in the Shell passage.

Through the uncurtained window glimmered a soft starlight. There was light enough for Crooke to see his way about.

He closed the study door, and stopped before Tom Merry's desk, the old oaken desk, a present from Miss Priscilla Fawcett, which Tom Merry had searched in vain for cash a week before. Carefully, cautiously, Crooke tried one key after another, till the desk opened.

He lifted back the lid, and then he ventured to turn on a glimmer of light from a pocket electric-torch.

From his pocket he drew a crisp slip of paper—the five-pound note Colonel Lyndon had given him the previous Saturday.

He fumbled in the desk.

In that stack of old letters, old papers, and odds and ends, it was easy enough to find a hiding-place for the banknote, which Tom Merry was not likely to discover if he happened to open the desk.

Crooke's hands were shaking, his heart beating almost to suffocation; but he did not relent.

The five-pound note was hidden, the lid of the desk closed again, and locked.

Then the rascal of the Shell left the study.

Outside he paused.

He was trembling in every limb, from the fear of what he had done. Long he had revolved that scheme in his dark, cunning mind, till it seemed to him that he had thought of and guarded against, every possible chance of failure. And yet—if something should go wrong—if it should transpire that he had plotted to blacken and ruin a fellow he detested—what would happen then?

Crooke's heart failed him.

Perhaps he was not, at heart, so great a villain as he believed himself—as hatred, and envy, and bitter resentment had made him, for the time being. His hand was on the study door again.

Again he paused. Long minutes elapsed while he stood hesitating. Then, suddenly from the darkness below, came the sound of a closing door. Someone was still up—some master who had not yet gone to bed. That slight sound brought to Crooke's terrified mind the possibility of discovery, and he fled through the darkness for the dormitory staircase. The die was cast now.

He reached the Shell dormitory, and entered, in his haste closing the door with a slight sound. Trembling, he groped towards his bed.

"What's that?"

Crooke halted, shaking from head to foot. It was Talbot's voice. Talbot of the Shell had awakened. Doubtless he was a light sleeper, accustomed to wake easily. From of old, the Toff had been trained to wariness. There had been a time when night had been as day to the prince of cracksmen. Crooke stood quite still, hoping that Talbot would take no further heed. But he heard the sound of someone sitting up in bed.

"Is that you, Crooke?"

Crooke muttered an imprecation. Was the fellow a cat, seeing in the dark? He hurried towards Talbot's bed.

"Yes. Quiet!"

He trembled under Talbot's grave, searching glance in the dim starlight from the high windows.

But Talbot could not suspect—he could not imagine why Crooke had left the dormitory. He could not know that he had been absent only a quarter of an hour. With that reflection Gerald Crooke regained his courage.

"Quiet!" he whispered. "You don't want to give me away. It's not the first time I've been to the Green Man at night. Nothing to be surprised about, and no bizney of yours."

"You've been to the Green Man?"

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 878.

"Yes," muttered Crooke.

It seemed to him that Talbot's eyes, in the dimness, grew more keen and searching.

"Did you hear me go?" he muttered.

"No. I've only just woke up."

Crooke breathed more freely with relief. If Talbot had not heard him go he would naturally believe that Crooke had been absent a long time, on one of his accustomed escapades. There was no reason why he should think otherwise, so far as Crooke could see.

"No bizney of yours," he said in a low voice. "You're not going to give me a lecture at this time of night, I suppose?"

"No!" said Talbot.

"Well, good-night, and keep quiet."

"Good-night!"

Talbot laid his head on the pillow again. Crooke, greatly relieved, stole to his bed and turned in. There had not been a sound from any other fellow in the Shell.

But Crooke had not turned in to sleep. Tom Merry's bunch of keys was in his pocket; he had not dared to attempt to get rid of them while Talbot was awake. But they had to be returned to their place in Tom's pocket before morning.

Crooke waited, his eyes heavy with sleep, but he dared not sleep. He waited, while the long night grew older. Talbot, he was certain, was asleep; there had come no sound or movement from him. The glimmer of dawn in a misty sky at the windows warned the wretched schemer that it was unsafe to hesitate longer, and he slipped noiselessly from his bed. Without a sound, though his hands trembled, the bunch of keys was thrust into Tom Merry's pocket, where he had found it.

Then Crooke crept into bed again, and slept—a sleep haunted by dreams of terror, the natural punishment of guilt.

CHAPTER 7.

Accused!

"MR. LINTON, may I speak to you, sir?"

It was the following afternoon, and the Shell were in their Form-room. Mr. Linton, at his high desk, was busy with papers, when Crooke addressed him.

The master of the Shell glanced up.

"What is it, Crooke?"

"Something's happened, sir, that I think I ought to tell you about," said Crooke, standing up in his place in the Form.

Mr. Linton looked slightly impatient.

"You may tell me, Crooke, but be brief," he said. "What is it?"

"I've lost a five-pound note, sir!"

"That is very careless, Crooke."

"I mean, it's been taken, sir!"

"What?"

Mr. Linton shot out that word like a bullet. Every eye in the Shell was turned on Gerald Crooke.

"Crooke, are you telling me that your banknote has been stolen?" exclaimed the master of the Shell sharply.

"Yes, sir."

"Nonsense!" snapped Mr. Linton.

"It's been taken, sir," said Crooke doggedly. "I thought I ought to tell you, sir. I can't afford to lose five pounds."

"There is no question of that, Crooke. Certainly you ought to tell me, if such a theft has occurred. But I cannot believe it. I should require the strongest evidence to make me believe that there is a thief in my Form, or in the school at all. Doubtless you have mislaid the banknote."

"I haven't, sir."

Mr. Linton laid down his papers. There was intense excitement in the Shell-room now.

"This matter must be gone into at once," said Mr. Linton. "I warn you, Crooke, that if you have made such a serious statement without adequate grounds you will be dealt with severely by the Head. In the first place, how did you come to have a five-pound note in your possession at all?"

"My uncle, Colonel Lyndon, gave it to me last Saturday, sir, when he came to see me."

"When did you miss it?"

"Just after dinner, sir. I had put it into my jacket-pocket this morning, intending to ask you to change it for me, sir. That was after third lesson. Between third lesson and dinner it was taken from my pocket."

"It is much more probable, Crooke, that you dropped it somewhere," snapped the master of the Shell.

"I couldn't have dropped it, sir. It was safe enough in my jacket-pocket. I know it was taken."

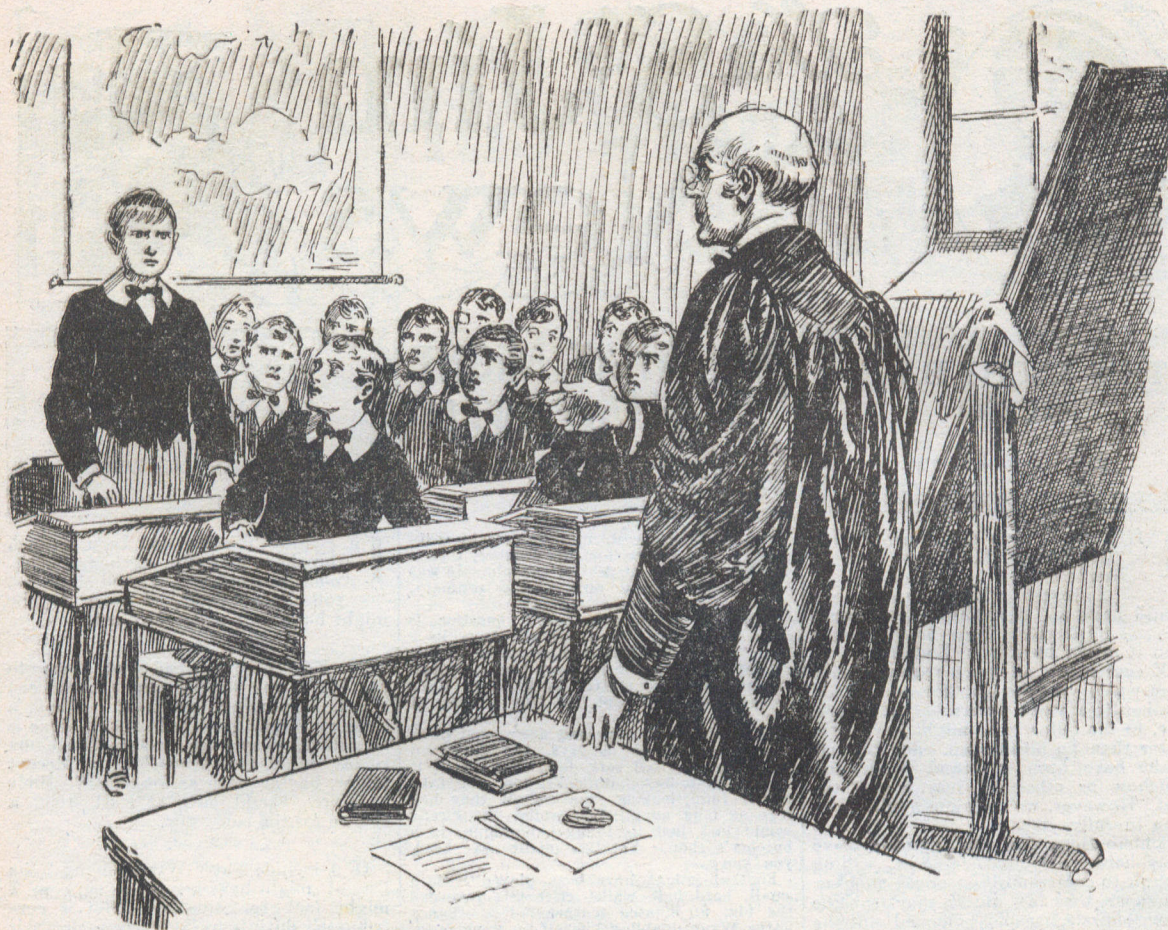
"You speak, Crooke, as if you suspected some individual person?"

"I do, sir!"

"His name?"

Crooke hesitated.

"I've got no proof, sir. Ought I to mention the name?"



"You speak, Crooke, as if you suspect some individual person of stealing your banknote," said Mr. Linton. "I do, sir." "His name?" Crooke hesitated. "I've got no proof, sir. Ought I to mention the name?" "Certainly you ought. A search will clear the boy you suspect, if he is not guilty. His name?" "Tom Merry, sir!" said Crooke. There was a general gasp of amazement. Tom Merry sat transfixed. (See this page.)

"Certainly you ought. No boy has been out of gates since third lesson, and the banknote, therefore, must be still in the school. A search undertaken at once will discover it. A search will clear the boy you suspect, if he is not guilty. His name?"

"Tom Merry, sir!"

Every fellow in the Shell jumped.

What name Crooke had been going to utter the Shell fellows could not guess, unless it was that of his own pal, Aubrey Racke, or Clampe, the only fellows in the Form who could possibly be suspected of dishonesty. The name of Tom Merry was a bombshell. There was a general gasp of amazement, and some of the Shell even laughed.

Tom Merry sat transfixed.

"Merry!" repeated Mr. Linton blankly. "Are you serious, Crooke? You suspect Tom Merry of taking your banknote?"

"Yes, sir!" said Crooke doggedly.

Tom Merry jumped up, his face in a flame.

"You lying rotter!" he shouted in a voice that rang far beyond the Shell Form room.

"Silence, Merry!" snapped Mr. Linton. "I, and everyone here, can take no heed of this ridiculous accusation. Your character is too well known for that. But the matter must be gone into, Crooke, be very careful what you say. For what reason do you suspect Merry?"

Crooke's face was pale, but hard. He was "for it" now, and he was going ahead with brazen hardihood.

"Just after third lesson, sir, I ran into Tom Merry in the passage by accident. He collared me and rolled me over in a very rough way. I thought at the time he was showing a lot of temper, on account of a trifling accident. But when I missed the banknote afterwards I knew that it must have been taken then."

"What do you say to this, Merry?"

Tom's eyes blazed.

"It's true that Crooke ran into me in the passage, sir, but it was no accident. He butted into me intentionally, and I shoved him off. Certainly I never touched his pockets, or anything in them."

"I am sure not, Merry. Crooke, your statement seems to me to indicate a very distrustful and suspicious mind," said Mr. Linton. "You have no right whatever to suppose that Merry touched your pockets. Only the discovery of the banknote in Merry's possession would make me think anything of the kind possible."

Crooke's eyes glittered for a moment.

"I can't afford to lose a five-pound note, sir, and I believe Tom Merry's got it," he said.

"Nonsense! You have no right to think so," said Mr. Linton. "I have every confidence in Merry's uprightness; and your accusation, Crooke, on such very slight grounds, amounts to something like slander."

"Thank you, sir!" said Tom.

"But the matter must be strictly investigated," said Mr. Linton. "That is necessary for your own sake, Merry, as you will realise, now that such an accusation has been made. You have no objection to a search of your person and your belongings?"

Tom crimsoned.

"It's in your hands, sir," he said. "I've no objection to whatever you think necessary."

"I personally do not think it necessary, Merry," said the master of the Shell very kindly. "I do not doubt you for a single instant. But no room must be left for doubt on the part of others."

"I understand, sir," said Tom.

"You will come with me to the Head, Merry, and you also, Crooke. Dr. Holmes will take the matter in hand without delay."

"Very well, sir."

"I'm ready, sir!" muttered Crooke.

"The Form will proceed with the Latin paper during my absence," added Mr. Linton.

