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EVERY
WEDNESDAY.



FIGGINS "DROPS IN!"

(A "smashing" incident from this week's fine story of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's.)

GEORGE FIGGINS IN THE LIMELIGHT—AND THE WARS—



Revenge is sweet, says Aubrey Racke, the cad of the Shell. But the sweets of revenge that appear to spring from his rascally plotting against big-hearted George Figgins change to ashes in his mouth!

CHAPTER 1.

Aubrey Racke—Footballer!

HANG it!" Aubrey Racke, the black sheep of the Shell at St. Jim's, stood in his study and stared out into the deepening dusk of the old quad at St. Jim's.

Racke did not look happy!

There was a deep frown on his face, and his thin lips were twisted into a bitter line.

The cause of Racke's troubles was not far to seek. The "gay dog" of the Shell held an open letter in his hand, and every now and then he glanced down at it, reading again and again the evidently discomfiting news it contained.

"Confound it!"

Racke swung away from the window and dropped into a chair. He crumpled the letter in his hand savagely.

The door of the study opened, and Gerald Croke, Racke's study-mate, entered the room. It did not take Croke a moment to see that something was wrong in Study No. 7.

"What's up?" demanded Croke, staring at his chum curiously.

Racke shot him a sullen glance.

"The pater!" he snapped.

"What's wrong with him?" asked Croke, surprised. As a rule, when Aubrey Racke had a letter from his father, it

meant a handsome remittance. For Racke senior had been a War-time profiteer, and was now a millionaire. It puzzled Croke, therefore, to find that for once Racke was in a bad temper because of a letter from home.

"The pater's got a blessed bee in his bonnet!" growled Racke. "He's taken it into his head that he wants me to play games—to be a blessed shining light on the footer-field, and all that sort of rot! He says he wouldn't mind me being low down in the Form as regards work if I showed I was an athlete—"

"Oh, my hat!"

Croke gave a guffaw. The idea of Aubrey Racke being a shining light at athletics seemed to amuse Gerald Croke.

Racke glared at him.

"What are you sniggering about, you cackling dummy?"

"Sorry!" gasped Croke hastily.

"The pater says he's coming down to the school on Saturday," went on Racke gloomily. "He says he wants to find me playing in a footer match. If not—"

"What'll happen if he doesn't?" grinned Croke.

"Well, reading between the lines, he's going to part up with a whacking remittance if he does," said Racke savagely. "A couple of tenners or so, I expect. But if he doesn't, he won't shell out a brass farthing!"

Croke's face fell. He stared at his chum's scowling face blankly.

Though, as a rule, Study No. 7 was very well supplied with funds, thanks to the liberal allowance Racke junior

--IN THIS COMPLETE TALE OF TOM MERRY & CO., OF ST. JIM'S!

UP AGAINST IT!

by Martin Clifford

received from Racke senior, at the moment the two cads of the Shell were hard up—very hard up. Crooke, like Racke, had been relying on an early remittance from Mr. Racke, in answer to Aubrey Racke's urgent demand for funds. But, instead of the expected cash, it seemed that Mr. Racke had replied in a very caustic tone that he expected his son to show himself worth it!

It was a nasty shock for Crooke, as well as for Racke.

"Oh crumbs!"

"It's rotten!"

The two black sheep stared at one another disconsolately.

"Well, there's only one thing for it," said Crooke, doubtfully. "You'll have to let him find you playing in a footer match on Saturday."

"Don't talk like a fool!" snapped Racke. "How the dickens can I?"

Racke knew perfectly well that Tom Merry, the captain of games in the junior school, would never dream of playing him in a match—not at such short notice, at any rate. If Racke made up his mind to go into training, and showed that he could play football, in time he might win a place in the team. But to get a place by Saturday was impossible.

"Well, you never know your luck," said Crooke desperately. "Why not ask Tom Merry to play you, as a special favour?"

"I can see him doing it!" snarled Racke.

"Why not ask him, anyway?" persisted Crooke. "It's your only chance—no harm in trying."

"Something in that," said Racke grudgingly.

And with frowning brow, Aubrey Racke strode from the study and slammed the door after him, leaving Crooke looking almost equally sour.

There was no doubt but that Racke's father's caustic letter had come as a bombshell in Study No. 7.

Outside Study No. 10 Racke halted and knocked. The cheery voice of Tom Merry bade him enter, and Racke opened the door and strode in.

The captain of the Shell was seated at the table in the study, together with his two chums, Monty Lowther and Harry Manners. The Terrible Three were busy with their prep, and they did not look too pleased when they saw who their visitor was.

"Racke!" exclaimed Monty Lowther, in surprise. "Shut the door as you go, will you?"

"Good-bye, Racke!" said Manners, bending over his books again.

Racke scowled.

His reception had not been exactly favourable, but he was too determined in his purpose to be snubbed so easily.

"I want a word with you, Merry," he growled.



"Well?" asked Tom Merry.

"Is there a match on next Saturday?" demanded Racke. Tom Merry jumped. That the cad of the Shell should show any interest in football was almost too amazing to be true.

"Yes," said Tom, staring at Racke in great surprise. "Why?"

"Because I—I want to play in it!" blurted out Racke, breathing hard.

"M-m-my hat!"

Tom Merry stared at Racke as if he could not believe his ears. Monty Lowther gave an exclamation, and dropped his Latin dictionary in his amazement. Unfortunately, the dictionary, in falling, knocked over the inkpot, and there was a yell from Manners as the contents splashed over his books.

"You clumsy ass!" roared Manners.

"Sorry!" gasped Lowther. "It was Racke's fault, anyway—he startled me! Did you hear what he said? He wants to play in the match on Saturday!"

"Are you joking, Racke?" asked Tom Merry wonderingly.

"No!" growled Racke. "I mean it, I tell you!"

The Terrible Three stared at one another. Then they stared at Racke. Monty Lowther tapped his forehead significantly.

"Batty!" he murmured. "Bats in the belfry and rats in the attic. He'll be saying he's a poached egg next. Where do you feel the pain, Racke? At the back of the napper, or over the ears?"

Racke breathed hard. He tried to twist his sour features into a cheery smile.

"Well, what about it?" he asked affably. "If you're short of a man, Tom Merry—"

"I am short of a man," nodded Tom thoughtfully. "The School House is playing Mallingham on Saturday, and Levison's crooked."

A gleam came into Racke's eyes. He took an eager step forward.

"Good! I'm your man!" He leaned across the table eagerly. "Will you play me?"

Tom Merry stared at the blackguard of the Shell curiously.

"What's your idea, Racke?" he asked bluntly.

Racke hesitated. He did not wish to explain the whole truth. But a half-truth might win Tom Merry's sympathy, he told himself.

"It's like this," he said quickly. "My pater's very anxious for me to take up footer. He's visiting the school on Saturday, and it would please him no end if I was in the team."

"I see," Tom smiled slightly.

He could understand Racke's father's wish for his son to become a footballer. But he could not see Mr. Racke's son and heir going very far out of his way to fulfil his father's wish. An attempt to figure on the footer field on the day of his father's visit was about as far as Aubrey Racke was likely to go! The millionaire's visit over, Racke would undoubtedly relapse again into his old slacking habits.

And Tom Merry did not feel inclined to risk a heavy defeat from the Mallingham team for the sake of helping Racke to deceive his father!

"Sorry, Racke, but there's nothing doing," said Tom quietly. "And as we are rather busy, perhaps you'll go?"

"Shut the door quietly," added Monty Lowther.

Racke glared from one to another of the three chums. But he saw that further argument was useless.

"Hang you!"

And with that pleasant farewell, Aubrey Racke swung on his heel and strode from the study with a black brow.

As he had feared, his attempt to win a place in the School House team had ended in dismal failure. But Aubrey Racke was not going to give up too easily. He had a lot at stake, and he meant to leave no stone unturned to get his wish.

"Figgins!" he muttered suddenly.

Since it was a School House team, and not a St. Jim's team, that was playing Mallingham on Saturday, Figgins & Co., of the New House, might be playing a match of their own.

"I'll try Figgins!" muttered Racke.

And though it seemed a slim enough chance that the New House would accept his services, there was renewed hope in the eyes of Racke as he hurried down the stairs on his way to visit George Figgins, the captain of the Lower School in the New House.

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CHAPTER 2.

Figgins' Suggestion!

"F IGGINS!"

George Figgins, ascending the steps to the New House doorway, halted and turned as he heard his name called.

Figy had just returned from the village, and Racke had recognised his lanky figure as the New House skipper crossed the quad in the dusk with his coat-collar turned up against the wintry wind. Racke hurried up.

"Hallo, hallo!" rejoined Figgins cheerily. Then he gave a grunt when he saw that it was Racke. "What's up?"

Racke saw now that Figgins was not alone. Kerr and Fatty Wynn, Figgy's two chums, had joined him. All three stared at Racke with distinctly unfavourable expressions. Racke felt a trifle uneasy. School House fellows sometimes got rather roughly handled when they ventured across into the New House precincts.

"Pax," said Racke hastily. "No fooling! I say, Figgins, I want a word with you."

"Get it off your chest," suggested Figgins.

"Is your House team playing a match on Saturday?" queried Racke eagerly.

"What on earth has that got to do with you?" exclaimed Figgins in surprise.

"Well, if you are——" Racke hesitated, then plunged on desperately. "I'm rather keen on footer these days, and I'm wanting a game on Saturday. Tom Merry hasn't got room for me, as it happens. I thought if you were short of a man, Figgins, you might like me to fill up. I know some of your chaps are in the sanny——"

"My only aunt!" ejaculated Figgins.

"Of all the cheek!" gasped Kerr.

"A School House bouncer wanting to play for us!" breathed Fatty Wynn. "If that isn't the blessed limit!"

Racke eyed the New House trio uneasily. He was on dangerous ground, and he knew it.

"So you are a footer fiend, are you?" murmured Figgins, staring at Racke curiously. "Bit of a change, isn't it?"

"Well, perhaps it is," admitted Racke, with rather a sickly grin. "But better late than never, I suppose."

"Oh, rather!" said Figgins, with deep irony.

He was puzzled. Not for a moment did George Figgins believe that Racke really wanted to take up football seriously. There was something behind the black sheep's sudden, surprising desire to play football.

"The age of miracles hasn't passed yet!" ejaculated Kerr.

"Oh, rats!" grunted Racke. "I say, Figgins, what about it?"

There was a warlike gleam in the eyes of Fatty Wynn. The Falstaff of the New House was indignant at what he considered a School House waster's "nerve" in asking to play for the New House. He snorted.

"Roll the bouncer down the steps!" he suggested warmly.

And the fat junior made a move as if to begin the good work. Racke jumped back hastily.

"Hands off!" he exclaimed.

"Half a jiff, Fatty," put in Figgins suddenly. "Let him alone!"