And he left the Shell-room, followed by Tom Merry and Gerald Crooke. There was a buzz in the Form-room as the door closed behind him.

(Continued on page 16.)

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 878.



The St. Jim's News

THIS MIGHT HAVE BEEN!

By Tom Merry.

THIS might have been started with "My dear Readers," but it hasn't!

I forget who suggested we should have a "Might-have-been" number. It might have been Manners, but then it might have been Lowther.

Of course, we all know that the term from which we take title for our special number this week refers, as a general rule, to the fellow who might have been better than he finishes up. Joe Beckett might have been a grand boxer, but somehow or other he just missed the boat. However, we've taken might-have-been literally.

Contributions for this number have been hard to obtain. Chaps, willing enough to contribute to a comic number—because they all think they can be funny—mizzled when I looked in the Common-room and asked for MSS dealing with the week's subject. However, I think I've got together quite a decent lot of stuff, but I must admit that it might have been better!

I've got one thing to complain about. I gave up the whole of one evening to thinking out stunts for this number, with the result that I got "might-have-been" on my brain. It came in frightfully awkward at times.

I had posted up the team for our match with Rookwood, and had forgotten all about it in the stress of my editorial duties. Gore burst into the study.

"I say, Tom Merry! I thought you said my name was down as goalie?" he roared.

"It might have been!" I murmured.

"Eh? Then some rotter's altered it! I'll alter him!" roared Gore, and out he rushed.

Later I thought there had been a row. There might have been a slaughter, judging by the number of black eyes in the Sneak's Brigade.

The worst effect of my brain strain came in the Form-room. I was jotting down the names of likely contributors, totally unconscious of the lesson in hand, when Mr. Railton came along and stopped by my side.

"Are you thinking that Christopher Columbus discovered Monty Lowther?" he asked sarcastically.

"It might have been!" I murmured.

Then I got mighty beans! Such is an editor's life!

Tom Merry

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 378.



WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN!

By Harry Noble.

WHEN Tom Merry asked me to write an article for this number, I gave it a great deal of thought. It was something out of the ordinary, and deserved special attention.

But this "might-have-been" question is very interesting. One can sit down in a chair in the twilight and mentally picture lots of things that might have been. I found it quite an easy matter to think of these things—quite sufficient for this article, at any rate.

For instance, if pigs had flown, and birds had always lived in stys, the farmyard might have looked very different to what it looks like to-day. Bullocks, too, would be rather funny-looking creatures if they had legs as long as giraffes, whilst the giraffe would look just as funny hanging up in a butcher's shop. Yet this might have been, you know.

Football might have been played with a small, hard ball, whilst cricketers favoured the big, air-inflated leather ball. Fancy Fatty Wynn doubling himself up when bowling, balancing in one hand a new match-ball the size of a football! Yet it might have been, you know.

Take racing. It might have been that donkeys were trained to race, and not the splendid, long-legged horses that can be seen to-day. Truth to tell, this might have been better for a great number of people, for whilst a man might like to back a horse and be called a horsey fellow, no chap would be such a silly ass as to back a donkey and be called a donkey man!

We have made pets of dogs and cats. The world would have been a funny place if lions and tigers had been tame animals, and dogs and cats quite wild. It might have been responsible for many less burglaries, for I can't fancy many of the fraternity tackling a house where they were likely to come up against a nice, juicy lion, tame or not.

Then there's grub. Supposing nobody had thought of making succulent sosses—supposing nobody had thought of catching fish, or growing potatoes. Everybody might have been growing grass, and pa would have led the family out to graze upon their own land on their hands and knees!

A point we mustn't overlook is schooling. Some Johnny started a school in some part of the world, when he might have been doing something better—or worse. If nobody had thought of schools, we might have been without the "St. Jim's News."

Taking it all round, although the world might have been quite a different place, I think I prefer it as it is!

OUR COMPANION PAPERS:

"THE BOYS' FRIEND" Every Monday
 "THE MAGNET" Every Monday
 "THE POPULAR" Every Tuesday
 "JUNGLE JINKS" Every Thursday
 "THE HOLIDAY ANNUAL"
 Published Yearly

SOME MIGHT HAVE BEENS!

By Monty Lowther.

IF Bagley Trimble had been bathed, thrashed, flogged, birched, flayed, boiled, smothered, kicked, bumped, rolled, and squashed every day he might have been a decent chap.

IF Eric Kildare had not come to St. Jim's, our skipper might have been Knox. Jumping crackers! What a time we might have had! Still, there is no getting away from the fact that Knox is a might-have-been—for a decent fellow, having been as long at St. Jim's as Knox, would have at least stood a chance for the captaincy.

IF I include Fatty Wynn amongst the list of might-have-beens, I suppose I might look for squalls. But a contributor's duty is to be fearless—dooty is dooty, as Taggles says. I'm therefore fearless. (You nearly wrote 'fearful'!—Ed.) Therefore—if Fatty Wynn had been mangled, rolled, thrown from the houseposts, fed on biscuits, forced to push his own pram, he might have been slim!

IF Tom Merry had more sense he might have come to me and offered me the editorial chair for this week only. It might have been a decent number then, instead of a one-column affair!

IF George Kerr had not been such a studious ass he might easily have been assistant to a famous detective, like that fellow Jack Drake, who assists Ferrers Locke. Still, as it happens, it's just as well. A detective, or his assistant, has to be slick. Who ever heard of a slick fellow in the New House? (This paragraph ran into 4,000 words. It might have been published—if this "News" was as big as the "Holiday Annual.")

IF Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had never heard of a monocle, he might have been anything but the smartly dressed fellow he is. Seeing only one side of himself might have been disastrous to the caste of Vere de Vere!

IF Bernard Glyn had succeeded in getting his inventions in universal use, we might have seen many strange things. We remember his bowling machine. What would the M.C.C. have done in Australia if they had been allowed to use everything British appertaining to cricket? We might have been reading something like this: "S. Australia, 1; M.C.C., 999 (dec.)."



MELLISH GETS HIS WISH!

By Bernard Glyn.

I WISH we could have the election for captain over again!" said Mellish one morning, as he came out of Kildare's study, rubbing his hands. "We get nothing but lickings from Kildare, the beast! Ow! I wish old Knox was captain!"

"My dear ass," said Levison, in the tone of a master administering a lecture to a recalcitrant junior, "if you go setting booby traps for the high and mighty Sixth, you must expect to be licked when you are found out!"

"Rats! Go and eat coke!" Mellish, with that pleasant remark, rubbed his hands still harder, and entered his study. The cad of St. Jim's must have had some sort of intuition about it, we all thought. For the very next day old Kildare had to leave St. Jim's to take some important papers to London for the Head, and Knox was told that Kildare's duties were his for that day.

Most of the fellows of the Fourth and Shell kept out of the way. They knew Knox, and, knowing him, understood without being told that the black sheep of the Sixth would soon be on the war-path. They were right!

Before Kildare had been five minutes out of St. Jim's, Knox came down the Shell passage, an ashplant under his arm, and a surly expression on his face.

But we were ready. We smiled sweetly upon him, bowed politely, and stepped out of his way.

"No cheek, or I'll lam you!" said Knox unpleasantly.

"Yes, Knox!" we said in chorus.

"No cheek!" snarled Knox.

"Oh, no, Knox!"

"Silence!"

"Of course, Knox!"

Knox gave it up. He couldn't very well lam us for being polite.

He made for the Fourth Form quarters, where there were some pretty reckless characters.

"We might have been much better off if Knox had been skipper all the year," Mellish was saying, in a loud voice, as Knox crept round the corner.

The artful sneak of St. Jim's had only just come round that way himself, so he had caught sight of the beast—I mean, the temporary skipper.

Knox's surly expression vanished like mist before a sun as he heard Mellish's complimentary observations. He even smiled—a happening sufficiently rare to bring the stares of the Fourth upon him.

"Why, he smiled!" gasped Blake.

"Yaas, wathah! I distinctly saw him smile, deah boys!" said D'Arcy in a stage whisper.

That, in the language of the celebrated poet, fairly tore it. Knox's smile vanished like a streak of lightning, and down into his hand came the ashplant.

"D'Arcy!" snapped Knox. "Hold out your hand!"

"Eh?" demanded Gussy, fixing his monocle firmly in his eye. "What for, deah boy?"

"Cheek! I heard your remark!" snapped Knox. "Hold out your hand!"

"Bai Jove! That's wathah wough, isn't it, deah boys?" pleaded D'Arcy, looking around at the sympathetic faces about him.

"Are you going to hold out your hand, or am I to lam you?" asked Knox angrily.

"Weally, Knox—Ow! Yow! Stoppit! Vescue, deah—Ow-vow!"

D'Arcy wailed as the temporary skipper

started lamming into him with the ashplant, and it might have gone on for some time—in fact, almost indefinitely—if D'Arcy hadn't thought that discretion was the better part of valour, and taken to his heels.

He disappeared round the corner, with Knox in hot pursuit. The sound of a door banging a few seconds later suggested that Gussy had taken refuge in some study.

"That's the stuff to give the troops!" said Mellish, with a chuckle. "That's what might have been happening all along if Knox had been skipper!"

"Oh, you think that, do you?" said Blake grimly.

"Yes, rather! I was only wishing yesterday that old Knox would be skipper—Here, wharrer you at, you dummy?"

Mellish broke off rather uneasily. Blake had taken a step towards him, and the leader of the Fourth was looking angry.

"You'd take that rotten bully's part if he were captain, would you?" said Blake grimly. "My sneaking dummy, you don't know what we've missed, having old Kildare for skipper instead of that foxey worm! But there is no reason why it shouldn't be impressed upon you, is there, chaps?"

"None at all," said his chums, rather doubtfully.

They hadn't quite tumbled to the game.

"So I'll just show you what might have been really happening if Knox had been skipper instead of Kildare," went on Blake grimly. "This way, Mellish!"

Mellish yelled, for Blake had taken his ear between thumb and finger, and Mellish had no option about going "this way."

Blake led him towards his study, and the rest of us followed on to see the fun. We hadn't as yet the remotest idea as to what Blake intended to do.

But we soon found out. So did Mellish. Blake closed the door of his study just as Gussy was entering, and for a moment Mellish was free. He made a bolt for the door, but as Gussy happened to be coming in he stopped Mellish's headlong rush—with his chest.

The swell of the Fourth went flying backwards, and Mellish tripped over Gussy's sprawling legs and crashed to the floor. In a moment Blake had him by the ear again. "This way, Mellish," said the leader of the Fourth pleasantly. "This is Knox's study, Mellish—"

"It isn't!" snarled Mellish.

"Well, it might have been," chuckled Blake. "We'll suppose it is. Just clean my shoes, Mellish!"

"What!" shrieked Mellish. "Clean your own rotten shoes!"

"My cane, Monteith—I mean, Gussy!" said Blake serenely. "Can't have fags playing the giddy ox—I mean, refusing to obey lawful orders!"

"Look here—"

"And here!" said Blake, waving his walking-stick, handed him by the obliging Gussy, in the air. "Where will you have it?"

"You're about twenty to one!" sneered Mellish.

"Oh, no! These are—ahem!—prefects come for a lesson in 'How to See a Duty Carried Out!'" said Blake calmly. "You've heard how medical students crowd round to see an operation, Mellish? Well, this is the same, only different."

"Weally, Blake, deah boy—"

"Shut up, Gussy—I mean, pray do not interrupt me in my official duties—nunno—that's not how Knox would speak. Hold your confounded row, hang you!"

"Bai Jove, if you speak to me like that—"

"Gag him, somebody! Now, where are you going to have it, Mellish?" asked Blake.

The sneak of the Fourth eyed Blake, and then eyed us. He was fairly in for it, and though he knew we shouldn't interfere, he knew just as well that Blake could make little mutton outlets of him in less than five minutes.

"I'll clean your rotten old shoes," muttered Mellish at last.

"Hurry, hang you!" roared Blake, dancing about the study like a being demented.

We took cover. It seemed the wisest thing to do. Blake was imitating Knox a little too cleverly for our liking!

Mellish got busy with the shoes, and the manner in which he cleaned them accounted for the fact that he never possessed a clean pair of shoes in his study. He put the blacking over the dirt, and Blake roared.

"That's not the way to do it, you shrieking dummy!"

"Is Blake potty, deah boys?" asked D'Arcy anxiously.

He hadn't been present when Blake had so kindly undertaken to show Mellish what might have been happening had Knox been captain.

"A million lines, Gussy—I mean, D'Arcy!" shrieked Blake. "Bring them to me before tea—"

"We've had tea!" I murmured gently.

"Have we had tea to-morrow, dummy?" demanded Blake. "What are you sliding towards the door for, Mellish?"

"I'm going," said Mellish.

"Oh, no," said Blake sweetly. "Under my—ahem!—captaincy, all fags of the Fourth are compelled to work until bed-time. The grate wants polishing, Mellish!"

"Polish your own confounded grate!" booted Mellish. "This is beyond a joke, Blake—"

"So would Knox be, dear man," chuckled Blake. "That's what I'm trying to prove to you, and you don't seem to appreciate all the trouble I am taking!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The cane swung suggestively in the air, and Mellish got busy, growling and muttering under his breath.

We looked on, chuckling. Mellish was a cad of the first water, and it had been just



D'Arcy stopped Mellish's headlong rush with his chest!

like him to see Blake's chum licked and then indulge in some caddish remark.