Fatty Wynn stared at his chum in surprise, and Figgins winked at him solemnly, a wink that Racke failed to see. Fatty grinned. Clearly, Figgins had some scheme at the back of his mind for getting a little fun out of Aubrey Racke!

"Look here, Racke," said Figgins gravely, "I'm sorry, but the New House aren't playing a match on Saturday." Racke's face fell. "But if you're so jolly keen to have a game of footer, why not get up a team of your own?"

"Oh, my hat!" breathed Kerr softly, grinning.

The idea of Aubrey Racke getting up a footer team was amusing to the Scottish junior. But Racke's eyes gleamed suddenly.

"Gad! That's an idea!" muttered Racke. "I hadn't thought of that!"

His face lit up. Here was an easy way out of the difficulty! Why hadn't he thought of it himself? After all, if he could arrange for a team to play a game of football on Saturday his father would never know that it was not a regular St. Jim's team in which his son was figuring! Racke fairly hugged himself with delight.

"It's a great scheme!" he exclaimed. "The only trouble is, to get someone to play against my team."

"That'll be easy enough," said Figgins blandly.

"You mean you'll get up a New House team to play us?" demanded Racke eagerly.

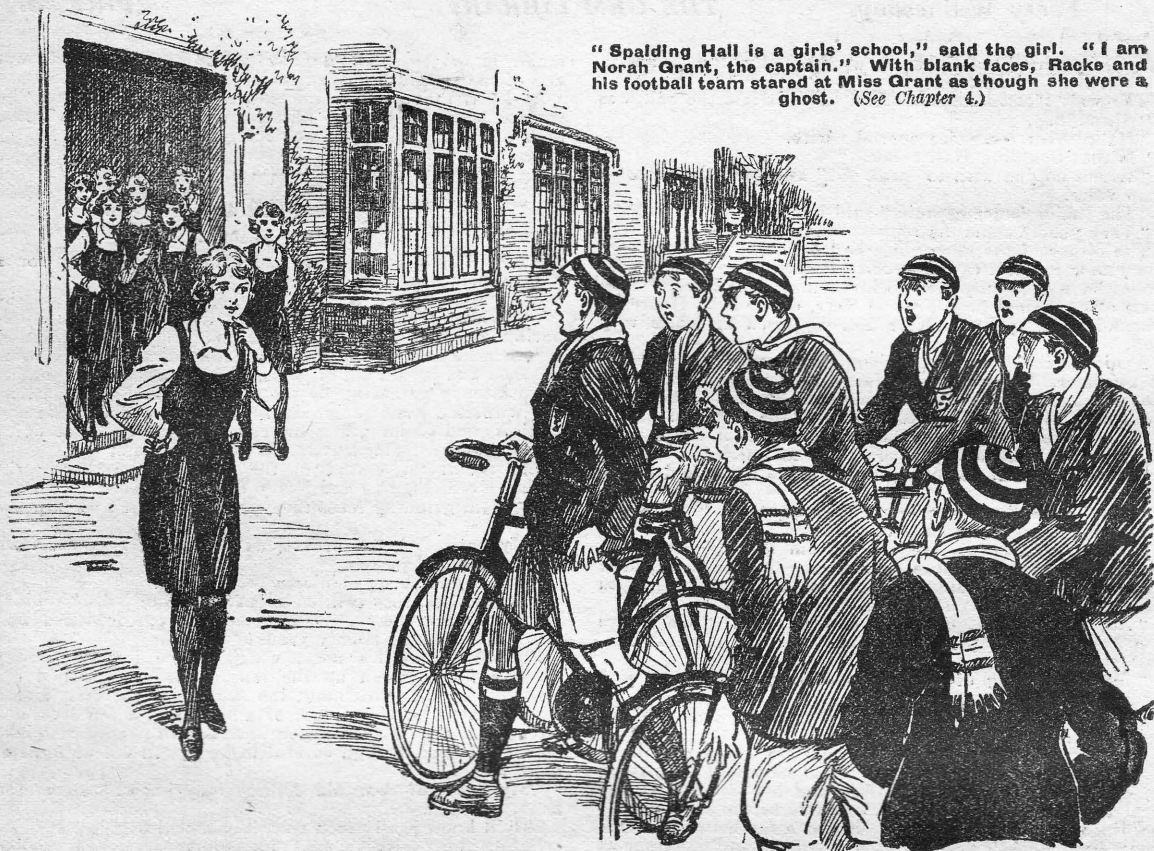
Figgins snorted.

"My hat, no!" he answered crossly. "Of all the cheek!" Then, remembering his scheme, he grinned. "No, too many of our chaps in the sanny," he went on hastily. "But you can get a game all right, Racke."

"Where?" asked Racke dubiously.

"Why, haven't you heard of that new school that's been opened not far from here?" exclaimed Figgins.

Racke shook his head.



"Spalding Hall is a girls' school," said the girl. "I am Norah Grant, the captain." With blank faces, Racke and his football team stared at Miss Grant as though she were a ghost. (See Chapter 4.)

"Oh, rather!" nodded Fatty Wynn, concealing a grin behind his fat hand. He was beginning to understand Figgins' little scheme at last. "You mean Spalding Hall, Figgy?"

"That's it," nodded Figgins.

There was a sudden muffled laugh from Kerr. Figgins shot him a warning glance. But Racke had failed to notice Kerr's stifled amusement.

"Spalding Hall?" echoed Racke. "Never heard of it!"

"Of course not, you ass," said Figgins. "I tell you, it's a new school. Only just opened. It's on the other side of Wayland. Why not go over there and play 'em on Saturday, Racke?"

"Do you think they want fixtures?" asked Racke eagerly.

"I know they do," nodded Figgins. Whether, however, they were footer fixtures that Spalding Hall School wanted he did not say.

"Good!" exclaimed Racke. "To-day's Thursday—not much time, is there? But if they want fixtures they'll be only too glad to play my team on Saturday, I suppose. I'll bike over there and fix it."

"I shouldn't," said Figgins hastily. "I shouldn't go over there. I should phone 'em up."

"Well, it would save trouble," admitted Racke. "I wonder what their phone number is?"

"I can tell you," said Figgins.

He took out a pencil and a scrap of paper and scribbled a telephone number on it, handing it to Racke. Racke pocketed it with great satisfaction.

Whether the number that Figgins had given him was the number of Spalding Hall was another little point that Figgins failed to make clear. Figgy had been perfectly truthful in telling Racke that he was able to tell him the number of the new school, but he had not said that he would.

"I'll phone up to-night," said Racke. "I know Railton is going out to-night at half-past six. I'll be able to nip into his study and use the phone."

It was a risky proceeding, using a Housemaster's telephone. But Racke was prepared to take risks in order that his father should find him playing in a footer match on Saturday.

"Good idea!" nodded Figgins.

"What sort of a place is Spalding?" inquired Racke. "A small place, of course?"

"Ye-e-es," admitted Figgins. "Not as big as St. Jim's, of course. But quite big enough."

"Right-ho!" said Racke. "Well, thanks for the tip, Figgins!"

"Don't mench!"

Aubrey Racke hurried away across the dusky quad towards the School House, to seek out Crooke, and Mellish, and his other cronies, and arrange for eleven footballers to play against Spalding. It was not likely that Racke would succeed in gathering together a very strong team from the material at his disposal. Grundy, for example, would no doubt have to be roped in, and any team with Grundy playing for it was doomed to a terrific licking. But even if Spalding beat them by a dozen goals, it wouldn't matter, Racke told himself. His father, to whom he intended to write that very evening, would find his hopeful son playing in a match, and that was all that Racke wanted.

"Quick!" muttered Figgins the moment Racke was gone. "We've got to buzz over to Wayland like blessed lightning to be there by the time the ass telephones!"

"What number did you give him?" gurgled Fatty Wynn.

"Old Martin's—the book shop!" chuckled Figgins. "I'm going to answer Racke's phone call!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Won't Racke get a giddy surprise on Saturday!" gasped Kerr.

"And won't Spalding Hall, too!" chortled David Llewellyn Wynn.

And still chuckling, the New House trio hurried across the quad in the direction of the cycle-shed. A few minutes later, Figgins & Co. were cycling out of gates and speeding off towards Wayland.

It was a good thing for the peace of mind of Aubrey Racke that he could not see their faces at that moment.

CHAPTER 3.

All Fixed Up!

"COAST'S clear!" murmured Mellish.

"Good!" said Racke.

The tall figure of Mr. Railton, the Housemaster of the School House, had just vanished down the stairs. Racke, who had been watching for him with Mellish and Crooke, hastily emerged from his hiding-place round the corner and hurried along the passage to the master's study.

A few moments after slipping into Mr. Railton's deserted study, Racke had the telephone receiver to his ear.

"Wayland, four-two-one!" he murmured into the mouth-piece, with an anxious glance at the door. If Mr. Railton

took it into his head to return unexpectedly, Racke was in for trouble, he knew.

The wait seemed interminable. But at last the call was put through.

"Hallo!" came a voice over the wire.

"Is that Spalding Hall School?"

"Whom do you wish to speak to?" answered the voice—a deep voice.

"The junior footer captain," said Racke.

"Very good," came the reply. "Hang on, please."

The owner of the deep voice had evidently gone to fetch the junior football captain—or so it seemed to Racke. He would have been surprised to know that it had really been none other than George Francis Kerr, of the New House, to whom he had spoken! Kerr had disguised his voice very well.

Again Racke flung an anxious glance over his shoulder at the door. He expected a fairly long wait. But, to his pleasant surprise, the games captain of Spalding must have been near at hand at the other end of the wire, for almost at once there came another voice. This time it was a boy's voice, and it seemed vaguely familiar to Racke.

"Hallo! Is that the junior footer captain?" asked Racke eagerly.

"Yes," came the answer—truthfully enough. Figgins was junior footer captain of the New House at St. Jim's.

"Good!" exclaimed Racke. "I am speaking from St. Jim's. My name is Racke. I am—er—skipper of a junior team here, and I want a fixture for Saturday. Are you fixed up for Saturday afternoon?"

"No, rather not!" came the hearty reply. "We'll give you a match with pleasure. Come over at half-past two, will you?"

"I was thinking of you chaps coming over here," said Racke doubtfully.

"Oh, no; you come over here to Spalding," answered the voice on the telephone rather hastily.

"Right you are!" Racke grinned. He would explain to his father in his letter that night that he would be playing an away match at Spalding Hall, and his father could go straight to Spalding to watch the game before returning to St. Jim's for tea with his son. It was a far better arrangement, from Racke's point of view, than playing the game at St. Jim's. If his very scratch team put up a hopeless show—and even Racke knew they probably would—they would escape the ridicule of the rest of the school if the match were played away.

"Right-ho!" repeated Racke. "That's fine! I'll bring my lot over to you. We'll be there by two-thirty, then. Whom shall I ask for?"

"Ask for V. Sharp."