By the time that evening was over, Mellish certainly had worked. Knox himself couldn't have been a harder taskmaster, although I must say I think Knox might have been a bit more free with the ashplant than was Blake.

The cad of the Fourth was groaning by the time Blake allowed him to go.

"I'll make you pay for this!" he snarled.

"That's not the way to talk to the skipper of St. Jim's!" said Blake sternly. "Just a minute, Mellish, whilst I take my coat off, and I'll give you the licking of your sweet young life—"

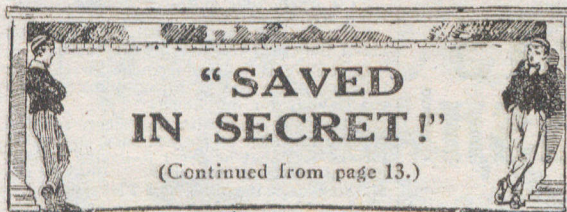
Mellish didn't wait. He scooted out of the study like a rabbit for his burrow.

"I don't think he'll talk about what might have been our lot if Knox had been captain of St. Jim's!" chuckled Blake. "Not a bad demonstration, eh, chaps?"

We agreed that it hadn't been a bad demonstration. In fact, we pointed out that the demonstration might have been considerably worse for Mellish if Knox had been the demonstrator instead of Blake.

THE END.

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**CHAPTER 8.****The Toff Takes a Hand!**

TALBOT of the Shell sat silent, his face pale, set, strangely thoughtful and troubled. He was the only fellow in the Shell who was not talking excitedly—the Form was in a ferment. Mr. Linton had told his Form to keep on with the "Latin paper," but the Shell fellows were not likely to devote much attention to Latin just then. The accusation against Tom Merry caused anger, derision, contempt, and excitement on all sides. As for belief in it, even Racke and Clampe did not pretend that. The thing, on the face of it, was ridiculous. Monty Lowther and Manners were crimson with indignation, longing to get to close quarters with Crooke, and make him swallow his base accusation by drastic measures. But the general opinion was that Crooke was a fool for his pains. Burning with animosity against the captain of the Shell, he had made this absurd accusation—which he could not hope to substantiate.

"Why," said Grundy, "even if the dashed banknote was found in Tom's pocket, I'd rather believe Crooke shoved it there when he butted into him in the passage than that Tom Merry stole it."

"Yes, rather!" said Kangaroo.

"And I know Linton would think so, too, and the Head," exclaimed Manners. "Crooke must be mad to spin such a yarn."

"Mad or not, we'll make him sorry for it," said Monty Lowther between his teeth.

Talbot of the Shell heard, without heeding, the excited comment on all sides. He rose quietly from his place and left the Form-room, hardly noticed in the general commotion and excitement.

Talbot's handsome face was almost white; a black and torturing suspicion was in his mind. He was assured, of course, that Tom Merry was innocent—that went without saying among Tom Merry's friends. But why, then, had Crooke accused him?

Crooke was revengeful and malicious. But he was no fool.

He knew well enough that severe punishment awaited him if his accusation turned out to be a reckless slander. And there was only one thing that could substantiate it—the discovery of the banknote in Tom Merry's actual possession.

Crooke, perhaps, was capable of destroying a banknote, if it served his turn. But that would not serve his turn. It was not up to Tom Merry, any more than to any other fellow, to prove that he had not picked a pocket. Proof had to be found that he had done so.

If the banknote was not found nobody would believe for a moment that Tom Merry had taken it and hidden it. Everyone most certainly would believe that Crooke had hidden it or disposed of it himself, and then invented this accusation.

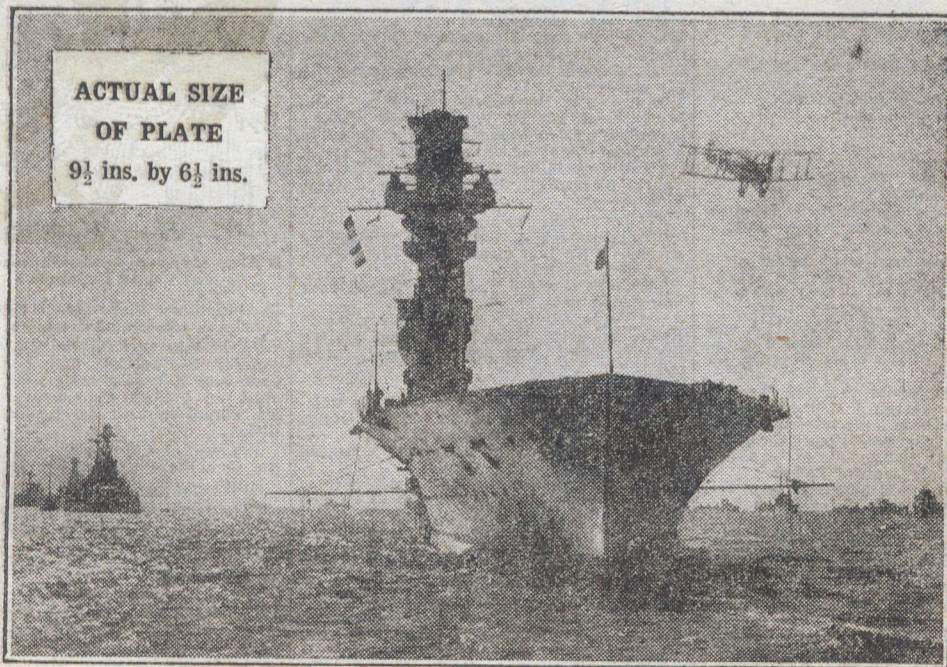
That was not what Crooke had planned, assuredly. And it was borne in upon Talbot's mind that the banknote would be discovered in Tom Merry's possession.

Unless Crooke was out of his senses, he must have something to "go" on. A reckless accusation, which might have been made against any fellow in the school just as well as against Tom Merry, carried no weight. Without definite proof it simply recoiled on the head of the accuser.

Some of the Shell fellows already suspected that Crooke had "buted" into Tom Merry in the passage for the purpose of "planting" the banknote on him somehow. If the banknote was found in Tom's pockets that would be the general conviction. Crooke must know that; and so—as Talbot followed his line of reasoning—the banknote would not be found in Tom's pockets.

Where, then?

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In his study—but there was no proof in that. Anybody might step into a fellow's study and place a banknote there; and such a discovery, too, would involve Manners and Lowther as much as Tom Merry, as they shared the study. Certainly, if Croke had been known to be an honourable fellow and not on bad terms with Tom, there might have been something in it. But Croke's character was pretty well known, and his hatred of the captain of the Shell was no secret.

The banknote was not, then, placed in Study No. 10, where anybody might have placed it. If this was a plot—as Talbot knew it must be—the banknote had been placed somewhere where only Tom Merry could be supposed to have placed it; and that was in some receptacle to which only Tom had the key.

Either the accusation was true, or Croke had taken such measures as that. Talbot believed the accusation to be untrue, so his conclusion followed.

He recalled the incident of the previous night—Croke's stealthy absence from the dormitory. Croke had told Talbot—finding him awake—that he had been to the Green Man—a plausible explanation enough. But Croke had counted without the keen, searching wariness which was a part of the character of the Toff, and which had not been lost by Talbot of the Shell. Talbot had not believed him then, for he had noted, even in the dimness of the dormitory, that Croke was half-dressed—certainly he had not been out of the House without his boots or his jacket or his collar and tie. Talbot had dismissed the matter from his mind, as no business of his.

But now—

He knew that Croke had been busy, not outside the House, but inside the House, in the dead of night. In the light of this accusation Talbot knew how he must have been busy—preparing evidence that was to substantiate the accusation already planned. In a mental vision, as in a glass darkly, Talbot could see the stealthy movements of Croke in the sleeping dormitory—the abstraction of keys from Tom Merry's pocket—the locking of the banknote in some box or desk in his study. That was what had taken Croke from his bed in the small hours.

Talbot knew it—knew it as well as if Croke had told him. The low cunning of the schemer was not a match for the searching sagacity of the Toff.

But what now?

To state what he suspected—or, rather, knew? To clear Tom, no doubt, at the cost of covering his own cousin with indelible shame and ruin? The rascal deserved it—and yet— And it was possible, too, that what Talbot had worked out in theory, would be deemed unconvincing—the Head would be slow to believe a schoolboy capable of such planned villainy. There was another way.

From the Form-room Talbot hurried to the Shell passage. In a couple of minutes he was in Tom Merry's study.

There was another way—a way impossible to others, easy to Talbot of the Shell. For the fingers of the Toff had not lost their old cunning. There was no lock in the school that could have defied the prince of cracksmen.

Talbot was five minutes in Tom's study.

Then he returned to the Shell Form room, where he found the juniors still in a hum of excitement. Every fellow was on his feet; the desks were deserted. Talbot moved along among the desks, and paused for a moment at Croke's.

Then he went along to his own place, and, taking no part in the excited buzz of talk, sat down to his Latin paper.

CHAPTER 9 The Search!

DR. HOLMES was about to leave his study to go to the Sixth Form room, when Mr. Linton arrived with Tom Merry and Croke. As soon as the master of the Shell explained, it was clear that the Sixth would have to wait a little while for their headmaster that afternoon. Dr. Holmes listened with pursed lips, his keen old eyes, over his glasses, scanning the faces of the two juniors—Tom Merry's flushed and indignant, Croke's pale and set and dogged. Certainly, of the two, Croke looked more like the accused than the accuser. Bad as he was, bad and vindictive, his conscience was not dead, and it required a strong nerve to sustain a false accusation under his headmaster's eyes, a stronger nerve than Croke possessed. He did not think of retreat or retraction. He dared not. But it was with a sinking heart that he kept desperately on.

"Ridiculous!" said the Head tersely. "Croke, your suspicion of Tom Merry shows, I fear, a bad and distrustful nature. I warn you that unless your accusation is proved you will suffer for it!"

Croke licked his dry lips.

"Merry, turn out your pockets! I am sorry to have to ask you to do so, my boy; but this must be cleared up beyond doubt."

"Very well, sir."

Tom Merry turned his pockets inside-out. The only cash that came to light was a sixpence.

"Now give me your keys."

Tom handed over his bunch of keys.

"We had better proceed to Merry's study, Mr. Linton."

"Quite so, sir."

"Come, Merry!" said the Head kindly. "You, too, Croke!" His tone was much less kindly in addressing Croke.

The Sixth were wondering what had become of the Head. That stately gentleman was proceeding to Tom Merry's study in the Shell passage, with a bunch of keys in his hand, and a deep frown on his brow. His task was necessary, in the circumstances, but extremely distasteful. He entered Study No. 10 in the Shell, followed by Mr. Linton and the two Shell fellows.

"Have you anything in this room, Merry, which is locked, and of which only you have the key?"

"My desk, sir."

"Kindly unlock it."

Tom Merry took the keys and unlocked the old oaken desk. He did not touch it after unlocking it, but stepped back and laid the keys on the study table.

"Mr. Linton, perhaps—"

"Certainly, sir!"

Mr. Linton opened the lid of the desk.

Croke's eyes burned.

It had been extremely unlikely that Tom Merry would discover the hidden banknote among the papers in his desk. That he had not done so was clear, of course, from his looks and manner now.

Croke had no doubt.

He almost trembled with eagerness as Mr. Linton, with methodical care, lifted out letters and papers, dog-eared books, and odds and ends, examining each article meticulously. Not because he fancied for a moment that the banknote was there, but rather because he was assured that it was not there, the master of the Shell was careful to leave no doubt on the subject.

Slowly, but surely, the rather untidy desk was emptied.

Croke breathed harder.

Surely the banknote ought to have come to light by this time. Certainly, Mr. Linton's careful search had not missed it. Yet only a few papers remained in the desk, and the banknote had not appeared.

Croke felt his heart beating almost to suffocation.

What did it mean?

Of Talbot's visit to the study, while he was with Mr. Linton and Tom in the Head's room, he knew nothing. He would have supposed that Talbot was all the time in the Form-room with the rest of the Shell, had he thought about Talbot at all. But he was not, of course, thinking of him.

Where was the banknote?

Unless he was out of his senses, he had hidden it there, and there it must be. But the last papers came out of the desk, every one looked at and shaken, and still there was no banknote.

Croke's brain swam.

He glanced at Tom Merry. Had Tom, then, gone to the desk, found the banknote, and hidden it elsewhere?

That seemed the only possible explanation, and yet—Croke knew that it was not the right one. Tom Merry was calm, quiet, slightly scornful. It was obvious to Croke that he knew nothing whatever about the banknote, and had no suspicion at all that it had been "planted" in his desk.

Then what did it mean? Was he out of his senses? Had he only dreamed that he had stolen down to the study in the night, and hidden the banknote in the desk?

The desk was empty.

"Nothing here, sir," said Mr. Linton.

"Quite so."

Croke rested his hand on the back of a chair. He felt as if he could not support his own weight. His brain was in a whirl. The banknote was there. It must be there, unless he was mad and a dreamer of dreams. Yet, from the evidence of his own eyes, he knew that it was not there.

Mr. Linton moved about the study, looking into boxes and drawers, careful to the last. Croke was taking no interest in his movements now. If the banknote was not in the desk it was not likely to be in the room. What did it all mean?

"There's my locker in the Form-room, sir," said Tom Merry, when the master of the Shell paused at last. "I kept that locked, and the keys on this bunch."

"Let us go to the Form-room, Mr. Linton," said Dr. Holmes.

Mr. Linton picked up the keys from the table.