"Right! By the way, your voice seems a bit familiar. I wonder if we've met somewhere—"

There was no answer over the wire. V. Sharp had apparently rung off.

Racke replaced the receiver and hurried from the study. At the end of the passage Croke and Mellish were waiting for him.

"All serene," said Racke, with great satisfaction. "We're going over there to play. Better than playing here."

"I'd say so," nodded Croke, "with Grundy in the team!"

Grundy had already promised to play in Racke's eleven. Though the great George Alfred Grundy did not like the idea of playing under the captaincy of Aubrey Racke, he was too eager to shine on the footer field on the following Saturday to worry too much for whom he was playing. Grundy believed that he was one of the world's great footballers, but since everyone else always told him quite rudely that he was the world's worst it was very seldom that he got an opportunity of displaying his astonishing prowess.

In Study No. 7, Racke sat down in the armchair and took out a pencil and paper, and began jotting down names.

"There's me, and you two," he told Mellish and Croke.

"And Grundy. Wilkins and Gunn will play if Grundy insists on it, and we'll get him to make 'em. Gore said he'd play. So will Tompkins. I told him I'd give him the hiding of his life if he didn't!" Racke chuckled. "I dare say Lumley-Lumley will play, too. And Scrope. That's ten."

"What about some of the New House chaps?" suggested Croke. "Chowle might oblige—or Clampe."

"I'll go and ask Chowle now," nodded Racke, and left the study.

He returned in a few minutes with the news that Chowle, the sneak of the New House, had agreed to play—for a consideration.

"I told him I'd stand a spread afterwards—when the pater had dubbed up!" grinned Racke.

"That's the idea," chuckled Mellish.

"Rather!" agreed Croke.

"Now to write to the pater," murmured Racke, and sat down at the table to write the letter that was to let Racke

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senior know the splendid news—that his son and heir was one of the shining lights of football at St. Jim's.

At least, that was the impression that Racke's carefully-worded letter conveyed. Whether subsequent events would bear out that impression was really rather doubtful!

CHAPTER 4.

A Girls' School!

SATURDAY came crisp and cold—an ideal day for a footer match.

Tom Merry & Co., together with the rest of the School House team, were in the dressing-room preparing for their match against the visiting Mallinghamites, when Racke and his ten supporters wheeled their cycles from the shed and passed out of gates. And as most of the juniors were already gathering by the touchline on Little Side, no one witnessed the strange sight of Racke, and Croke, and Mellish, and Grundy, and the other members of that weird and wonderful team, leaving St. Jim's in footer kit.

But round the corner of the lane, hidden among the bushes there, Figgins and Fatty Wynn and Kerr were waiting. With grinning faces they watched Racke's team pedal by.

"My hat. What a collection!" chuckled Figgins, when the cyclists had passed.

Fatty Wyna shook helplessly with mirth.

"Footballers, they call 'emselves!" he chortled. "Wilkins and Gunn are the only two there who could kick a ball into a haystack at twenty yards!"

Figgins craned his neck, watching the last of Aubrey Racke's team vanish up the lane. Then he jumped up. Followed by his two chums, the skipper of the New House wheeled his own bicycle out of hiding, and a few moments later the trio were speeding up the road in pursuit of Racke and his cronies, though careful to keep well out of sight of those ahead.

"My hat! If dear old Aubrey only knew!" murmured Kerr.

"He'll know pretty soon now!" chuckled Figgins.

Before long Racke and his supporters were cycling through Wayland. It was market day, and it was not easy to make their way through the crowded streets. When at last they had passed through the throngs of country-people, Racke glanced at his watch with a frown.

"Nearly half-past!" he exclaimed. "We mustn't be late!"

"What does it matter?" grinned Chowle.

"Of course it matters!" snorted Grundy. "I tell you we're going to lick this new school this afternoon, so we've got to be in time to do it!" He glanced round at the others with a sniff. "Of course, I know you're pretty nearly all duds and wash-outs, but with me playing, we're bound to put up a hefty score."

"Think so?" murmured Gunn ironically. Gunn, who was a fair sportsman, was thoroughly disgusted at being found in the company of all the cads and slackers of the junior school. Only the forceful arguments of Grundy had persuaded Gunn and Wilkins to put in an appearance; Grundy's forceful arguments being his hefty fists!

"Of course, it's a rotten business, being in a team with Racke as skipper," continued Grundy, with a sniff. "But when I've practically licked the Spalding team on my own, it'll show Tom Merry he can't afford to keep me out of St. Jim's footer any longer."

"We're nearly there, now, I fancy," said Gore.

"Good!"

Figgins had carefully explained to Racke just how to reach Spalding Hall. Following Figgins' directions, it was not long before Racke saw over the bare trees ahead the chimneys and gables of a big, old house, set well back from the road.

"That's the place!" he exclaimed.

"Looks small!" remarked Mellish.

"It's only a small school, of course!" nodded Racke.

"All the better!"

A little farther on they caught sight of two big iron gates, flanked by stone pillars, clearly the gates of Spalding Hall.

With Racke leading the way, the eleven St. Jim's juniors pedalled in through the great gateway.

A big quadrangle met their gaze, surrounded on three sides by a big, rambling red-brick building. Spalding Hall had once, clearly, been a large private mansion, dating from Elizabethan days. It was an attractive place, though it was obvious that the school into which it had been transformed was nowhere near the size of St. Jim's.

Racke dismounted from his cycle, and the other juniors followed suit.

The quad seemed strangely deserted. Racke stared round hopefully. There was a porter's lodge by the gates, but apparently the porter was not at home that afternoon.

DO YOU KNOW that there are FOUR TOPPING FREE GIFTS in this week's "Magnet" ? 7

"Nobody about," said Racke, puzzled. "I should have thought that chap Sharp would have been waiting here to meet us."

Then suddenly he jumped, and stared across the quad in puzzled bewilderment.

"My hat! Look!"

"A girl!" growled Grundy. "What's she doing here? Must be the Head's daughter."

The girl who had appeared from one of the doorways was staring across at the eleven juniors intently. She was a tall girl, with dark hair and a pretty face. She turned and walked towards them.

The St. Jim's juniors raised their caps.

"Good-afternoon!" said Racke coolly. Racke rather fancied himself as a ladies' man. "I wonder if—"

But the girl interrupted. Her eyes were on their footer kit, which showed plainly beneath their overcoats.

"Were you wanting anyone?" she inquired, glancing from face to face curiously.

"Rather!" nodded Racke. "A chap called Sharp. V. Sharp."

"A—a boy, you mean—called Sharp?" echoed the girl, apparently completely bewildered.

"Yes," said Racke. "He's the captain of junior footer at this school I believe."

The girl stared at him. And then suddenly she burst out laughing. It was Racke's turn to stare—as well as the rest of the footballers.

For the girl facing them was laughing quite uncontrollably.

"I—I say, there's nothing wrong about Sharp?" stammered Racke uneasily, a vague alarm entering his mind.

"I'm afraid there is!" The girl composed herself with an effort. Her eyes were dancing. "V. Sharp, you say his name is? What does the V stand for, I wonder?"

"Victor, I suppose—or Val," said Racke, wondering if the young lady had taken leave of her senses.

"You are sure it doesn't stand for 'Very'?" asked the girl gravely. "Very Sharp, you know?" She laughed again. "Oh, dear! I'm afraid someone has been playing a joke upon you."

"A—a joke?" roared Grundy, aghast. "Why—what—"

"You see," went on the girl merrily, "this is Spalding Hall—"

"I know!" cried Racke, mystified and impatient. "And we've come to play the junior eleven at football!"

"Really?" gasped the girl. "Then you've certainly had a trick played on you! Spalding Hall is a school for girls, you see. I am Norah Grant, the captain!"

With blank faces, Racke and his footballers stared at Miss Grant as though she were a ghost. George Alfred Grundy was the first to find his voice.

"What?" he roared, staring at Racke with an angry flush mounting in his face. "Racke, you prize cuckoo—"

"A—a—a girls' school?" stuttered Racke feebly.

"Yes, a girls' school," answered Miss Grant quietly, with eyes dancing mischievously.

Eleven crimson-faced juniors stared at her dumbly.

The sudden sound of a motor-horn cut the silence. A big closed car came swinging in at the gates. Racke turned his head and gave a startled gasp.

"The pater!"

It was the last straw. Aubrey Racke's dearest wish at that moment was for the earth to open up and swallow him. Mr. Racke had duly arrived at Spalding Hall—just in time to see his son's arrival to play football against a school for girls.

"Oh gad!" groaned Racke miserably. "My hat! I'll slaughter Figgins!"

It was at that moment that Racke caught sight of the grinning face of Figgins himself, watching the scene with evident merriment from outside the gates, with Kerr and Fatty Wynn.

Other girls were appearing at the doorway now, and crossing with evident curiosity towards the little group. Racke wanted to turn and run—as did the rest of the St. Jim's juniors.

But already the big car had drawn to a standstill. The door opened, and Racke's father stepped out into the quad, puffing at a big cigar and looking thoroughly delighted to see his son.

"Ah, there you are, Aubrey, my boy!" exclaimed Mr. Racke, crossing towards the group. "All ready for this football match, eh? Splendid, my boy—splendid! But who are these young ladies?"

With puzzled face, Racke senior glanced round at Norah Grant and the other Spalding Hall girls who had come up, and were now gathered round, smiling broadly. They had learnt the cause of the juniors' presence there—they knew that the St. Jim's fellows had been fooled into coming to Spalding Hall for a game of football against a team captained by a V. Sharp. Norah Grant's polite suggestion

that that initial stood for Very, and not for Victor, met with unanimous agreement.

And the girls were smiling very broadly indeed. In fact, most of them were laughing.

The fact that something was wrong was clear now to Mr. Racke. That gentleman laid a heavy hand on his son and heir's shoulder.

"Well, my boy?" exclaimed Mr. Racke. "Will you kindly explain?" There was a puzzled frown upon his face.

Racke glanced round miserably at the laughing faces of the Spalding Hall girls, and at the crimson, sheepish faces of his supporters from St. Jim's. From outside the gates came a yell of laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins & Co. were enjoying the fruits of their jape to the full! The chums of the New House were fairly doubled up with merriment outside the gates.

"I—I—" mumbled Racke. "You see, dad, there's been some mistake. We've just turned up to play this school at footer, and—and we find it's a girls' school!"

"What!" Mr. Racke seemed nearly to jump out of his skin.

"A—a girls' school," repeated Racke feebly. "We've been japed!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was a chorus of girlish laughs that rang out in the quadrangle, stinging Racke's cheeks to an even deeper shade of crimson.

"Come on, you chaps!" mumbled Grundy, scarlet to the roots of his hair.

And with the others only too eager to follow, George Alfred Grundy staggered blindly for the gates, wheeling his bike.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A shout of laughter from Figgins & Co. greeted them as they emerged into the road. Grundy glared at them. Having no suspicion that their presence there was anything more than a coincidence, however, he merely glared, and almost threw himself on to his bicycle and pedalled furiously off up the road, with the other footballers streaming after him.

And not till they were well clear of the gates of Spalding Hall did Racke's footballers feel that they could breathe properly again!

"We'll flay Racke for this!" roared Grundy.

"Hear, hear!" panted Gore. "Oh, wasn't it awful?"

"A girls' school! Would you believe it?" groaned Gunn.

And with cheeks still crimson, the ten juniors cycled back towards St. Jim's vowing vengeance upon Aubrey Racke, the unhappy cause of their troubles.

Racke's little footer match, that was to have been staged for the exclusive benefit of his father, had not been quite a success!

CHAPTER 5. Rough on Racke!

"YOU mean to tell me, Aubrey—"

Mr. Racke broke off, breathing hard, searching for words. His face had become red and wrathful.

He glared at his son with anything but sympathy.

"Wasn't my fault, you know!" growled Racke sullenly.

"I didn't know it was a blessed school for girls!"

Mr. Racke stared round. Dozens of laughing schoolgirls surrounded the pair now. The pupils of Spalding Hall had turned out in force to enjoy the joke.

"You didn't know?" roared Mr. Racke. "You're a fool, then, Aubrey, a fool!"

Mr. Racke was in a very bad temper.

He had driven down from London that day expecting to see his son, whom he knew to be something of a slacker, playing football for St. Jim's, or, at any rate, for his House.

Instead, he had found the young hopeful of the Racke family turning up at a girls' school to play the young ladies!

No wonder that Mr. Racke was exceedingly irate!

"You had better apologise to these young ladies, my boy, and clear off!" snapped the millionaire.

Racke turned a scarlet face to Miss Grant, the captain of Spalding.

"I'm sorry to have troubled you," mumbled Racke.

"Not at all," answered the captain sweetly.

"Come along, Aubrey!" snapped Mr. Racke, and, raising his hat to the crowd of giggling Spaldingites, he turned to his car.

"Are—are you coming to St. Jim's, dad?" faltered Racke, visions of his father's pocket-book growing more dim at every moment.

"No," said Mr. Racke grimly. "I came down from London to see you play football—not make a fool of yourself, my boy!" He turned to the grinning chauffeur.

"Home again, Perkins."

And Mr. Racke climbed into the luxurious interior of the limousine, with a red and wrathful countenance.

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"I—I say, dad!" exclaimed Racke desperately. "If you must get back now, what about a quid or two? I'm beastly stony, and——"

"Not a penny!" roared his angry parent. "You're an extravagant young nincompoop!"

"But——"

"Not a penny, sir! Ready, Perkins?"

The engine hummed, and the car slid smoothly out of the gates and vanished up the road. Racke stared after it dumbly.

"I'm afraid your father was rather annoyed," said Miss Grant, with a suspicious little cough.

Racke glanced at her, and went scarlet again. Grinning schoolgirl faces surrounded him. Aubrey Racke snatched up his cycle desperately and hurried out of the gates, a ripple of laughter following him.

"Oh, gad!" groaned the black sheep of the Shell.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A fat chuckle from Fatty Wynn smote his ears. Figgins, Kerr, and the Welsh junior were waiting outside the gates for Racke, and at sight of his face they again burst into a yell of laughter. The cad of the Shell glared at them, simmering with rage.

"Had a nice game?" inquired Figgins blandly. "How do the young ladies play footer? Pretty well?"

"Hope they weren't too rough," chuckled Fatty Wynn, wiping his eyes.

"Who won?" murmured Kerr.

Racke choked.

"You—you rotter, Figgins!" he snarled.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You knew all along it was a girls' school!" gasped Racke.

"Go hon!"

Racke was beside himself with fury. Not only had he been made to look an utter fool in front of the Spalding girls, but the money in his father's notecase had gone back to London, together with Mr. Racke—and Aubrey Racke had badly wanted some of those notes!

They were out of sight of the girls in the quadrangle now, and even had they not been, it is doubtful if Racke would have cared. He dropped his bicycle and flung himself at Figgins.

Figgins, taken by surprise, went spinning before Racke's onslaught. But he picked himself up in a moment, and the snarling black sheep of the School House was promptly collared by the New House trio.

"Going to be a good little boy?" grinned Figgins.

"You—you——"

"Up with him!" murmured Figgins.

Aubrey Racke was whirled into the air, and he gave a fiendish yell as he descended to the hard road with a thud. The process was repeated, eliciting a further howl from Figgins & Co.'s victim.

"Yaroooh!"

With all the breath knocked out of him, the black sheep of the Shell sat dazedly in the road and watched the grinning New House trio mount their machines and pedal away.

Aubrey Racke had been done absolutely brown by those cheery japers, and his temper, as he staggered to his feet and picked up his cycle once again, would have done credit to a Prussian Hun.

"The hounds!" he snarled. "Just let 'em wait!"

Painfully the cad of the Shell mounted his machine. His face was venomous.

If malicious and unscrupulous cunning could bring it about Racke was going to be revenged on Figgins, and that in the very near future!

CHAPTER 6.

The Great News!

"I SAY, deah boys——"

It was tea-time on the following Wednesday in Study No. 10 of the Shell passage.

Tom Merry & Co. had invited a few chums to tea. Blake, Herries, and Digby were busily helping the Terrible Three make toast and open sardine-tins and poach eggs, for Study No. 10 were in funds, and they were providing a really excellent spread. The chums had all been for a long tramp that afternoon, and they were ready to do more than justice to the appetising array of good things.

"I say, deah boys——"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of St. Jim's, had just arrived, and apparently he had something of interest to say.

"Cut some more bread, Herries, old scout!" sang out Monty Lowther, who was busy with a toasting fork.

Arthur Augustus screwed his eyeglass more tightly into his eye and surveyed Monty Lowther frostily.

"You intewwupted me, deah boy," said the swell of St.

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Jim's coldly. "I have some vewwy interwestin' news, and I was about——"

"Hand over the butter, Manners," said Digby. "I'll butter this toast."

"Weally, Digby——"

"Don't poach those blessed eggs to death, Blake!" exclaimed Tom Merry warningly.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, I was twyin' to tell you fellows——"

"Well, don't!" grunted Blake, turning a hot, red face from the fire. "Just pass me those plates instead, to put these blessed eggs on."

"Weally, Blake! I wufuse to be intewwupted in this wude and inconsiderate mannah!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus warmly. "I have some vewvy interwestin' news——"

"Well, let's hear it," suggested Monty Lowther. "Don't keep it to yourself like this, Gussy."

Arthur Augustus breathed hard and glared at Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah, I——"

There was a tap on the door, and Talbot of the Shell entered the study. At a request from Tom Merry, Talbot began to help lay the table.

"I was just about to wemark——" recommenced Arthur Augustus.

"He's off again!" groaned Herries.

"That my Cousin Ethel——" snorted the swell of St. Jim's.

He had won his chums' attention at last. Any news about Ethel Cleveland, Gussy's popular cousin, could always depend upon an uninterrupted hearing.

"I have had a lettah fwom Cousin Ethel," went on Arthur Augustus, glancing round at his listeners. "It has just awvived. It contained some wathah extwaordinawy news."

"What is it?" asked Blake.

"As you chaps know, a girls' school has been opened neah Wayland," continued Arthur Augustus, adjusting his monocle. "Spalding Hall——"

"We know!" grinned Monty Lowther. "That's the school where Racke and his team of crocks went to play footer."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a chorus of chuckles. The memory of Racke's exploit at Spalding Hall—which Figgins & Co. had spread far and wide in St. Jim's—was still sufficiently recent in the minds of the juniors to bring a shout of laughter. Aubrey Racke had been the laughing-stock of St. Jim's ever since.

Arthur Augustus grinned with the others.

"Yaas! That's the place! Well, deah boys, it may surprise you to learn that my Cousin Ethel is goin' to school at Spalding!"

There was a breathless silence for some moments in Study No. 10.

"You mean to say——" burst out Monty Lowther eagerly.

"Yaas," cut in the swell of St. Jim's. "As I say, Ethel is goin' to school at Spaldin' Hall! Wathah good news, what?"

"My hat! Ripping!" ejaculated Blake. "Then Cousin Ethel will always be in the neighbourhood?"

"Yaas! Natuwally!" Arthur Augustus beamed round at his chums through his gleaming monocle. "Wathah wippin', eh?"

The delighted looks on the faces of all the juniors present showed that they agreed with him!

"She is awwivin' on Saturday," went on Arthur Augustus cheerfully. "I pwopose that we all go to meet her at Wayland Station, and escort her to Spalding in gweat style!"

"Rather!"

"What-ho!"

Arthur Augustus had certainly caused some excitement this time! The news that Cousin Ethel was coming to a school so near St. Jim's was absolutely splendid, the juniors considered. They were all warm admirers of Gussy's fair cousin, and in Tom Merry & Co.'s opinion her visits in the past had been far too infrequent.

The prospect of having Cousin Ethel within easy reach, so to speak, at Spalding Hall caused the eyes of the juniors to shine. To have their girl chum near St. Jim's always, ready for any picnic or country ramble, or to cheer them from the touchline at football matches, and from the pavilion during the cricket season—it was wonderful news! It sounded almost too good to be true.

Blake thumped Arthur Augustus on the back so lustily that that aristocratic youth's monocle shot from his eye.

"Good old Gussy!" roared Blake. "When you write to Cousin Ethel tell her how jolly glad Study No. 6 is to hear the news!"

"And tell her the same from Study No. 10," chimed in Tom Merry.

"Ow! Wathah!" gasped Arthur Augustus, rubbing his shoulder where Blake had thumped him. "Weally, Blake, I can undahstand your pleasuah at the news, but pway wefwain fwom bein' so howwibly wuff!"

"And please tell her the same from me, Gussy!" put in Talbot, laughing.

"Wight-ho, deah boy!"

Arthur Augustus was clearly delighted at the warm reception of his news. Then he frowned.

"By the way," he said suddenly, "pway keep this dark fwom that New House boundah, Figgins. You all know what a cheekay, pushin' ass Figgay is where Cousin Ethel is concerned. If he heahs of this, he will pwobably twy to push in on Saturday when Ethel awwives."

Tom Merry grinned. George Figgins was a very staunch admirer indeed of Cousin Ethel, and Cousin Ethel, in her turn, always seemed to find a great deal of pleasure in Figgins' company. But Arthur Augustus disapproved strongly of what he considered Figgins' New House "nerve" in seeing so much of his cousin when Ethel had visited St. Jim's in the past.

Now, with Cousin Ethel at Spalding Hall, Arthur Augustus greatly feared, in his heart, that Figgins would continue in his New House "nerve," and try to see a good

Arthur Augustus adjusted his eyeglass and stared at the skipper of the New House with great annoyance.