Croke's knees knocked together as he followed on. He stumbled on the stairs, feeling weak in every limb. What was to become of his accusation now—and of him?

Had the banknote been found in Tom's desk, of which Tom only had the key, all would have been well. But it was not there. It was as if a miracle had happened to save the innocent and confound the guilty. Gerald Croke's face

was white, haggard, almost tortured as he limped into the Shell-room after the Head and Mr. Linton.

There was a scurrying to the desks as the masters came in. Talbot of the Shell rose from his Latin paper, and stood at attention with the rest of the Shell, his glance resting curiously for a moment or two on Crooke's tormented face.

"Take the key and open your locker, Merry," said the Head.

Tom obeyed.

Mr. Linton turned out the contents of the locker. Nothing distantly resembling a banknote came to light.

The Head fixed his eyes upon Gerald Crooke.

"There's my desk, sir," said Tom, with a slight smile.

The Head coughed.

"Quite so, Mr. Linton——"

"Very good, sir!"

Tom Merry's desk was not locked. The master of the Shell looked through it.

He glanced back at Dr. Holmes and shook his head.

"This investigation," said the Head, in a deep voice, "has proved what I fully expected it to prove—that Crooke's banknote is not in the possession of Tom Merry, and I am fully convinced that it never has been in his possession. Crooke, after this careful search, do you still venture to say that you believe that Merry abstracted the banknote from your pocket?"

Crooke licked his dry lips.

"I—I——" he stammered.

"Answer!" rapped out the Head.

"I—I believe he's hidden it," gasped Crooke desperately. Tom's lip curled contemptuously.

"I hope, Crooke, that you believe nothing of the kind," said the Head sternly. "You have no grounds whatever for such a belief, no shadow of evidence to adduce. But the matter does not end here. The banknote must be found."

The Shell waited breathlessly.

"Your accusation against Merry falls completely to the ground. I cannot help fearing, Crooke, that it was inspired by malice. Merry and his belongings have been searched. You will now be searched, Crooke."

"I!" gasped Crooke.

"You!" said the Head grimly. "So far, there is only your word as proof that the banknote is missing at all. I was bound to take note of your accusation against Merry, and to sift it with care. That has been done, and Merry is completely exonerated. You have made a terribly serious accusation without a particle of proof. It is you, Crooke, who are now in the position of an accused person."

"Oh!" panted Crooke.

Some of the Shell were grinning now. The tables were being turned on Gerald Crooke in a way that quite won the approval of the Shell.

At a sign from the Head, Mr. Linton renewed the search, with Crooke now as its object. Crooke sneered as he turned out his pockets. In whatsoever mysterious way the banknote had vanished from its hiding-place, Crooke had no fear of its being found on him.

"Now open your locker, Crooke."

The locker was searched.

"Your desk."

"My desk isn't locked, sir," said Crooke sullenly.

"Kindly look through Crooke's desk, Mr. Linton, before we proceed to his study."

"Very well, sir."

Crooke, with a pale face but a sneering lip, watched the master of the Shell bending over his desk. Talbot watched him, too, with a strange expression on his face.

There was a sudden, startled exclamation from Mr. Linton.

He looked up from the desk, and fixed his eyes on Crooke.

"Crooke! How many five-pound notes had you?"

"One, sir."

"You have the number of the note?"

"Yes, sir; in my pocket-book."

"Give me the number."

"00014268."

"Very good," said Mr. Linton. He picked a crisp, rustling slip of paper from Crooke's desk. "Here is the note."

CHAPTER 10.

Crooke is "For It"

TOM Merry started, and then he smiled. His own opinion had been that Crooke had carelessly lost or mislaid the banknote, and that the rest had been dictated by malice and suspicion. He was not likely to suspect the deeper villainy of which his enemy had been guilty.

The discovery of the banknote in Crooke's own desk in

the Form-room was confirmation, to Tom, that his opinion was well-founded.

But to the hapless plotter the discovery came like a bombshell.

He staggered, and almost fell down, in his utter dismay and amazement as Mr. Linton held up the banknote.

"That is the banknote, Mr. Linton?" said the Head, in a deep voice.

"That is it, sir."

"Crooke, what have you to say now?"

Crooke had nothing to say. He was almost fainting with terror and stupefaction.

"After your iniquitous accusation against Merry, it appears that the banknote was not lost at all!" said the Head.

"It was in your own desk, Crooke. Wretched boy, is it possible that you accused your Form-fellow of theft, knowing him to be innocent?"

Crooke groaned in utter dismay.

"Oh, no, sir!" exclaimed Tom Merry, moved to compassion by the misery and terror in his enemy's face. "Oh, no! I'm sure not, sir! Crooke forgot where he had put the note, and fancied it was stolen, sir. He can't help being a suspicious rotter—I—I mean——"

"I trust, Crooke, that Merry's explanation is correct," said the Head. "I should be sorry to believe you capable of a deep-laid scheme to bring disgrace upon an innocent boy."

Crooke gave a hoarse cry.

"No, sir! I—I——"

"At the best, Crooke, it appears that the banknote was not stolen at all, and that, from sheer carelessness with your money and a base propensity to suspicion, you accused your Form-fellow of the theft. That is the very best that can be said of your conduct."

Crooke shivered.

"As a warning to you, Crooke, you will receive a severe flogging," said the Head. "Taking the most lenient view of your conduct, I cannot acquit you of culpable carelessness and reckless slander. On any recurrence of such conduct, you will be expelled from the school."

What followed was not soon forgotten by Gerald Crooke.

Before all the Shell Crooke was "hoisted," and the Head took the birch in hand.

The Shell fellows looked on in silence. As a rule, there was sympathy for a fellow who was "up" for a Head's flogging. There was no sympathy for Crooke.

In silence the Shell watched, with grim satisfaction. But Crooke was not silent. His yells and howls rang through the House. But the Head did not spare him. The flogging was severely dealt out, to the last stinging stroke, and when it was over Crooke of the Shell was gasping, and squirming, and sobbing—an object of contemptuous pity even to the fellow whom he had striven so basely to injure.

Tom Merry dismissed the matter from his mind. His feeling towards Crooke was only one of contemptuous indifference. He put his foot down on a proposition to "rag" his accuser. He felt that Crooke had had enough from the Head.

Of the danger he had narrowly escaped, of what he owed to his good angel, Talbot of the Shell, Tom knew nothing. Talbot was not likely to tell him. Crooke had taken his punishment, and, so long as he made no further attempt, Talbot felt that the matter could and should end. But on that one point Talbot left nothing to chance. The same evening, while Crooke was still squirming wretchedly in his study over the effects of the flogging, Talbot came in.

Crooke met him with a bitter look.

"One word with you, Crooke," said Talbot quietly.

"You've been through it, but you've got off cheap. If the Head knew the facts, you'd be sacked from the school, and you know it."

Crooke stared.

"What do you know about it?" he hissed.

"Your whole game from beginning to end," said Talbot scornfully. "I know why you left the dormitory that night, I know what you did when you were gone. If the banknote had been found in Tom Merry's desk I should have gone to the Head and given him the whole story."

"You—you—How—It's a lie! I——" stammered Crooke incoherently.

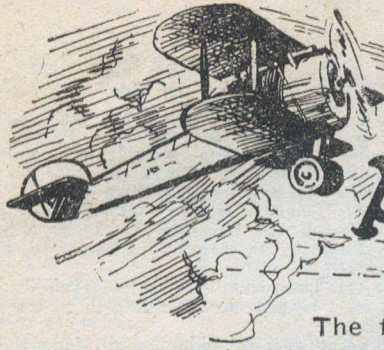
"You can guess now how the banknote changed places," said Talbot. "You did not reckon on the Toff, the prince of cracksmen. It was easy enough for me, spotting your game, to save Tom Merry, and to save you."

"To save me?" muttered Crooke.

"You; for your plot would never have succeeded. I should have taken care of that. I could have told the Head enough to open his eyes. I spared you for your people's

(Continued on page 27.)

Keen as mustard on wireless are the two chums Lyle Lindsay and Jerry O'Gorman, and their enthusiasm in this direction puts them right on the track of a tremendous secret!



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CHAPTER 1.

"Live-Wire" Listens In!

SOMEWHERE in England a clock chimed the magic hour of midnight, and so changed the course of many lives. In particular, its melodious note hurled Lyle Lindsay bang into a weird adventure, and sent him journeying miles farther than the bed he was making for.

A strange fellow, Lindsay, christened Lyle, re-named "Live-Wire" by his intimates, because he could "see daylight" quicker than most, he slaved all day in a Liverpool office, and lived half the night in the realms of romance. In short, the wonder of wireless held and gripped his imagination, and his alert brain had for months been concentrated on the marvel of beam—or directional—ether shaking.

In these fascinating experiments he had one pal—a young aero pilot named Jerry O'Gorman. Poor Jerry! He'd sunk his modest capital in a baby "Bristol," and had gone seeking joy-riders on Blackpool sands. Alas! Those Blackpool trippers proved remarkably shy on the "joy" idea.

But to-night Lyle was over-tired, and had closed down ahead of his usual. His right hand was already hovering on the earth switch, his left was giving a last perfunctory twirl to the tuner—a habit of most practical wireless fans—when he dropped plumb into the middle of the midnight bell, and decided to "see" what was doing.

Ten, eleven, twelve! The notes sounded crystal clear, so plain and strong that the last golden chime lingered and died like a drawn-out sigh. Then came a rumble of voices, the click of a lock falling into socket, and the vibrant echo of a plucked gut string.

"Hallo, Pip See," he heard. "Ultima calls Pip See! Hallo, Pip See!"

Lyle smiled.

"Um—queer! I've chanced to pitch on that johnnie's wave-length with my 'directionals' full on him," he muttered. "But—Pip See and Ultima? They've no place in the radio call-book. Miserable licence pirates, I'm thinking."

Whatever they were, they quickly established contact, though Pip See's response was so faint as to be merely an unintelligible whisper even to Lyle's super-sensitive ear.

Again the first speaker's voice boomed, harsh, loud, and commanding: "Pip See, I'm about to play over the 'Broken Melody.' Listen carefully. I want no repeats, and no mistakes."

"Quaint bird," Lyle grinned. "Too

ripe to miss. Wonder if Jerry's earthed yet?"

His glance fell on a strange apparatus that was attached to his aerial lead—twin wires running through a cellulose bath of selenium acid, and hence to the hammer of an electric bell. Later, that arrangement was to be multiplied by the million, but at present its sole copy lay beside Jerry's set in his Blackpool attic.

Switching his tuner from 390 to 120—the low wave-length they invariably used—Lyle placed a silver whistle to his lips, and threw a long, piercing blast into the microphone.

"Now, if Jerry hasn't bedded down," he thought.

The half-spoken question was answered inside three seconds.

"Hallo, Live-Wire?" he heard Jerry yell. "If ye've again whistled up to howl 'Goo'-night, it's the nose of ye I'm ather punchin', ye red-necked Sassenach!"

Both sets were fitted with the Duplex routine, obviating the tiresome routine of constant "change over." That meant that Lyle was able—he was more than willing—to cut into Jerry's complaints and threats.

"Muzzle it, Jay," he laughed. "There's a gay spark working on 390 with a cello, splashing the 'Broken Melody' about. Spouts his call sign as Ultima. But it doesn't exist, old sky-pilot, so I want you to help find out where he originates. Get his bearings with your screen, we'll compare in exactly five minutes."

Wasting no time, Lyle twirled the finger of his tuner, dropped into 390, and had the luck to pick up Ultima's first note.

But it proved a wearisome business. The musician kicked off in fine fettle, playing a dozen deep notes of real good sob stuff with a sure hand. Then he faltered, broke down, rapped out a snappy excuse about faulty strings, and began a monotonous tuning up of his instrument. Again he played, again he cut into a deadly dull bout of string plucking, and so alternated 'twixt bow and pegs until he nearly drove Lyle distracted.

"My sainted aunt!" Lyle groaned. "Only that I specially asked Jerry to stick it for five minutes, I'd say farewell to this mad musician and pop away to bye-bye."

From very boredom his thoughts wandered. He fell to studying his hacked

old bench, its welter of unpainted oblong boxes, its confusion of multi-coloured wires strewn here, there, and everywhere. He wondered what the lordly owners of "rosewood and polish" sets would think of his humble "doings." He smiled as he imagined their supercilious "five-valve" contempt. No, there was nothing "posh" or "dinkum" about Lyle Lindsay's wireless-room. But then, there was nothing posh about the room's owner.

"A most unsightly, jumped-up mess," he grinned. "Still, it's not so bad. It's capable of amplifying signals from half a continent, with the help of those four little glow-lamps yonder."

But, oh! That eternal twang, twang, twang!

It went on, and on, and on. Like the babbling brook, it seemed fated to go on for ever. Long, tremulous notes that boomed protestingly, and short, jarring, pulls instantly smothered as by an impatient hand.

Quite suddenly the sounds stabbed into Lyle's brain with a new, a sinister, meaning. Twang, twangety, twang turned to dot, dash, dot. He sat up rigid, then gave a little gasp of amazement.

"Ye gods!" he whispered. "That cute beast is radiating International Morse by pulling fiddle strings! Phew! This grows absorbing."

It did, so much so, that, by the time he was due to speak to Jerry, he had grown white-faced, wild-eyed, and purposefully serious.

He tuned in to wave-length 120 with a swift and sure hand.

"You hanging on, Jerry? Good! D'you freeze to that fellow's game?" he demanded.