"Bai Jove! Weally, Figgins, I had no ideah you were there, you know!"

"I rather thought you hadn't," agreed Figgins cheerily. There was a dancing gleam in his eyes, and his face was very bright.

"Did you heah my wemark?" inquired the swell of St. Jim's anxiously.

"Rather!" "Oh deah!" Gussy's noble countenance wore an expression of dismay.

"So Cousin Ethel is coming to school at Spalding Hall, Gussy?" said Figgins slowly. He rubbed his hands together with a chuckle. "Oh, ripping! That's the best bit of news I've heard for years! Hip, hip!"

Arthur Augustus eyed him coldly. Figgins' tremendous pleasure was not shared by the swell of St. Jim's.

"Well, let's begin tea!" cut in Tom Merry cheerily. "We'll talk about it over grub!"

George Figgins was noticeably silent during the meal, but his eyes were very bright.



Tom Merry & Co. did not enjoy that tea. Eating wafer-thin slices of bread and butter, and balancing tea-cups of eggshell china on their knees, was not in their line. Herries, in fact, became so nervous that he spilled his tea on the carpet, and in his embarrassment upset a plate of cakes as well! (See Chapter 8.)

deal of her. In the opinion of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, such a thing was by no means to be encouraged!

"So pway wefwain fwom lettin' Figgins know, deah boys! He will learn pwetty soon, anyhow, but—"

"Shurrup, you ass!" murmured Digby.

The door had opened. Arthur Augustus having his back to the door, had not noticed the fact, however.

"Weally, Dig! I wepeat, I do not wish that ass Figgins to know yet awhile that Cousin Ethel is comin' to school at Spalding Hall—"

And then Arthur Augustus jumped and gave a gasp. Turning his head a trifle, he had caught sight of the open door.

"Oh deah!" For framed in the open doorway, staring at the swell of St. Jim's very oddly, was George Figgins himself.

CHAPTER 7.

Racke's Resolve!

"GWEAT SCOTT!" gasped Arthur Augustus. Figgins came into the study and closed the door. He had been invited to tea that afternoon by Tom Merry, but Arthur Augustus had been ignorant of the fact till now.

There was a very peculiar expression on the face of George Figgins.

"Penny for your thoughts, Figgy," sang out Monty Lowther, after a time.

Figgins coloured to the roots of his hair, and there was a chuckle round the table. Everybody guessed that the long-legged leader of the New House had been thinking what ripping times were in store, with Cousin Ethel at school at Spalding Hall!

But Arthur Augustus did not chuckle. He merely sniffed.

"Heard the news?"

Percy Mellish, the sneak of the Fourth, put his head in at the door of Study No. 7 in the Shell passage with a grin on his crafty face.

Racke was alone in the study, sitting moodily by the fire.

Racke had kept to his study quite a good deal during the last few days. Whenever he put in an appearance in the outer world, so to speak, he was liable to get greeted by grins and facetious remarks, connected with footer and girls' schools!

"What news?" growled Racke surlily.

Mellish entered the study and closed the door.

"You know Spalding Hall?" grinned Mellish innocently.

"I—Ow! Here, I say—leggo! Hands off!"

Racke had leapt to his feet with a snarl, and had grasped

the sneak of the Fourth in a grip that was anything but gentle.

"If you've come here to be funny about that——" ground out Racke furiously.

Mellish wriggled, and broke away.

"I've not, you idiot!" he growled. "It's about Spalding Hall, though. You know Gussy's Cousin Ethel?"

"What about her?"

"She's going to school at Spalding!" grinned Mellish.

"My hat!"

Racke stared at Mellish incredulously.

"Sfact!" nodded Mellish. "I heard Figgins telling Fatty Wynn in the quad. It was dark, and they didn't see me. Figgins is no end thrilled about it."

Racke sat down. His face had suddenly gone very thoughtful.

"Cousin Ethel at Spalding!" he muttered. "Yes, I bet Figgins is excited all right!" A savage expression came into his face "Hang him!"

Mellish crossed to the door and turned the key. Then he returned to the fireplace and took out a cigarette-case, selected a cigarette, and offered one to Racke, who took it.

"You've not got level with Figgins yet, for that jape of his," said Mellish maliciously, lighting his cigarette and puffing at it with every pretence of enjoyment.

"I'm biding my time," snarled Racke. "I've not forgotten, as he'll soon find out!"

The two black sheep smoked their cheap weeds in silence for some minutes.

Mellish watched the gleaming eyes and knitted brows of Aubrey Racke intently. That Racke was brooding over some idea that had come to him, he felt convinced.

"Yes, Figgins will be excited about this all right," muttered Racke suddenly. "He's very pally with Ethel Cleveland. I dare say he's mashed on her!" he added, with a sneer.

"He, he! Yes!" sniggered Mellish.

Suddenly Racke jumped to his feet. He gripped Mellish by the shoulder.

"What's up?" exclaimed Mellish, startled.

"This is where I get my own back on Figgins!" Racke seemed almost to spit out the words in his venom. "I'm going to smash his friendship with Cousin Ethel!"

CHAPTER 8.

Cousin Ethel!

THE great Saturday arrived at last.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had heard from Cousin Ethel that she was not arriving by train, but was travelling down to Spalding Hall by road with Lord Eastwood, who was Arthur Augustus' father and Cousin Ethel's uncle. It was rather a disappointment to the chums of the School House not to be able to meet her at the station in these circumstances. But Lord Eastwood's Rolls-Royce, by arrangement, visited St. Jim's on its way to Spalding, and a tremendous cheer welcomed Cousin Ethel as she stepped out of the big car into the quad.

It was a cheer that George Figgins heard, but could not join. For ill luck had overtaken the leader of the New House. A bad cold had laid him low on the previous day, and the matron insisted on his remaining in bed. So the unfortunate Figgy could only lie between the blankets and sneeze, while he heard his chums cheering Ethel Cleveland. It was wretched for Figgins; but Arthur Augustus was rather glad!

Big though Lord Eastwood's car was, it could not cram in everybody who would have liked to accompany Gussy's father and cousin to Spalding Hall. So only the lucky few whom Lord Eastwood selected went with them—Arthur Augustus, of course, and Blake and Herries, and the Terrible Three—were crowded into the car as it rolled smoothly out of the quad and turned in the direction of Wayland.

That Cousin Ethel was delighted to be going to Spalding Hall was quite obvious. Whether she felt quite so delighted when they reached the school and was face to face for the first time with Miss Finch, Tom Merry wondered—for Miss Finch was a distinctly vinegary-looking lady, well past middle-age, with bright eyes that seemed to bore through you like a pair of gimlets. She struck terror into the St. Jim's juniors on sight.

But they soon found that, despite her rather forbidding appearance, the little headmistress of Spalding Hall had a heart of gold. All the same, it was clear that Miss Finch had a very determined will of her own. Without doubt, she would be able to show herself a regular terror, when necessary, to her pupils, as Tom Merry whispered to Monty Lowther.

Cousin Ethel and her escort arrived at the school at tea-

time, and Miss Finch invited them all to tea with her in her drawing-room. That the old lady took a liking to Cousin Ethel from the first was obvious to all—and it was equally obvious that Ethel returned her liking. But, nevertheless, it was not a meal that Tom Merry & Co. enjoyed. Eating wafer-thin slices of bread-and-butter off tiny plates, and balancing teacups of eggshell china on their knees, was scarcely in their line!

Herries, in fact, became so nervous that he spilled his tea on the carpet, and in his embarrassment upset a plate of cakes as well. With the possible exception of Arthur Augustus, the juniors all drew sighs of relief when at last the time came to go.

Leaving Cousin Ethel with Miss Finch, the juniors returned to St. Jim's through the early dusk in Lord Eastwood's car.

"Well, I fancy we gave the deah gal a pretty good start off at Spalding," remarked Arthur Augustus in Study No. 6 of the Fourth, as he and his chums began their prep.

"Rather!" agreed Blake warmly. "I say, it was rather rough on Figgy, being in the sunny to-day," he added, with a wink at Herries and Digby. "Wasn't it, Gussy?"

But Arthur Augustus pretended not to hear. He busied himself very intently with his prep, and Blake chuckled.

"Footer!" remarked David Llewellyn Wynn.

"Footer!" agreed George Kerr.

They glanced at Figgins. But Figgins said nothing.

The New House trio were crossing the quad after classes on the following Wednesday morning. It was a sunny afternoon, with the rooks cawing in the leafless elms, and the playing-fields waiting, crisp and firm, for the half-holiday that day.

But Figgins did not seem to notice what an ideal day for footer it was. He strode on towards the New House, his books under his arm, in a reflective silence.

"Footer!" repeated Fatty Wynn.

"Footer," echoed Kerr, with determination. "Don't you think so, Figgy?"

Figgins started from his reverie.

"Eh?"

"I said footer!" grinned Kerr.

"Oh!" said Figgins. "Footer? What footer?"

"Why, this afternoon, you dummy!" roared Fatty Wynn.

"What about this afternoon?" queried Figgins vaguely.

Fatty Wynn and Kerr stared at their chum. It was unlike George Figgins to display so little interest in football.

"Footer, this afternoon, of course!" growled Fatty Wynn. "There's the match against the School House on Saturday."

"Is there?"

This time Wynn and Kerr looked at their chum as though they really doubted his sanity.

"Don't you know there is?" gasped Kerr.

"I'd forgotten," said Figgins candidly. "Anyway, what about it?"

"What about it?" hooted Fatty Wynn, thoroughly exasperated. "Why, you burbling bandersnatch, with the match against the School House coming on we've got to have a practice game this afternoon, haven't we?"

"Of course we have!" exclaimed Kerr.

A dogged look came into Figgins' rugged face. He halted at the foot of the School House steps.

"You chaps can play footer this afternoon, if you like," he said shortly. "In fact, you'd better. But——"

"Aren't you?" ejaculated Kerr in astonishment.

"No!"

"Why not?" demanded Fatty Wynn wonderingly.

"Ahem!"

"Eh?"

"Ahem!"

Figgins coughed again. He was beginning to go violently crimson. Kerr suddenly understood. He chuckled.

"Going out, Figgy?" asked Kerr blandly.

"Ahem! Yes."

"Spalding Hall?" murmured Kerr, with a wink at Fatty Wynn.

"Ye-e-e-es," admitted Figgins, quite scarlet. "How did you know?"

"Guessed, my dear Watson!" grinned Kerr. "Oh, well, it'll be no good trying to persuade you to play footer this afternoon in that case!"

"Look here, you young ass——" began Figgins, with a snort.

"Well, of all the asses!" growled Fatty Wynn, in deep disgust. "And with the School House match on Saturday!"

"Rats!"
"But—"

"Rats!" repeated George Figgins, and swung on his heel, leaving his two chums to stare after him from the bottom of the steps as he vanished, still very red, into the New House.

CHAPTER 9.

A Shock for Figgins!

AN hour or so later Figgins took his bike from the shed and pedalled out into the road. Fatty Wynn, seeing him go from the steps of the New House, snorted, and went off in the direction of the tuck-shop. David Llewellyn Wynn always liked a "snack" before a game of football; and although he had only just had dinner he could always do with something more.

But even as he enjoyed one of Dame Taggles' best rabbit-pies, Fatty Wynn found time to snort again as he thought of Figgins' desertion from the footer field that afternoon.

Figgins, bowling merrily along the lanes in the crisp wintry air, was not, however, worrying over his chum's severe disapproval.

Figgins was feeling very cheerful indeed!

As yet he had had no chance of getting over to Spalding to visit Cousin Ethel. But now he had the whole afternoon ahead of him. Furthermore, he knew that Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was playing in a School House practice game, and so would not also be visiting Spalding Hall that afternoon!

In fact, there was not a single fly in the ointment, as far as Figgins could see, as he sped on, free-wheeling down the incline into Wayland.

"My hat!"

The exclamation escaped Figgins as he was passing Wayland Railway Station.

A train had evidently just arrived, and several passengers were emerging into the little station yard. And among them was a figure that Figgins recognised.

Racke!

The fact that Aubrey Racke had come over by train from Rylcombe to Wayland that afternoon would not have interested Figgins in the slightest as a general rule. But Racke's attire on this particular afternoon roused Figgins' interest—even a vague suspicion.

For Solomon in all his glory was scarcely arrayed more gorgeously than was Racke at the moment.

A gleaming topper surmounted his head, and snow-white spats graced his patent-leather shoes. A silver-headed cane was tucked under his arm, and his waistcoat was a thing of beauty and a joy for ever. Aubrey Racke was immaculate!

"My hat!" repeated Figgins, in surprise, and jumped off his machine alongside Racke, as the black sheep of the Shell turned out of the station yard, fastening a flower in his button-hole.

"Hallo, Racke!" grinned Figgins.

"Going to a wedding, or a funeral?" Racke jumped. As his eyes rested on Figgins he grinned. It was not a pleasant grin.

"Hallo!" he said easily. "Well, if it comes to that, where are you off to?"

Figgins went a trifle pink. Racke grinned again.

"Spalding Hall, eh?" he said maliciously. "So am I."

"What?" ejaculated Figgins.

"I'm going to Spalding Hall," said Racke coolly.

"Whom are you going to see there?" Figgins exclaimed sharply.

"Is that your business?" sneered Racke. "But if you want to know, I'm going to see Miss Cleveland."

Figgins stared at him blankly.

"Well, I'm blessed!" exploded Figgins wrathfully. "Of all the cheek!"

"Thanks!" retorted Racke ironically. "I happen to be a friend of Miss Cleveland's. I suppose I can call on her without asking your permission?"

Figgins glared at him, speechless.

"See you later, perhaps," grinned Racke. "I'd rather thought of taking Miss Cleveland out to tea, though, so if

you happen to want to see her before we go, you'd better hurry up!"

A taxicab was passing along the street towards the station. Racke hailed it, and jumped in.

"Spalding Hall School," he told the driver. "So-long, Figgins!"

The taxi turned and sped away up the street. Figgins stared after it dazedly. His mouth was set in a grim line, and he was breathing hard.

"Well, I'm blessed!" gasped George Figgins.

That Cousin Ethel did not care for Racke, he knew well enough. But he knew, too, what a kind-hearted girl she was. If Racke arrived at Spalding Hall for the express purpose of seeing her, her good nature might persuade her to be pleasant and friendly to him—even to the extent of going out to tea with him.

Figgins' face fell at that thought. In another moment he had jumped on to his bicycle and was pedalling furiously up the street.

Had he been forced to keep to the main road, Figgins knew that he would stand no chance of overtaking the fast-moving taxi. But there were short-cuts that a bicycle could take, and Figgins, who knew the geography of the Wayland district by heart, took them all. Consequently, when he shot out of a footpath into the main road near Spalding village, it was to see the taxi coming into sight round a distant bend.

Figgins was ahead!

Bending low over the handlebars, Figgins made his cycle fairly fly. He wanted to see Cousin Ethel before Racke arrived at the school, if he could. But luck was against him.

He was within fifty yards of the school gates when his tyre punctured on a fragment of broken glass. There was a sharp report, and the tyre peeled off, and Figgins went over the handlebars into the hedge. As he sat up, dazedly, rubbing an elbow, Racke's taxi sped past, and the grinning face of Aubrey Racke sailed by.

He surveyed his bicycle. It was not greatly damaged, but one glance was enough to show that it could not be ridden at that moment, and, with a growl, Figgins slung it into the hedge and broke into a run in the direction of Spalding Hall.

Though he did not think that Cousin Ethel would really accept Racke's invitation out to tea, there was the chance that she might. And Figgins meant to be on the scene before she had a chance of accepting it.

Already the taxi had vanished into the gates of the school.

"Here goes for another short cut!" Figgins told himself

(Continued on next page.)

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grimly, and turned to the high, red brick wall that flanked the premises of Spalding Hall. He believed that by swarming over it he could probably drop into the quad, and get there as quickly as Racker in the taxi.

It was a high wall, but Figgins was an athletic fellow, and, with a nimble leap, he sprang up, catching the top of the wall and hauling himself up. He stared down on the opposite side.

He had made a mistake. He was not overlooking the quadrangle, but a trim kitchen garden. And the next moment, to Figgins' dismay, a sharp feminine voice hailed him.

"What are you doing there?"

A vinegary-looking, little old lady was standing on the path not far away, fixing him with a gimlet-like gaze. Though Figgins had never seen Miss Finch before, some instinct told him that this was surely the headmistress of Spalding Hall.

"Oh crumbs!" groaned Figgins.

And, in his excitement, the skipper of the New House lost his balance. He felt himself falling, and clutched wildly. But he could not save himself.

Crash!

With a sound like the breaking of a thousand windows, George Figgins dropped clean into Miss Finch's cucumber-frames, at the very feet of the little headmistress of Spalding Hall.

CHAPTER 10.

No Luck for Figgins!

"**Y**OW!" gasped Figgins. "Oh crumbs!"

He stared up at Miss Finch from the wreckage of the cucumber-frames in horror.

The headmistress of Spalding Hall returned his gaze with a mixture of surprise and annoyance, in which annoyance was rapidly gaining the upper hand. Her already grim face had taken on an expression that was truly terrifying; her eyes seemed to the hapless junior to pierce him like gimlets.

Figgins quaked.

Tom Merry & Co. had been scared on sight by Miss Finch, although they had afterwards discovered that the old lady possessed a kindly heart beneath her grim exterior. But Figgins did not know that, and as those gimlet eyes fixed themselves upon him, he gasped. After all, Tom Merry & Co. had met Miss Finch in circumstances that had caused her to regard them favourably. The unhappy Figgins, on the other hand, was meeting Miss Finch in circumstances that were causing her to regard him very unfavourably indeed.

"And what," inquired Miss Finch, in a voice that seemed to freeze the surrounding air for miles—or so Figgins thought—"is the meaning of this?"

Figgins tried to struggle free from the loving embrace of the cucumber-frame. But he was too tightly wedged in the wreckage to do more than wave his arms and legs frantically.

"Yaroooh!" roared Figgins, as he caught his shin against a corner of the woodwork. "Ow! Wow! I—I'm terribly sorry, ma'am—"

"So I should hope!" snapped the old lady frigidly. "So I should hope, indeed!"

Figgins, under that terrifying glance, renewed his struggles. There was a cracking noise, and the edge of the frame broke under his efforts. Figgins, dabbing at a cut finger with his handkerchief, struggled to his feet, to face the wrath of the headmistress of Spalding Hall.

"I'm awfully sorry," mumbled Figgy, crimson to the roots of his hair. "It was a giddy accident—I mean," he corrected himself hastily, "it was an accident!"

"I had not imagined that you would jump into a cucumber-frame on purpose!" snapped Miss Finch. "But what were you doing on that wall? I demand an explanation."

"Ahem!"

Figgins, shuffling his feet awkwardly, racked his brains in desperation. He could not admit that he had been trying to take a short cut to the quad—that would have required further explanations, and he was determined to keep Cousin Ethel's name out of it. It would not do to tell Miss Finch that he had come to visit Ethel—that might bring the wrath of this terrifying old lady on Ethel's head!

The gimlet eyes seemed to bore through him. With pursed lips and grimly folded hands Miss Finch waited for his explanation. Figgins gulped.

"As a matter of fact," he stammered wildly, "I—I was admiring your garden, ma'am!"

Miss Finch jumped.

"From the top of the wall?"

"Rather!" said Figgins desperately. "You get a ripping view from up there!"

That was true enough! It was true, too, that for a moment it had flashed through Figgins' mind, on top of the wall what a very trim garden it was.

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"A ripping garden!" added Figgins. "I—I've never seen such—such spiffing fruit-trees in my life!"

Miss Finch's face softened.

Had Figgins but known it, he had found the shortest cut to the old lady's heart. Gardening was Miss Finch's hobby, and she was particularly proud of her kitchen garden. Though at that time of the year there was very little to see but brown earth and bare trees, it did not seem at all out of place to her that Figgins should admire it.

Miss Finch smiled.

Figgins drew a deep breath and smiled, too.

"What ripping earth it looks?" he continued earnestly. "I bet things grow like—like fun here."

"You are right!" beamed Miss Finch. "The loam is most rich, my dear boy. You are interested in gardening? Splendid! So few young people are," she added, with a sigh.

"Gardening?" exclaimed Figgins. "Me? Oh, rather!"

Figgins' gardening in the past had consisted of little more than growing mustard and cress on wet flannel. But his tone seemed to convey that he was never really happy unless he was thinning parsnips or digging potatoes. Miss Finch beamed upon him.

"My dear boy," she exclaimed, with sudden concern, "you have cut your finger! It must be attended to at once. Follow me."

And Figgins, feeling that it was his lucky day, after all, followed the headmistress of Spalding from the kitchen garden through a doorway into the quadrangle, and the next moment his jaw dropped.

For the first sight that met his eyes was Racker—and Cousin Ethel.

Racker had his back to Figgins. He was chatting very brightly to Ethel. Racker fancied himself as a ladies' man, and he had always cherished a certain liking for D'Arcy's pretty cousin. And now he was particularly anxious to win her favour, since he had set himself the task of coming between her and George Figgins.

As Miss Finch appeared on the scene, followed by the somewhat dishevelled Figgy, Cousin Ethel gave a little gasp of surprise, and her face lit up.

"Why, Figgins!"

"Hallo!" mumbled Figgins, glaring at Racker. He grinned at Cousin Ethel sheepishly. "I—er—"

"Why, you know each other!" exclaimed Miss Finch, glancing from Figgins to Ethel quickly, while Racker raised his hat to the headmistress with a graceful flourish.