"Game, is it?" Jerry groused. "'Broken Melody,' d'ye call it? Shure, Live-Wire, it's meself 'd be playin' a better tune wi' th' fate of me."

"You ass! He's morsing crime as fast as he can," Lyle snapped. "I've captured half his message—missed the beginning, unfortunately—but I've heard enough to know that someone's going to suffer in person and in pocket."

Jerry's sharp whistle was proof of his surprise, but Live-Wire carried on before his pal could offer comment.

"Attention, Jay!" he called. "Jot down the bearings you've taken, they'll give us a line on Ultima, later. But Pip See's the nigger in the wood-pile. Pitch a line on him, then tune in to me the moment they close down. D'you get me?"

"I get," Jerry agreed tersely.

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From Lyle's tone he realised that the "game" had changed to grim business, that success or failure was a matter of seconds, that wireless is swift as thought. Abruptly he switched up to the mystery musician's wave-length.

That which followed was an amazing demonstration of latterday science. Alone in their wireless-rooms—one in a Liverpool suburb, one in a Blackpool attic—they pinned down the whereabouts of the unseen, unknown Pip See, as securely as butterflies are pinned by spectacled entomologists.

Though forty miles separated them, their actions might have been worked by one string, so faithfully alike were their movements. Motionless, almost breathless, they waited the last of the cello thumping and the profuse apologies of the player. Then came the first word of Pip See's reply, the beginning of a sentence that filtered through the ether ever so faintly.

For that the two alert youths had waited, poised like tigers tensed to spring! With the first sound each began fingering the wired screen at his side; fractional movements only—movements so delicately graded that to the casual eye the screens must have appeared absolutely stationary.

But to ears fined and refined by the constant strain of detecting minute ether forces, the sensitive wires whispered a plain, assured story. The directional screens, wired with a selenium alloy in place of copper strand, reacted to every wavebeat of Pip See's voice with a prescience that was almost human.

In Lyle's room the points of his screen were fixed nearly due north and south, the flat face of the wired square thus operating from east to west. In the beginning, the voice in his phones was broken, unintelligible. But with each tiny alteration of position the screen brought in the throaty words plainer, stronger, and, finally, clear as a bell!

Then, another fractional move—they swiftly diminished.

"Passed zenith," Lyle murmured, unperturbed. "Back again, old boy—again! And there, Pip See, that fixes you—for keeps!"

He was making no attempt to understand the unknown's words; though his brain mechanically registered one ominous sentence: "Your solo was good and clear in every way—in every way!" That Lyle recalled later; but at the moment his mind was concentrated on the strength of the voice, scientifically weighing its modulation, vividly alert for the fractional instant when volume touched maximum.

That attained, he made a swift, careful comparison of screen, compass, and

chart. Once he was certain that he had the exact direction, he discarded headphones and jumped for a great scale map that covered the whole of one wall. Then, with delicate care and confident touch, he ruled a long, straight line that had Liverpool for centre, and studied the result with wrinkled, thoughtful brow.

"West-nor-west by east-sou'-east," he muttered, as he sprang back to his chair, snatched up phones, and twirled the tuner to 120.

Quick though he was, Jerry was already challenging the line.

"Lyle! Lyle—oh, good!" came Jerry's voice. "My directional line passes east through Oldham, Sheffield, Great Yarmouth, and west through Douglas and Downpatrick."

"And mine through Warrington, Macclesfield, Norwich—t'other way doesn't matter," Lyle replied, ruling a second line as indicated by Jerry, and whistling with amazement at the result obtained.

Incredible though it seemed, Jerry confirmed his rulings in one explosive, excited sentence.

"Bedad, it's dhramin' I am, or your Pip See's in Rotterdam!" his pal yelled. "Rotterdam, I make it," Lyle agreed.

"Shure now, it proves our Screen 7 a long-range winner!" Jerry cried happily.

Lyle ignored the splendid truth.

"Jerry, I'm beginning to realise that we've stumbled into a mighty big affair," he said. "I missed the opening, but the second spasm told me that someone called D. is carrying a fortune, that he escaped a hold-up in Liverpool simply because he chanced to step straight from steamer to train, and that he is now speeding for Pip See's city. He's due to arrive there at 6 a.m., and, obviously, that city is Rotterdam. Jay, old man, Ult's last morsed words were that D. must have no chance to squeal afterwards!"

"Phew! An' if we go to the police they'll tell us we're dhramin' or japin' or doity!" Jerry groaned.

Before Lyle could reply Seaforth broke in with its staccato six-hundred thud. For once he was glad of the interruption. He wanted to make a suggestion, yet wondered if he had the right.

But in that short interval Jerry had also guessed the one way in which the hunted unknown might be helped. The big seaboard station had hardly crashed out its last pounding stab than he yelled his decision.

"Lyle, it's a non-stop job!" he cried. "I'm rousin' out owl Fleetwing, and I'm planin' down on Formby beach in about two bats of an eye! Shure, you'll be ready for me, bboy?"

And before Lyle could say yea or nay Jerry had definitely and finally closed down.

CHAPTER 2.

A Grim Joy Ride!

LIVE-WIRE was very much alive in the minutes that followed. Not trusting entirely to memory—though seldom did that play him false—he scribbled down every word of Ultima's morsed message, raced through the house, and was speeding along the dark and deserted roadway inside two minutes.

He had two miles to go, a strong head-wind to face, and a wet path to travel on.

"H'm! An unkind night for cloud-climbin'!" he muttered, glancing up at a watery moon, half hidden by scudding drift.

Nevertheless, he maintained a steady jog-trot until the roads gave way to a series of high, broken sandhills. These he negotiated at a fast walk, and on the last slope that preceded Formby's level foreshore he took stand and commenced stabbing the night sky with irregular flashes of a pocket-torch.

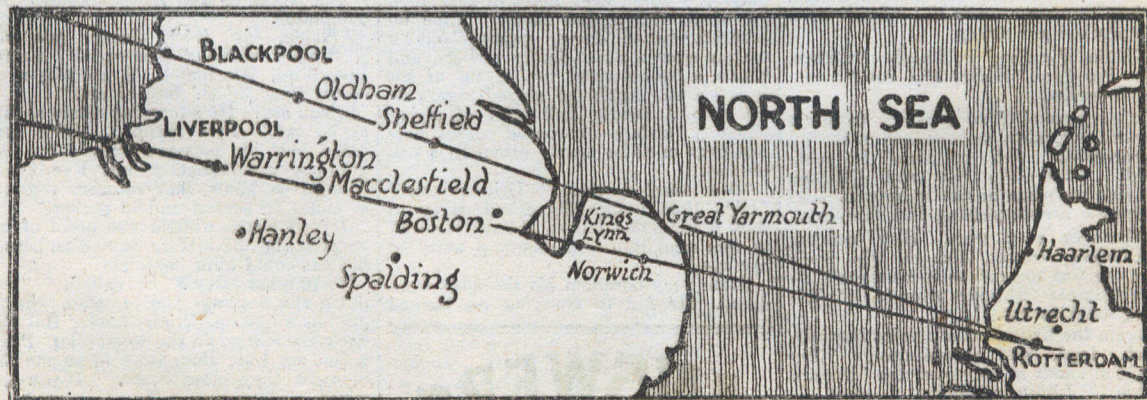
"Jerry'll hug the coast, cross the Ribble, and eat these few miles in no time," he reasoned—a fact that was proved by the thin drone of an aero engine that came within the next wind-wave.

Very soon his searching eyes located dancing fireflies—red and green—high up in the sky, and the engine, deepening and increasing its purr with every second, told that Jerry was beating up at a rare old bat.

The momentary deadening of the riding lights showed Lyle that his signal was being acknowledged, and in another minute the plane passed over his head at a height of a thousand feet. A parachute flare, released by Jerry while still over the sea, floated erratically and lighted up the stretch of wet sand with its ghostly blue radiance.

Lyle knew the flare was timed to a life of sixty seconds, and in that short span Jerry treated him to a flying stunt that would have been foolhardy to any but an expert pilot. The flick of a white tail-light showed that he was racing inland, drooping to earth and swerving cunningly. Then in a swift, wide speed he whipped round, shut off his engine, and drove low over Lyle's head. Timing skilfully, he flattened out, touched, bounced, and taxied along the hard sand, and then slowed to a standstill just as the flare abruptly expired.

"Well played, Jerry!" Lyle called, racing towards the machine. "You've



Map showing directional lines found by Lyle Lindsay and Jerry O'Gorman, the two wireless enthusiasts.
THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 373.

more lives than a cat, or you'd have snapped the old vertebrae long ago."

"Faith, it's the only one I own, so I nurse it gently," came the cheery answer. "Come aboard, you omadhaun, and let me be shakin' the supper up for ye."

Had Lyle flashed his torch into the machine he would have seen a freckled, grinning face, a tip-tilted nose that invited laughter, and a tousled ginger nob that defied its owner's most earnest claim to respectability. But he was careful only to illuminate the step he must ascend, for a flash of electric light in a night pilot's eye will blind for minutes together, and has caused over many accidents.

"Squeeze into the owld leather jacket and helmet I loaded for ye," Jerry advised, as Lyle dropped into the pit. "It's goin' to be a cold, rough ride, so it's yerself as'd better stop at home, maybe?"

"Don't get fresh, or I'll dump you and do a solo," Lyle grinned. "Now, Jerry, we're on 'contact'—let her go!"

Jerry allowed a strong gust to whine through struts and stays, taxied slowly along the sand, corrected a hint of side-slip by swift rudder work, and lifted as smoothly and gently as a plump bumble-bee.

They endured a moment of doubt when the wind seemed determined to drive them downwards. But Jerry, easing the control-lever, picked up speed until the "hit" of the gale no longer existed; then, having risen to six hundred feet, he made a swift, clean turn, climbed steadily to two thousand, and commenced a long, rising drive over country.

Aloft he became a different fellow. The humorous twinkle dropped from his eyes, and was replaced by the sharp, searching gaze of the "salted" airman. He was known as the youngest and most daring pilot in England, and an all-weather man. But he was also known, and commended, as one who had no time for unnecessary fool stunting.

Until they had climbed to four thousand, and worked up a speed of eighty per hour he was silent and intent on his job. Then, with a satisfied sigh, he put his lips to the tube and began asking questions.

"Now, Live-Wire, I've brought the owld bus along because you told me some fellow's like to be hurt," he said. "Shure, now, it's not a blind shot you're taking?"

"I heard Ult's message—though whether it foretold crime or not, only the night can prove," Lyle answered.

"Bedad, it's such a queer way for thieves to act—that's what makes me doubtful," Jerry said. "Now, you'd have thought this Ultima would have followed his victim, instead of wirelessin' to someone miles and miles away."

"He admitted that he missed his chance in Liverpool, and—though fiction writers usually ignore the point—even a rogue has to buy travel tickets, passports, and so on, things not obtainable at a minute's notice," Lyle reasoned shrewdly. "It's a strange way of nobbling a victim, I admit; but, come to think of it, it's almost inevitable that wireless holds amazing possibilities for the army of sharks who live by their wits."

"Um—yes," Jerry admitted. "Still, I don't freeze on to Ult's little game."

"Why not?" Lyle demanded. "He has a confederate in Rotterdam—there's trade unionism in crime, and Ultima might have confederates in half the cities of Europe—and he's after a fellow who's carrying big spoil in some form or



Putting every ounce of strength into the effort Lyle Lindsay tugged at the inert form of Jerry O'Gorman and dragged him into the cockpit. "Knocked out!" he muttered compassionately. "And one you'll never wake up from unless I speed up a bit!"

another. Missing him, he wirelesses by a mighty clever code. If he doesn't mean to obliterate this unknown D, then I've scored a wide, Jay."

"Bedad, it's sad and sorry I am for Mr. D," Jerry grunted. "Rotterdam's a big city, and it's a million to one against us spottin' him in time."

"I'm banking on the six a.m. arrival that Ult morsed," Lyle replied. "That narrows our search—it tells me that D is travelling by the night steamer. With any luck, we'll be there—or thereabouts."

But the luck—so far good—now faltered. Trouble began with a jarring "rap, rap" of laboured engine, and Jerry was forced to climb still higher and shut off.

"Overheating," he grumbled. "Cooling chamber clogged. Have to ease her down a bit."

That was a small matter, and soon put right. But great events have slender threads, and Jerry, having loosened his belt, and got the valve working properly, met strange and dire disaster.

He was settling comfortably back in his seat, the safety-strap in his hand, when the Fleetwing suddenly staggered, dropped like a winged bird, and plunged clean into heavy, impenetrable cloud.

Nor was that the worst. Momentarily off his guard, half sitting, half standing, Jerry's body jerked forward in sympathy with the plane's dive, and his forehead crashed on hard metal with shattering force!

"Great smoke!" Lyle yelled, motionless and aghast for one split second—during which the machine gave a fearful roll. Jerry's body pitched backwards over the cockpit, and he hung with feet tangled in the rudder bar!

Then, with lightning decision, Lyle acted. Imprisoned to his chair by its strap, he leaned forward to his hands' limit, grabbed the control-stick with his right, and clutched Jerry's slipping legs with his left!

The action canted the wings to an angle so steep that Lyle looked for nothing less than a complete and disastrous roll. But he didn't sit back whining over what might happen—he did his best to wheedle unkind Fate to his dire needs.