"Yes!" nodded Cousin Ethel brightly. "We are old friends."

"Hum!" murmured Miss Finch doubtfully. Clearly it occurred to her for a moment to doubt Figgins' interest in gardening, after all! But if the old lady had her suspicions, she dismissed them the next moment, and smiled.

There was a puzzled look in Ethel's eyes as she shook hands with Figgins. Figgins grinned.

"I was admiring the kitchen garden from the wall," explained Figgins, colouring again. "I had a bit of bad luck—fell into the cucumber-frames."

"And he has cut his finger," put in Miss Finch. "Ethel dear, perhaps you will take this boy to the matron, to have it washed and bound up. You are a St. Jim's boy, of course," she went on, turning to Figgins, her eyes on his cap.

"Yes," said Figgins awkwardly. "Er—my name is Figgins."

"And this is Aubrey Racker, Miss Finch," said Ethel. "Will you wait here, please?" she asked the black sheep of the Shell. "This way, Figgins!"

There were several of the Spalding Hall girls about as Figgins followed Ethel into the building, and Figgins—who was not a ladies' man by any means—had the countenance of a beetroot as he found interested feminine eyes turned in his direction. The faint giggles that came to his ears from some of the smaller girls—as a consequence of his beetroot-like complexion—did little to ease Figgy's embarrassment. It was with a sigh of relief that he reached the shelter of the matron's room.

"And how do you like Spalding Hall?" Figgins asked Cousin Ethel, as they returned to the quadrangle a few minutes later with his finger duly bandaged.

"Oh, it's a dear old place!" said Ethel happily.

"Good!" grinned Figgins. "And—ahem—it's pretty near St. Jim's!"

"That's splendid, isn't it?" smiled Cousin Ethel frankly.

"You bet it is," agreed Figgins with fervour. "It—it seems too ripping to be true, you know, your coming to school down here!"

Cousin Ethel laughed. They emerged into the quadrangle again, where Racker, on the other side, could be seen talking gracefully to the headmistress of Spalding.

"Look here," said Figgins quickly. "what about Racker? I—he—that is—"

He broke off, embarrassed. "He has asked me to go for a walk with him this afternoon, and have tea in Wayland," said Ethel, a trifle doubtfully. "I—I was just going to say no when you came. But

it's all right now! We can all three go together. That'll be nice."

Figgins did not agree in the least that that would be nice! But he did not like to say so—it would have been rather difficult.

After a short interview with the school porter, during which half-a-crown changed hands, it was arranged for Figgins' damaged bike to receive the slight attention it required, and to be sent back to St. Jim's.

Five minutes later Figgins and Cousin Ethel and Aubrey Racke were walking up the road together in the bright afternoon sunshine.

Figgins' face was not happy. But the black sheep of the Shell was smiling a silky smile.

So far, Racke told himself, things were going very well!

CHAPTER 11.

Figgins Loses His Temper!

NOW, what about some tea, Miss Cleveland?"

Aubrey Racke made that suggestion with a smile carefully produced for the occasion.

"That'll be splendid!" answered Cousin Ethel

brightly.

Figgins only grunted.

The three had arrived in Wayland, and Racke had paused outside a cosy little cafe. He held the door politely open for Cousin Ethel, and the three passed inside and selected a table by the window, overlooking the busy street.

From Figgins' point of view, it had been one of the least enjoyable walks of his life! Though it was a gorgeous afternoon, though he was with Cousin Ethel—even though he knew that his girl chum was at Spalding Hall now, so near St. Jim's, Figgins was not in the least cheery.

Throughout the walk Figgins had become more and more silent and morose, till Cousin Ethel had glanced at him very curiously, with a little puzzled frown. And as Figgins' moroseness increased, so Racke became more and more bright and pleasant. Smiling and chatting easily, the cad of the Shell had certainly been the life and soul of the party that afternoon.

He was enjoying Figgins' discomfiture to the full. It was nectar to Racke to see Figgins' gloomy face grow more and more frowning and black-browed. Racke's venomous desire to revenge himself on Figgins was being fed freely.

"Try one of these cream-buns, Miss Cleveland," purred Racke. "They're ripping. Aren't they, Figgins?"

Grunt from Figgins.

"You're not eating anything!" exclaimed Ethel suddenly, glancing at Figgins.

"No," mumbled Figgins, his eyes on his tea-cup.

Without intending to in the least, Figgins sounded distinctly surly. Cousin Ethel bit her lip, and a faint flush mounted to her cheeks. She turned again to Racke.

Cousin Ethel was pleasantly surprised with the cad of the Shell. She had never cared for him in the past, but now he was being so pleasant and cheerful that she felt she must have misjudged him.

She was surprised, too, with Figgins, but not pleasantly. She could not understand Figgins. His morose silence hurt her, and she came to the conclusion that he was sulking because Racke was with them. With a little toss of her head, Cousin Ethel told herself that Figgins was being ridiculous, and that he needed a lesson in manners.

"Well, it's great to see you down here at Spalding, Miss Cleveland!" said Racke heartily.

Figgins sipped his tea in silence, and wished that a thunderbolt would drop through the roof on to Racke's sleekly-oiled head.

He knew perfectly well that he must appear like a sulky child to Ethel, and he could have kicked himself for it. But his intense dislike of Aubrey Racke made it impossible for the blunt and honest Figgins to be bright and cheerful in the presence of the black sheep of the Shell. All the time he wanted to tell Racke what he thought of him, in language that was scarcely suitable for the ears of Ethel Cleveland.

And the effort of suppressing his feelings left Figgins tongue-tied.

And Racke, understanding, and seeing clearly what Ethel thought, chortled inwardly.

At last the time came to leave the cafe and return to Spalding Hall. Racke paid the bill, with an airy wave of the hand to Figgins that seemed to say, "Leave this to me," and the oddly-assorted pair of St. Jim's juniors left the cafe with their pretty companion.

"Oh, just a moment!" exclaimed Cousin Ethel as they walked past the next shop—a draper's. "I just want to get something in here. Shan't be a minute!"

And she disappeared into the shop, leaving Figgins and Racke on the pavement together.

Figgins plunged a hand into his pocket and produced some loose change. He began counting it out.

"You're not paying for my tea, Racke!" he said, with an angry flush. "Here's my whack!"

"That's all right," said Racke loftily, waving away the money that Figgins held out. "Keep that to buy yourself a toy or something. Sulky kids need a new toy to humour them."

"Who are you calling a sulky kid?" snorted Figgins, going crimson.

"That's what you've been like all the afternoon," grinned Racke. "Lucky for Miss Cleveland she had me to entertain her! You don't seem to know quite how to behave with ladies, Figgins."

"Why, you—you—"

"Why not go back to St. Jim's now," suggested Racke coolly. "I'll see Ethel back to Spalding Hall."

"She's Miss Cleveland to you, you cad!" said Figgins between his teeth. His face had gone white now—white with anger.

"I choose to call her Ethel," answered Racke, delighting to rouse Figgins to the limit—since he considered himself perfectly safe, there in the High Street, from Figgins' rugged fists.

But this time Racke had rather overstepped the mark. Figgins' anger burst its bounds at that. The New House junior forgot where he was for the moment—all he knew was that he wanted to smash Racke for daring to refer to Ethel Cleveland so impudently.

Crash!

Figgins took a step forward, and his clenched fist landed on Racke's jaw. Aubrey Racke went sprawling into the gutter, his hat and gloves and stick flying in different directions. He thudded into the road with a yell—and at that moment, just as Figgins realised what he had done, the door of the little draper's shop opened.

Cousin Ethel stepped out on to the pavement, with Racke sprawling at her feet in the mud, and Figgins standing over him with clenched fists and blazing eyes.

CHAPTER 12.

The Black Sheep's Triumph!

COUSIN ETHEL gave a gasp of wondering horror at what she saw, staring from Racke to Figgins as though she could not believe her eyes.

Figgins dropped his fists. He would have given a good deal to take back that blow. But it was too late now.

Racke scrambled up, his clothes smeared with mud, his face white. He stood with a hand to his jaw, glaring at Figgins with bitter malice.

Cousin Ethel stood dumbly watching them.

Figgins dropped his head. He was heartily ashamed of himself. He turned to Ethel and licked his dry lips. He wanted to apologise, but somehow no words would come.

It was Racke who spoke first. Racke was grinning now, despite his aching jaw. He realised that Figgins had played right into his hands.

"I'm sorry this has happened, Miss Cleveland," said Racke coolly. "I am afraid Figgins has rather a bad temper, and insufficient manners to control it."

There was a sting in every word. His eyes were fixed on Figgins with a derisive gleam.

"I—I—" mumbled Figgins miserably. "I—I never meant—"

"I can scarcely believe it!" There were tears of anger in Cousin Ethel's eyes. She stamped her foot. "How dare you behave like this? Like—like a hooligan!"

Her voice was breathless.

"Never mind, Miss Cleveland," said Racke virtuously. He picked up his hat and stick and gloves, and began to brush the mud from his clothes. Fortunately, the street happened to be rather empty just then, and no one had seen the incident. "Let me see you back to Spalding Hall."

"Please do!" cried Cousin Ethel, with a sob of vexation. "I—I shouldn't have believed you could do such a thing!" she said to Figgins, in a low, quivering voice.

"Come along," murmured Racke soothingly.

Figgins, still tongue-tied, stood white-faced as they turned away, Cousin Ethel hurrying up the street as if anxious to be out of his sight, and Racke at her side.

"THE TITAN THREE"

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"Great Scott!" muttered Figgins miserably. "I've done it now!"

He took a step as if to follow the disappearing couple, but the next moment he stopped. Cousin Ethel was far too angry with him to listen even to an apology, he felt sure. Besides, what good was an apology, after behaving like a hooligan—as she had called him?

Figgins had acted as he had done in a moment when his feelings were beyond his control. But no one realised better than Figgins the enormity of his offence.

At the corner, Racke flung back a quick glance over his shoulder. Even at that distance, Figgins could read the gleam of triumph in the eyes of the black sheep of the Shell.

With a heavy heart, Figgins turned and tramped off forlornly in the direction of St. Jim's.

He understood now that Racke had deliberately set himself to goad him into just some such outbreak as this, for the purpose of estranging himself and Ethel. And Racke had succeeded beyond even his most hopeful dreams! His revenge was complete for the jape played upon him at Spalding Hall—the cause of his father's failure to "cash up," and the cause of Racke's being, for a while, the laughing-stock of St. Jim's.

Figgins tramped on dismally.

He had acted like a hooligan in front of his girl chum—and she had made it clear that she did not wish to see him again.

Racke's triumph was complete.

"Seen Figgins?"

Fatty Wynn put that question to Tom Merry in the quad at St. Jim's.