Unable to use the rudder-lines owing to Jerry's position, he wrenched the lever sideways, held firm for ten long, agonising seconds—then felt that the

carriage was slowly righting beneath his feet.

"That's about plumb—fore and aft," he muttered, driven to hazardous guess-work, for wing-tips and sighting strings were hidden by blinding mist. "Anyway, I can't hold old Jay much longer, so I'm chancing it."

Carefully easing the control to the vertical, he groped for the engine switch, shut off, and allowed the bus to glide slowly earthward at its own sweet will. Then, crooking a leg round his chair, he leaned outboard, and took firm grip on his pal's leather jacket.

"Now, old lad, I'm wishing you were an air-cushion—" he grinned wryly.

In the uncanny silence that surrounded him his own laboured heart-beats came startlingly clear. He gritted his teeth, he put every ounce into the effort, he endured a grinding strain, and—for a moment—feared failure as he'd never feared it before.

But pluck, plus muscle, proved victor. By fractions, by inches, he brought Jerry's shoulders level with his own, wrapped the sagging body in a swift bunny-hug, and dragged it into the well.

"Knocked out!" he muttered compassionately. "And one you'll never wake from unless I speed up a bit."

With frenzied haste he unstrapped the belt, dropped Jerry into his own chair, and climbed into the pilot's seat.

"Jay, old lad, it's lucky you're asleep," he thought whimsically. "If you knew your beloved camel was being nursed through cloudland by a 'dudateur' your own little engine'd stop for keeps, I'm thinkin'!"

His own very nearly did, when the bus serenely sailed through the cloud's base, and he spotted the lights of a sleeping town less than a thousand feet below!

"Phew-er!" he gasped; then made a lightning dive for the engine-switch, and pulled the stick into his chest with the one movement.

Like a startled colt the machine flung its nose into the air and streaked back to the clouds, an abrupt kick that ought to have stripped its tail, by all the laws that rule the flying game.

But Lyle was well satisfied. "Um! There's safety in height. There's always room at the top," he murmured. "Dunno where we are. Daren't try to land; can only wait for dawn or Jerry's recovery."

Until he had broken the clouds' surface, and was sailing in clear moonlight, he maintained the same rocketing angle. Only when he was satisfied that dangerous solidity was far below did he flatten, turn on the tiny glow-lamp of Jerry's gadget-board, and study its doings with absorbed interest.

"Altimeter shows six thousand—that's choice!" he murmured. "Locality chart—um—somewhere over England—that's hazy! Compass—" He glanced from instrument to propellers, and whistled with surprise. "Great snakes! We're heading for Greenland at about eighty per—and I'm wondering how long we've been doing it. Bless that cloud!"

Clumsily enough, he manipulated rudder-bar and joy-stick until the machine again pointed sou'-east—the direction he thought was about right. Then, settling Jerry as comfortably as possible, he snuggled down in his own seat, devoutly hoping the juice would last and that Jerry would speedily recover.

CHAPTER 3.

"Live-Wire" Jumps!

DAWN, and Jerry's waking sigh roused Lyle from the chilled daze that was rapidly overpowering him.

Slowing round in his seat, he saw that Jerry's eyes were open, and that he was staring about in palsied bewilderment.

"All serene, Jay!" he yelled, above the rickety roar. "You bounced over the top; but the old flag's still flutterin', and we haven't crashed yet."

"What happened?" Jerry asked stupidly. "Who knocked me out? Where are we?"

Lyle told the adventures of the night in a few terse words.

"Unfortunately, you'll name me 'bonthead.' I left the broad highway, somewhere in cloudland, and I'm still trying to locate it!"

"Shure, it could happen to anyone in night-cloud," Jerry answered. "But look, the light's spreading and the sea's beneath us?"

"And land's just showing, fore and aft!" Lyle yelled, glancing round.

"Bedad, it's well ye've done!" Jerry cried. "Ye can't mistake Dover Straits. You've brought us within a hundred miles of Rotterdam!"

But Lyle was ill-satisfied, after a glance at the clock.

"Eighty minutes left and a hundred miles to go," he muttered dubiously. "We're running it thin, Jay—thanks to your jolly old knock-out."

Jerry was silent for quite a time.

"Faith, it bates me how you iver expect to bag one spalpeen amongst a million Dutchmen!" he said later.

Lyle grinned.

"When Ultima was fiddling, didn't you hear someone persistently challenging P.C.X. and getting no reply?" he demanded.

"I did an' all," Jerry replied. "But that doesn't answer me question."

Lyle's grin broadened.

"You'll find it does," he said. "Anyway, I'm banking on it, and the saints protect us if I'm wrong!"

Jerry tried another tack.

"Live-Wire, it's forgettin' ye are that we'll be arrested for landin' on foreign soil the moment we touch down," he said.

"I'm inviting the arrest," Lyle chuckled. "You think it out, old dunderhead; it'll keep you warm!"

After that they concentrated on speed, Jerry prompting Lyle with many a cunning tip, and Lyle nursing the old bus with a touch so delicate that she responded by kicking out to capacity.

But she wasn't a Hendon racer, and it was bang on six when they sighted Rotterdam, and five minutes past the hour when they touched down on Volkern Luftweg Aerodrome.

That its staff was alert and watchful was quickly proved, for the Fleetwing's propeller had not ceased to revolve when a score of pilots and mechanics streamed across the grass, ordering the mysterious arrivals to descend.

"Englanders, you gum make der forced landings!" one fellow yelled, proudly airing his English. "You gum where you nod permissioned, so der heads we will sever and you die, until you account mid yourselves."

The sally was greeted with grins from the crowd, for nearly every man spoke English—of sorts. It is part of their training, and in general use for wireless work, in preference to their own guttural tongue.

Strangely enough, Lyle seemed quite disappointed with this frank and friendly greeting. But he brightened up wonderfully when a great fat fellow came tearing across the grass, his arms waving like semaphores, his face purple with rage.

"Tresbessers, you run off mid you!" he bellowed. "Der brivate ground dis is. Away mid you now—at once!"

To Jerry's surprise, Lyle's answer was deliberately offensive.

"Keep the wool on, old porpoise!" he drawled. "We're here, and here we stop until we've seen Mynheer Commandant!"

The words were fuel to the fat one's fury.

"I, Jan Sturm, I am der commandant!" he boomed. "I haf no business mid you. Ged away! Clear off! Go break der necks of you somewhere else!"

And, as though he intended to break their necks himself, he brandished a huge fist under Lyle's nose.

Lyle flushed, and knocked the fist aside.

"Cut it out, Sturm!" he said loudly. "We've flown several hundred miles to prevent a crime. You'll either listen to us, or an innocent man pays with his life for your stupidity!"

As Lyle had intended, the crowd heard every word he uttered. So loudly did

they voice their protests against their chief's behaviour that Sturm ended by glaring malevolently at the chums and turning sourly on his heels.

"Der time waste I cannot afford," he grunted. "But gome, I gif you two minids."

"I thought you would," Lyle murmured sweetly.

Fuming, the airway manager made for a long, low building, tramped through a room reserved for intending passengers, and flung back an inner door.

"My brivate office," he rasped. "I speak to you in der."

The private office held little beyond a desk, several chairs, and the company's six-valve transmitting set, the usual sort of thing that goes with every aero station.

Sturm dropped heavily into the swivel desk-chair, glanced at his watch, muttered something unpleasant in his own language, then stared sourly at the chums.

"Und now," he grunted, "dis silly tale—out mid it quickly!"

But Lyle refused to hurry. He seated himself opposite Sturm, hooked a chair forward for Jerry with his boot, and invited his pal to be seated, this despite the commandant's obvious impatience and his repeated and pointed consultations with his watch.

"Now, this silly tale," Lyle began at last. "It's one concerning wireless and rogues, and it begins in far-away Lancashire."

Slowly, and with infinite detail, Lyle told his story of the vibrant string and its Morsed message.

Sturm listened in frowning silence, and, at the end, laughed harshly.

"Der nonsense of it! A tale for childer!" he jibed. "But why gome to me mid it?"

Lyle's glance lingered on the transmitting set at Sturm's elbow.

"You understand wireless, d'you know anything of 'beam' reception?" he asked quietly.

For an instant Sturm's piggy eyes flickered, then again he smiled.

"Der directional—I haf read some about it," he admitted.

"Then you'll guess why we came to Rotterdam," Lyle answered. "The beam never lies—it located Pip See in this city."

"Der beam never lies," Sturm agreed. "So someone was bringing a fortune to Rotterdam. What else did it tell you?"

The sneer had vanished from his face, and he was eyeing Lyle intently.

"It told us that one named D had an appointment with a certain Hans Marias at noon to-day," Lyle answered. "It also told us that Pip See would pose as Marias, that he'd meet D on the steamer's arrival at six a.m.—with a suitable yarn for being six hours before time."

Sturm hesitated, consulted his watch, and frowned.

"You waste my time," he mumbled finally. "If der tale is true, it is a police work. You go to der police office—fore it is too late."

Lyle grinned.

"So very anxious to be rid of us, eh?" he drawled. "Sturm, we're not going, because"—he paused, unconsciously dramatic—"because, like you, we're expecting the victim to step into this place any old minute."

For a split second Sturm's jaw dropped, and his fat-circled eyes goggled like those of a stranded fish. Then, still seated, he swirled round to his desk—and in that instant Lyle jumped!

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The WALKING FELIX This Week

Don't miss any of these unique fun-makers, boys and girls! Buy this week's KINEMA COMIC (out on Wednesday, December 3rd) for the novel WALKING FELIX TOY! Next week's issue will contain a topping FLYING AEROPLANE, and the following week a POCKET CINEMA will be GIVEN AWAY. To make sure of them all, give your newsagent a regular order for

THE KINEMA COMIC 2d

Every Wednesday

"Len' a hand, Jay!" he yelled, hammer-locking Sturm's gross neck with his arm and pulling backwards until it seemed that the fellow's spine must snap on the chair-rest. "Dig into that drawer—expect you'll find a gun there."

Sure enough, Jerry's groping fist closed on a heavy Army pistol of the Mauser type.

"Weepin' William!" he cried. "It's right ye are—though how ye bowled the beggar out bates me intirely!" He pushed the barrel into Sturm's ample waistcoat. "Now then, Dutchy, let up on the kickin', or ye'll make me finger slip—an' shure, it'd be a shame to spoil this illigint carpet!"

So Sturm thought—or perhaps it wasn't the carpet he worried over!

"Put der weapon away—I gif in mid you!" he snarled.

"Keep the weapon there—until I've tied him up with the window cord," Lyle snapped. "If he moves—spoil the carpet," he added, winking over Sturm's head.

CHAPTER 4.

"Marias" Unmasked!

"SHTOP glarin', Sturm, or it's the optic nerve ye'll be fusin'!" Jerry reproved, grinning down on the unlovely object bound to

his own chair and gagged with a wad of blotting-paper.

"Ring off, Jay," Lyle snapped. "This chap's only one of a crook gang, and our job's not finished yet." He opened the door and stared round the public waiting-room. "That padded chair's your observation post—mine's the settee opposite."

For five long minutes the place remained silent, and apparently untenanted. Then a rumble of voices sounded without, and two men strode in, one old and frail, the other over-dressed, eyeglassed, and debonaire.

They were conversing in English, though each spoke with an accent noticeably different.

"Yes, Monsieur Darge, as my letter told you, I have found a purchaser for your diamonds—the eye-glassed one said. "Alas, it desolates me that I must ask you to make a further journey."

"But I fail to understand, Mynheer Marias," Darge answered. "Your client was to meet me in this city, and you were to have generous commission for bringing us together. Now you say I must fly to Amsterdam."

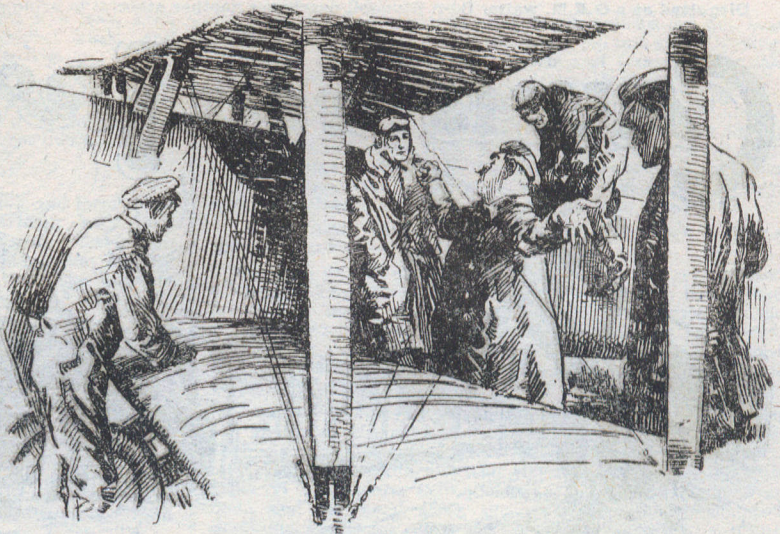
The false Marias was again "desolated." He spread his hands, he sighed, he nearly wept!

"Ah, it grieves me—but what would you?" he wailed. "My patron, the rich Countess Zononi, has received an urgent summons home, and must leave Amsterdam at ten o'clock. She wires that you meet her there—or the sale is off." He suddenly shrugged his shoulders and aped indifference. "The countess is rich and foolishly generous, but perhaps your jewels are not worth her consideration."

Darge hesitated, then slowly nodded. "I like not this ordering that I go here and go there," he answered. "But the money—it is vital. I am ready, Mynheer Marias."

"That is good—ver' good," Marias cried. "The commandant Sturm will himself pilot us, for he has business in Amsterdam, and—"

"And a jolly lean chance you'd have of getting there!" Lyle interrupted, springing to his feet and vaulting lightly over the couch. "No, Mr. Alias Marias, keep your paw from that pocket—there's a gun just behind your head, and it's held by a very unsteady hand."



"I Jan Sturm—I am der commandant!" boomed the fat Dutchman, brandishing a huge fist under Lyle's nose. "I haf no business mid you! Ged away—clear off—go break der necke of you somewhere else!" Lyle flushed, and knocked the fists aside. "Cut it out, Sturm!" he said loudly.

But the spurious agent was too wild with thwarted greed to listen to Lyle's warning. He snarled a guttural something in his own tongue, snatched a wicked blue automatic from his pocket—and fired.

Then things happened. Lyle, reading the murder in his eyes, ducked and dived for his legs, unconscious that Jerry's shot—a lucky snap—had whirled the gun from the fellow's hand and had paralysed the arm that held it!

They went down, all three, with a crash that shook the room; and for a moment the Dutch crook fought like a wild-cat. Then Lyle was astride his chest, Jerry had Sturm's gun against his forehead, and he was literally blubbering with pain and disappointment.

"He'll do, Jay," Lyle panted. "Hand me your gun—it'll soothe his temper—and get another length of cord."

"Sir, is this a—what you call—hold up?" Monsieur Darge quavered.

"No, sir; it's what I call a jolly old get out, for you!" Lyle laughed. "The secret of your deal in diamonds is known to half the crooks in Europe, apparently. If you had gone up in Sturm's bus you'd have been amongst the missing—when they touched down in Amsterdam!"

"Then this is not the real Marias?" the old man cried.

"Not a bit of him," Lyle laughed, wriggling aside so that Jerry could round off a neat job of knots.

"Believe him not!" the rogue yelled. "I am Marias—they would delude and rob you!"

But his last brazen bluff collapsed when half the Airways staff, alarmed by the pistol-shots, came crowding in the room—all mouthing excited questions.

Lyle held up a hand for silence. "This fellow claims to be Hans Marias, a diamond merchant," he said.

"Do any of you know him?" "Goltk—Herman Goltk—casino croupier!" a dozen voices answered.

"Ah, but I am bewildered!" Monsieur Darge cried. "I am in a maze!"

"You can thank Jerry's old bus you're not in the sea—feeding the nippy little jacksharps!" Lyle grinned.

Then the laughter died from his face, and he told all the company the amazing story of Ultima's message, of how wizard wireless had aided a crooked

gang, and of how it had worked their undoing in the end.

"But you have earned—" Monsieur Darge began.

"Your friendship, we hope—nothing else," Lyle interrupted. "And now, gentlemen, this specimen—the one inside—belongs to your police. We're off home, to land the big fish—Ultima!"

Within an hour the old Fleetwing again soared into the blue, and Jerry had hardly turned her nose westward than his mouth was at the speaking-tube.

"Now, Live-Wire, out wid it?" he yelled.

"Out with what?" Lyle demanded, smiling.

"Ye omadhaun—how you got on Pip See's tracks so quickly, av course," Jerry howled.

"Didn't I tell you that some irritated 'spark' operator was calling up P.C.X. all the time Ultima was sending his message?" Lyle chuckled.

"You did—an' what about it?" Jerry asked.

"Well, before I left home I peeped into the wireless directory and found that P.C.X. is the call sign for the new Airways Station in Rotterdam." He smiled broadly. "D'ye get it, Jay? Pip See taking a message in Rotterdam, and P.C.X.—of the same city—ignoring a most persistent call! Cause and effect, old sky pilot, and too plain a tip to be ignored."

"Ghosts of Galway—an' I never tumbled to it," Jerry murmured.

They reached England and home about midday.

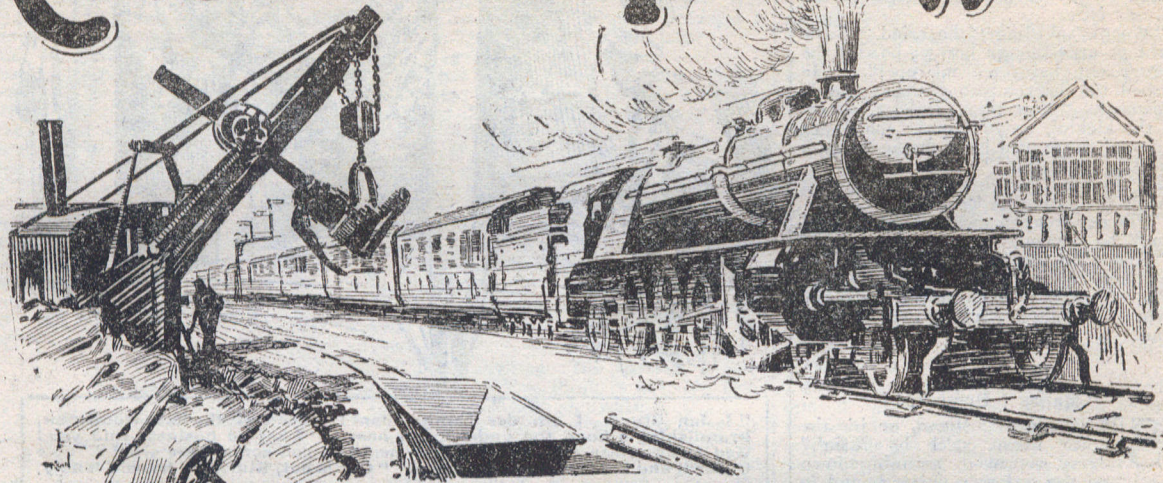
But Goltk, in all his welter of lies, had spoken one word of truth. The "beam" charts, when compared, crossed in Manchester, and so proved that the mysterious Ultima had operated amidst that wilderness of brick; but though the authorities searched and cross-examined every known wireless fan in the district, they had to confess themselves beaten—Ultima had vanished as effectually as though the ether had never vibrated with his harsh, rasping voice!

THE END.

(Look out for another topping yarn of Lyle Lindsay and Jerry O'Gorman.) THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 878.

Disguised as a G.E.N. waiter Sam Blundell overhears another attempt to bring about the downfall of the G.S.C.!

CHUMS OF THE IRON WAY!



A Thrilling Yarn of Exciting Adventure on the Railroad.
By ROLAND SPENCER and FRANCIS WARWICK.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED.

JIMMY SPEED, a plucky and cheery young newsboy of Blackhampton.
SIR RICHARD GRANT, chief director of the Great Scottish and Central Railway, who has in his employ nearly all the male population of Blackhampton.
JOHN LANGRISH—whose heavy and determined features, square-set jaw, and steely eyes earn for him the title of "Granite"—Langrish—chief director of the Great Electric Northern, and a rival of Sir Richard Grant.
HAROLD SOPER, a foreman shunter on the G.S.C., and an unscrupulous rascal, working in the pay of John Langrish, and
SAM BLUNDELL, a fireman on the G.S.C., and as true as steel.

It was a lucky day for the cheery young newsboy, Jimmy Speed, when, at great risk to himself, he rescued Sir Richard Grant from being crushed beneath the wheels of a monster goods-train engine, for it meant the realisation of his long-cherished ambition—to get a job in the great workshops of the G.S.C. To hear the clanging and the shouting, and to see the great steel locomotives towering around him, sent a thrill through Jimmy Speed.

But he is soon up against it when he meets Soper, who, in the pay of Granite Langrish, is endeavouring to poison his fellow-workers against the G.S.C.

He finds a friend, however, in Sam Blundell, a fireman. Then,

anxious to learn more, he shadows Soper, who, together with Cridland, another confederate of Langrish's, have met in the lonely ruins of Black Hill to discuss further villainous plans. A thrilling fight follows, Speed miraculously escaping from the hands of the villainous Cridland. Suspecting further villainy next night, Sir Richard Grant, together with some detectives, and Jimmy Speed, crouch in a ditch, waiting. An attempt is made to wreck a train. Speed and Blundell are captured in the scrap, and taken by Langrish's men to Black Hill ruins, where they discover a plot to collapse the tunnel. The two chums effect an escape, but before help arrives Cridland carries out his vile scheme. The great disaster casts a still deeper shadow over the great railway town, and the newspaper talk makes bitter reading for Blackhampton.

The following Saturday Carnborough meet Blackhampton on the football-ground. A fierce tussle takes place, but the bitter blood of the Carnboroughites soon comes to the surface. A fight follows, and inch by inch the staunch Blackhamptonians are forced back. Speed and Blundell are singled out, but cleverly evade capture by jumping on a passing electric express. With the exception of the first carriage the train is in darkness. This arouses the chums' curiosity. They are considering the strange situation when a waiter suddenly makes his appearance. Seizing the chance, Sam Blundell orders the man to change clothes.

"I'm going to do your job," he says—"or, at least, get through to that lighted carriage and see what's what!"
(Now read on.)

Sam Blundell—Waiter!

SAM BLUNDELL was rather a self-possessed person, but he did not feel at ease in his role of waiter on a G.E.N. express. However, he was in for the adventure, so he meant to see it through. He entered the first lighted coach of the train, and paused as he came to a door in the corridor from which the rattling of pans and the chink of china came to his ears.

There was someone there who would immediately give the alarm if he was seen, for doubtless they were the men with whom the real waiter had worked.

What should he do here? Investigations in the kitchen of the restaurant car would lead to nothing useful, anyway, even if he could look in without letting the cat out of the bag. No, he must push on past the kitchen and into the car where the directors, if the waiter's story were true, were dining. There he would run much less risk of discovery. There would be at least one other waiter, for sure, and a head waiter; but Sam felt pretty confident of being able to escape detection for some minutes at least. For he could keep his back to anyone likely to recognise him.

The young fireman pushed forward. He passed the door of the kitchen swiftly, but a voice bawled out:

"Hi, Simmonds, you've been a blamed time! Where're you off to now? Hi, there's this blinkin' tray o' corfee—"

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But Sam was gone, whisking round a twist in the corridor in double-quick time.

At the door of the dining-room car Sam paused and peered through. A number of men in evening-dress sat at the tables. A tall, thin waiter was bending over one of the tables, collecting plates, and the head waiter hovered about here and there.

One of the diners called the head waiter.

"You can stand down now," he said. "Leave one waiter on duty for drinks."

"Right, sir; thank you!" replied the head waiter, turning towards the tall, thin man. Sam saw him jerk his head with a meaning look, and the tall waiter grinned. Then the head man turned towards Sam.

Sam whisked round, showing his back to the dining saloon. He bent his head and pretended to be busy brushing his knee. The head waiter approached.

"Simmonds, hang on here and look after the gentlemen," he said.

"Right!" growled Sam, trying to imitate Simmonds' voice.

The head waiter turned with a muttered "Surly brute!" and to Sam's great relief the servants left the saloon. Then Sam plucked up courage and walked softly into the luxurious car.

Around the eight or nine tables in the saloon sat a number of diners in evening-dress. They were all men, and they looked a prosperous lot. Most of them inclined to

corpulence, but there were one or two who had lean, keen features. They were all laughing and joking freely, and appeared to be men of an equal social standing.

"So this is the pretty bunch of directors under the thumb of Chairman Langrish!" muttered Sam to himself, as he stood ready for orders. "Pretty crew! I'd like to sprinkle cayenne pepper in their drinks, blest if I wouldn't! But I daren't!"

The men were talking animatedly.

"Jolly surprise of Langrish's!" said one red-faced man who looked as if he had found the surprise very jolly indeed. "Making pleasure of stern business—what? Invitation to dinner—railway dinner, don't you know, and we find it's a grim struggle to beat all records in the London-Edinburgh run with the new-type locomotive. Here's to you and your continued success, Langrish!"

Sam started. So Langrish was aboard, seated there at one of the dinner-tables! Sam hadn't reckoned on this. He'd have to be very careful, for Langrish might see him—and then the game would be up. Still, diners of this sort hardly ever noticed waiters, Sam argued to himself, so with a bit of care he'd be all right.

Carefully noticing where the diners looked when they drank their champagne after the red-faced man's words, Sam discovered where Langrish was sitting. He was in a corner, and hidden from Sam's view, and therefore Sam from his.

"And we're doing wonders!"

Langrish's hard voice replied:

"Thanks, Velyn! Success to the company means success to all of us. This new 4-10-4 is a wonder! Here we are just north of Leeds, and it's now a quarter to eight! That means we have done practically two hundred and ten miles in exactly three hours. Seventy miles an hour average! Here's to our new locomotive, gentlemen!"

"Waiter!"

Two or three voices rasped out the word, and Sam seized a napkin. As if he had been used to the work from infant days, the young fireman flicked the wire off a bottle of champagne, which reposed in a vessel of ice, and swiftly passed down the car, refilling glasses. He was careful to keep his face turned away from Langrish as much as possible, but one quick glance he took told him that he need not fear greatly. Langrish was taking not the slightest notice of him.

"Look sharp, man! Don't go to sleep!" rasped one of the diners acidly. And Sam realised that men of this stamp are not used to calling "Waiter!" If he made any mistakes it would draw attention to him, and that, of course, mustn't happen. He must keep glasses filled to the brim without being called. Sam, growing thirstier every moment, got on with his work.

Langrish was speaking again:

"We can be certain now that this locomotive will come up to all expectations, gentlemen," he said. "We can average seventy miles an hour throughout the whole run. This will be a great blow to Grant! What steam-driven locomotive can do that? We gain our superiority in matters of speed, in acceleration. Did you notice how rapidly we picked up after slowing for that last bend? It was marvellous, and Harden, there, is to be congratulated."

Granite Langrish nodded towards one of his guests with a hard smile, and this man smiled in return. He was the man who had designed the new electric locomotive.

"We shall have some great news for the Press," began another man; but Langrish broke in with a "Humph!"

"I intend to keep it secret for the time, gentlemen," he said. "In fact, I have the biggest surprise of the evening for you now. I intend to challenge Sir Richard Grant to a race from London to Edinburgh, the race to take place in three months' time. What I desire, of course, is a spectacular win. This locomotive will do it."

A Dash for Freedom!

SAM all but dropped the bottle of champagne he was holding at the great news! A great railway race between the Great Scottish and Central and the Great Electric Northern! It would be an event of national importance. The result of that race would have far-reaching effect on the railways! And an average of seventy miles an hour to be maintained by the G.S.C. steam trains to be anywhere in it! Sam gulped at the thought. It couldn't be done! What did this mean? Another terrible blow to the G.S.C.

The young fireman stood as if dazed, and he did not hear another testy demand for his services. He just stood, staring, eyes fixed on the hard, cruel features of Granite Langrish, without seeing the man at all. A race between—

"Waiter, what the deuce is the matter with you?"

All eyes looked at Sam, and the young fireman swung suddenly round away from Langrish. But he was too late. The chairman of the G. E. N. saw and recognised. A wave of fury swept over his features, and he started up suddenly, upsetting glasses, and bumping into the man beside him.

"Catch him, Velyn! Don't let him go. He's a spy—a spy of Grant's—"

Sam had turned and bolted back towards the rear portion of the speeding train. Velyn made a weak grab, but he had drunk too much champagne to stay the course of the desperate young fireman. Sam left him on his back, and, followed by a shouting stampede of gentleman who had dined well if not too wisely, he burst into the corridor leading past the kitchen of the dining-car.

Disturbed by the row in the dining-saloon, the head waiter and the long, thin man flashed out from the kitchen where, doubtless, they, too, had been dining well. Sam met them like a rushing avalanche, and the men crumpled up, with yells, on the narrow floor of the corridor. Sam leapt over them and continued along the passage, looking back and chucking loudly to see a growing heap of directors piling on top of the unfortunate waiters on the floor.

Curses and yells floated down the corridor to Sam's ears. But the young fireman didn't wait to be entertained by them. He simply flew along through the dark coaches, bumping his shoulders against the sides of the corridors as he passed, reeling with the swaying of the rushing train.

The train shrieked onwards through the night, and at last Sam burst into the compartment where Jim, bored stiff, was sitting with the real Simmonds, who was bewailing his fate.

"Quick, Jim, out on to the footboards! All the blessed beehive are after us—"

Sam grabbed at the scruff of the real Simmonds' neck, his fingers gripping the collar of his own coat.

"Up with your hands, Simmonds! I want my coat!" he gritted, wrenching the garment clear of the terrified waiter.

Sam slipped into his coat, then, leading the way, the pair were out and clinging desperately to the footboard, working their way forward. Sam was glad he had his coat, for he felt that questions would be asked if he were found in the waiter's uniform of the G. E. N.

It was desperate work forcing their way forward along those rocking footboards, with the hurricane wind tearing at them. But they had a desperate game to play, so, gritting their teeth, they clawed their way onwards. Their greatest worry was if the pursuers would rush forward along the train in the corridors and intercept them. But, apparently, they were still searching the dark coaches.

Luckily, the train began to slacken in speed for another bend. Then Sam and Jim made quick way, and soon they were right forward, just behind the mighty yellow monster which was tearing its way through the night.

Sam was leading. Jim kept close, for he rightly judged that Sam had an idea to work out. Clear the train they must, but they could not jump it at the tremendous speed at which they were travelling.

Sam got his feet on the locomotive. There were foot-rests and hand-grips on the yellow monster to enable workers to mount to the top. Sam was up quickly, and Jim followed. Then, crawling along on their stomachs, they made for the doorway leading to the cabin of the locomotive.

The door was shut, but Sam gripped the handle-catch, jerked it up, and slid the door open. He was inside in a second, Jim close behind.

The motorman turned a startled face towards the intruders. He had one hand on a handle before him. Without releasing his hold he turned round to face Sam and Jim, his eyes wide with surprise more than with fear. The handle he held was what is known as the "dead man's handle." This is fitted on electric locomotives as a safety device. For, unlike steam locomotives, there is only one driver, and no other man in the cabin. Thus, should a driver drop dead suddenly, as has been known to happen, the centre portion of the handle—on which the driver has to apply a certain pressure—is relieved, and this automatically cuts off current and applies brakes.

Jim realised Sam's intention in a flash, even before the young fireman leapt at the motorman, gripped the lapels of his uniform coat and dragged him backwards, wrenching his hand from the handle.

A Bolt For It!

ALREADY the giant 4-10-4 electric locomotive, which only a few seconds past had been whirling the strange mystery train of the G.E.N. northward through the night at eighty miles an hour, had commenced to slow down.

As Sam Blundell had dragged back the driver from the controls, the "dead man's handle" had been automatically released, cutting off current instantaneously, and applying the brakes. A grinding tremor quivered through the cabin of the locomotive as the terrific speed slackened.

The driver gave a startled cry, and then struggled with Sam in grim, plucky silence. But he was no match for the young fireman of the Great Scottish and Central. Though he fought fiercely, Sam's great arms held the man in a vice-like grip.

Jimmy Speed glanced out of the glass by his head. A twinkling green signal light flashed past them. Ahead, dimly agleam in the broken moonlight, the treble-railed track dwindled away in a dead straight line to a vanishing-point lost in the gloom.

The train was doing a bare thirty miles an hour now. After the breathless speed of a minute before, the pace seemed a mere crawl. Jimmy, with a shout to Sam, made to swing himself out of the cabin to drop to earth. But Sam,

was all over in a moment. Even as he leapt forward with a cry of horror, the two entangled figures vanished from his sight, falling through the open door of the cabin into the darkness as the train, still travelling at a fair speed, ground its way on to a standstill many yards ahead.

From the windows of the coaches behind excited heads were staring out towards the locomotive. Even as Sam leapt out, a few moments before the train came to a complete standstill, half a dozen doors were flung open down the train.

Only for an instant did Sam hesitate, wondering what course he had better take. Then, though it seemed like certain capture, with dark forms dropping to earth from six or seven different points along the train, the young fireman turned to jump the signal wires and race back to where Jimmy and the driver had fallen.

But he had only taken three steps when running footsteps came to his ears. The next moment Jimmy was beside him.

"It's all right—neither of us hurt!" gasped Jimmy, with something very like a chuckle of excitement. "Fell soft—him underneath, in a bed of nettles!"

"You're lucky," muttered Sam, a wave of relief sweeping over him. "Might have been killed. But quick—follow me!"

He turned. Already someone had seen them, and excited shouts rang out behind them as the two chums raced away at the side of the gleaming rails.

"Round here—look out for the ditch—"

Sam caught Jimmy's arm and steered him suddenly aside. Across a ditch they went, and Jimmy heard a splash as Sam's foot slipped on the mud and went into the water. Up a steep bank of grass, wet with dew, they scrambled. Behind them they could hear the sound of hot pursuit, and again Jimmy chuckled breathlessly.

"Jove, Sam, what a game! All those chaps in boiled shirts and—"

A loud splash told the chums that one of their pursuers had failed to negotiate the ditch, with disastrous results to his glossy shirt-front.

A barbed-wire fence stretched along the top of the bank, and beyond it lay a dark stretch of moorland, where several sinister gleams of dark water could be seen.

"Gum, this is a nasty bit of country for playin' hide-and-

seek!" muttered Sam grimly. "There goes my posh waiter's bags!"

The sound of rending cloth came to Jimmy's ears as his chum scaled the barbed-wire.

Glancing back, Jimmy saw clearly in the light from the illuminated coaches the black running figures that were racing after them. Already the foremost were scrambling up the grass bank, the driver of the locomotive with them.

In the bewildering gloom it was difficult for Sam and Jim to pick their way over the marshy, dangerous ground that edged the moor. More than once the chums found their feet in water, and once, had not Sam dragged him back in time, Jimmy would have slipped forward into the deep water of a hidden mere. Covered with mud, they ran on as best they could.

"They're still after us!" cried Jimmy. "Jingo, Sam, you're right in saying this is no place for touch-last! Look-out—more water ahead! This way—this way!"

A second loud splash told of the fate of another pursuer. But three or four of their pursuers, headed by the driver of the train, hung doggedly on their heels.

(But Speed and Blundell had learned all they wanted to know and did not mean to be caught. Be sure you read next week's instalment of this thrilling serial, chums.)



Sam Blundell saw the danger, but he was powerless to stop it. For even as he stepped forward the two entangled figures vanished from his sight, falling through the open door of the cabin to be eaten up in the darkness.

used to the footplate, gave a startled cry of warning. One hand shot out, dragging Jimmy back in the nick of time.

"Not yet! You ass, too fast still—"

His involuntary action gave the driver his chance. In a moment he had wriggled free. Turning swiftly, he leapt at Sam, driving his fist with terrific force between Sam's eyes.

Sam Blundell staggered back, to crash against the driver's seat. The man leapt forward again, but Jimmy was too quick. Flinging himself forward, he collared the G.E.N. man round the middle. Struggling desperately, the two fell in a fighting heap.

To and fro on the broad floor of the cabin the two went rolling. Jimmy and Sam had no quarrel with the driver of the electric train—it was necessity that had caused them to attack him; but neither felt like using their fists in this scrap. The G.E.N. man, on the other hand, had no such reasons for any scruples, and he used his fists hard.

Jimmy grunted as he took a jolt on the jaw that caused him to see stars. Sam, coming to his chum's aid, drew back as Jimmy, exerting all his wiry strength, rolled uppermost. The youngster struggled to hold his man down, but could not. Across the floor the two went rolling—

Sam saw the danger, but was powerless to stop it, for it

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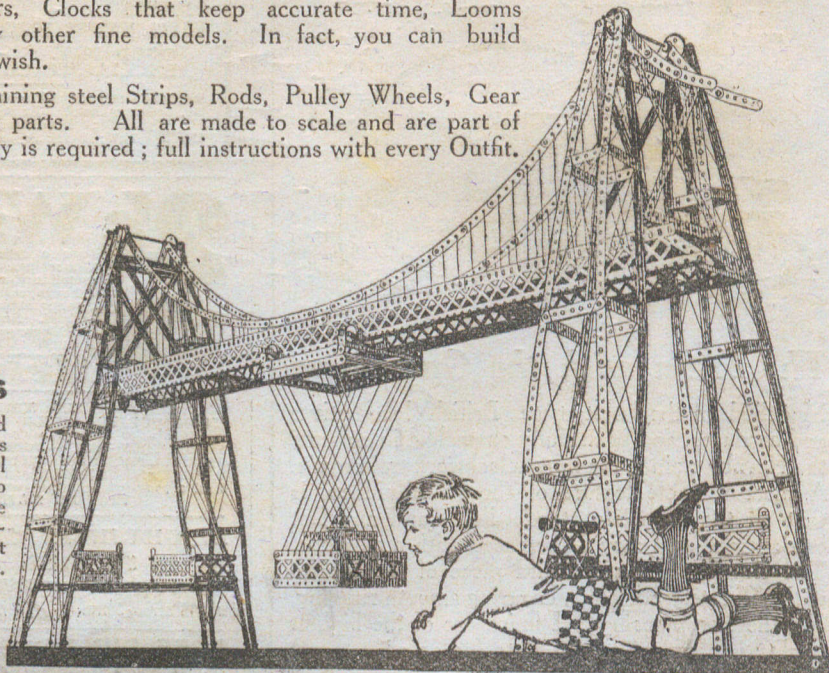
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"SAVED IN SECRET!"

(Continued from page 18.)

sake, and because I can't forget the ties of blood, though you can do so easily enough. Whether I did right I'm not sure; but you've got another chance, Crooke. Make the most of it. Another attempt to injure Tom Merry, and the Head shall know the truth about what you did this time. Do you understand?"

Crooke covered.

Without another word Talbot of the Shell left the study. In the Shell passage he came on the Terrible Three.

"Hallo, you're looking jolly serious!" said Tom Merry, with a smile.

"Put on a smile, old chap!" said Monty Lowther. "I've got an idea—the idea of the term! We're going to celebrate this giddy occasion, and the frustrating of Crooke's knavish tricks, with a spread in the study. My idea is to ask Crooke to lend us the banknote!"

Talbot laughed.

Crooke's answer to Monty's playful request, when he put his head into the study to make it, was a whizzing Latin grammar. But there was a great spread in Tom Merry's study, and all was merry and bright.

THE END.

(Next week's issue of the GEM—GRAND CHRISTMAS NUMBER—will contain a special Christmas story, entitled "GUSSY'S CHRISTMAS GUESTS," by Martin Clifford. Don't miss it on any account!)



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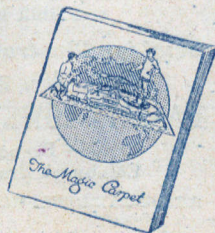
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