Tom Merry, Lowther, and Manners, and Blake & Co., had just come out of the little tuckshop under the elms. The chums had had such a strenuous game of football that afternoon that they had not felt like brewing tea for themselves, so had enjoyed the meal in Dame Taggles' little shop. It was growing late now, and the early winter darkness had descended on the old quad.

"Seen Figgy?" repeated Fatty Wynn.

"Hallo, hallo!" sang out Monty Lowther cheerily. "What on earth's this? An escaped elephant?"

He eyed Fatty Wynn's barrel-like figure critically.

"Oh, rats!" growled Fatty Wynn. "I say, seen Figgy?"

"No, deah boy!" returned Arthur Augustus D'Arcy serenely. "Weally, you know, School House chaps cannot notice New House boundahs!"

"Ha, ha, ha! No!"

"School House cuckoos!" snorted Fatty Wynn defiantly. "Look here, you might tell me if you've seen Figgy about. He ought to be back pretty soon now—"

"Back from where?" demanded Blake.

"Why, Spalding Hall!" sniffed Fatty Wynn. "The silly ass has been over there all the afternoon, instead of playing footer."

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, going a trifle pink. A very annoyed expression came into the face of the swell of the Fourth. "You mean to say Figgins has been ovah at Spaldin' this aftahnoon—seein' my Cousin Ethel?"

"That's it!" grunted David Llewellyn Wynn disgustedly. "Can you beat it? Fancy wasting a topping afternoon like this!"

"Bai Jove!" repeated Arthur Augustus warmly.

Tom Merry gave an exclamation, and nodded across towards the gates. A junior had just come tramping into the quad from the road. It was George Figgins.

"There he is!" said Tom.

Figgins had turned towards the New House. He was walking with eyes fixed gloomily on the ground, and he glanced up suddenly as he approached the little group. The look upon his face came as a surprise to all, and something of a shock as well. After an afternoon at Spalding Hall, Figgins certainly should have been looking very bright and cheery. But he was not. He was looking thoroughly dismal.

"Hallo, hallo! What's wrong?" muttered Manners.

"Looks as if he's just swallowed his last sixpence," murmured Monty Lowther.

"That something was wrong was quite clear!"

"Hallo!" growled Figgins, very morose.

"Bai Jove! You appear to be wathah depwessed!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus in bewilderment.

Figgins smiled twistedly, and tried to push on past them towards the House. But Fatty Wynn and Tom Merry barred his way.

"What's the trouble, Figgy?" inquired Tom good-naturedly.

Figgins glared.

"Out with it!" commanded Fatty Wynn.

Still Figgins hesitated. Then he burst out hotly with his troubles.

"That cad Racke! He was over at Spalding this after-

noon, and the rotter's been the cause of me having a—a row with Ethel! Not exactly a row, at least, she did all the rowing. I deserved it—"

Figgins broke off, breathing hard.

"Great Scott!" The swell of the Fourth stared at Figgins.

"Racke?" ejaculated Tom Merry, in astonishment. "But—but—"

"Yes, Racke!" Figgins kicked at the gravel, staring gloomily at the ground. "He tacked himself on, making himself beastly pleasant to Ethel; he can seem pleasant enough to girls when he likes. I—I lost my wool a bit, and punched the boulder in Wayland High Street—and Ethel came out of a shop and saw it!"

"Oh!" gasped Blake. "My hat!"

"She ticked me off properly!" growled Figgins. "And Racke took her back to Spalding Hall alone."

"BRAVO, O

A lot has been written recently about fresh Test Matches, but few tributes have been paid to the performances in

OF all the games which are played, cricket stands out on top as the one concerning which records are kept. It almost seems that nothing happens in big cricket which is not duly recorded somewhere or other, and when anything big happens, these records are immediately turned up and referred to.

There are people who can tell you the biggest stand made for any wicket in matches between England and Australia, the greatest number of wickets taken in a day by any bowler, the greatest number of runs scored off any bowler in a Test match. All these things, and a thousand and one others, are carefully filed away and brought up for reference when the occasion provides an excuse.

But in spite of the thoroughness with which these cricket records are kept, I have a grumble, and I think the fellows who have kept wicket in Test matches have a grumble, too. Anyway, if they haven't they ought to have, so I am going to voice it on their behalf.

A New Record!

There is nothing in the record books to tell us the wicket-keepers who have done best in the Tests—those who have allowed the smallest number of byes in proportion to the number of runs scored in an innings. That the number of byes is not necessarily the best indication of the merits of a wicket-keeper is admitted, but it seems to me that the fellow who doesn't allow many byes in an innings will be a good wicket-keeper in other directions.

As these things are not shown in the record-books, I am going to take my courage in both hands and say that, from the "byes" stand-point "Bertie" Oldfield, the wicket-keeper of Australia, set up a new record in that Second Test match of the present series. England scored the greatest number of runs ever made in one innings in a Test match—636. Did you notice how many of those 636 were byes? Perhaps you didn't, because we don't make a habit of noting these details. Well, the byes which Oldfield conceded in that terribly long innings totalled two!

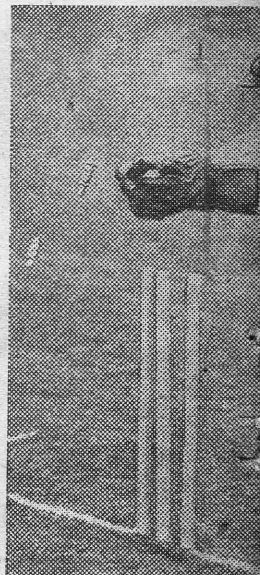
Think that over for a minute. During that innings Australia's bowlers sent down 272 overs—1,633 deliveries to be exact—and Oldfield only allowed two byes. As I say, the record books don't

tell us whether it is a portion to the number of wickets kept, or better figures, then "keeper!"

Patience.

For one thing, Oldfield's medal for patience is a fine one. One thousand and one in a single innings he took the ball from the bowler, and then bent down to take the ball or as it were, and then bent down to take what sort of oil a fellow uses on his knees, but well lubricated, don't you know.

As a rule we don't notice wicket-keepers, but Oldfield, Australia, and deserve a medal for his genius behind the stumps. His wicket-keeping genius is what I had the pleasure of seeing with him when the Au-



"BERTIE" Oldfield

"Did he, by Jove?" exclaimed Tom Merry.
 "Gweat Scott! Wacke—with Cousin Ethel!"
 There was dismay in the face of the swell of St. Jim's.
 His annoyance with Figgins was now quite forgotten. It was far, far worse that Aubrey Racke, the black sheep of the Shell, should be finding favour in the eyes of Cousin Ethel!

Something would have to be done about it, in fact. Arthur Augustus set his lips grimly, and glanced at his watch.

"I'm goin' ovah to Spaldin' Hall wight away," declared Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I shall tell Ethel that she cannot possibly be fwiendly with such an uttah outsidah as Wacke!"

Figgins brightened.

"You will?"

"Yaas, bai Jove! I shall tell Ethel that you were no

OLDFIELD!"

Records set up by bowlers and batsmen in the to the Australian wicket-keeper's remarkable is season's Tests.

s a record in pro- of runs scored, but has ever returned well, he was some

ersonified!

ld surely deserves a complete watchful- hundred odd times ouches low, watched's hand, got up as he batsman played it, gain. I don't know who does that must ey do require to be ey?

make heroes of our Oldfield is a hero in ally so. He is the aps. The nature of his was brought home easure of a long talk alian cricketers were

in England in 1926. I expected to find that his hands were all bruised, knuckles all out of shape from bad knocks, and fingers swollen. But not a bit of it! The hands were like the hands of a gentleman who had never done a stroke of work of any sort, much less stood up for over after over to bowlers like Gregory and Macdonald. And they were smaller hands than mine—which aren't large by any means.

Real Pluck!

If a wicket-keeper's hands are not all bruised and banged, knocked out of shape, that means that he is not only stopping the ball, but that he is holding it in the middle of his hand almost all the time. That's the real tribute to the wicket-keeping genius of Australia's "Bertie."

Of course, he hasn't managed to keep wicket so long without getting a nasty one occasionally. When the England team were in Australia in 1924-5, Oldfield got a bumper from Gregory on his body, and the ball broke two ribs. But he insisted on finishing the match behind the stumps.

The value of Oldfield to Australia does not end when he has kept wicket perfectly through an innings, though goodness knows that is enough for any player to do. But if Oldfield had not been such an excellent wicket-keeper he would have been a great batsman. Many are the excellent innings he has played for Australia in a crisis.

The Hope of the "Tail."

He scored 65 not out at Sydney in 1925 when Australia stood in dire need of more runs to secure the victory. His batting average in Test matches prior to the present series was 35. He goes in fairly late as a rule, of course—you can't send a fellow in to bat immediately he has left off keeping wicket—but when runs are wanted Oldfield is usually there to get a few. There is a stock phrase often used concerning Australian cricket: "While Oldfield has still to come there is always hope; when Oldfield has gone there is no hope left."

Yes, that's Oldfield—the hope of his side. And his place most of the time is behind the wicket. Artists don't draw pictures of the "hope" standing behind the wicket. But we pay tribute to Oldfield.

So, hats off to this famous wicket-keeper, brilliant "Bertie" of Australia.



OLDFIELD—best.

doubt wight in stwikin' Wacke this aftahnoon! It was a pity that she saw you do it, but Wacke is such a howwid boundah that I back you up, Figgay, evewy time!"

And Arthur Augustus smiled upon Figgins quite kindly. "Gussy backing up Figgins!" breathed Herries to Digby. "Wonders will never cease!"

"We'll go over to Spalding with you, Gussy," put in Blake. "And if we meet Racke on the way, we'll push his blessed face out at the back of his neck for him!"

"Ha, ha! Rather!"

The face of George Figgins was a little brighter as he watched the chums of the School House hurry off towards the cycle-shed, and emerge a few moments later lighting the lamps of their bicycles.

"Ta ta, Figgay!" sang out Monty Lowther. "Keep your pecker up!"

And Tom Merry & Co. and Blake & Co. jumped on to their machines and vanished through the gates into the dusky road.

But Figgins' face fell again as he and Fatty Wynn turned towards the New House.

"It's no good," grunted Figgins. "Ethel saw me slosh Racke, and nothing can get me out of her bad books!"

"Let's wait for Racke to get back, and duck him in the fountain," suggested David Llewellyn Wynn brightly.

"Rats! What's the good of that?"

And with dismal countenance, George Figgins tramped up the steps into the New House. He had very little hope in Tom Merry & Co.'s visit to Spalding Hall.

CHAPTER 13.

Arthur Augustus—Peacemaker!

"**E**THEL, deah gal—" Arthur Augustus broke off nervously, and coughed.

Together with Tom Merry and Blake, the swell of the Fourth had come to interview Cousin Ethel, leaving the rest of his chums waiting near the gates. Miss Finch had interviewed the trio first of all—causing a few minutes of great embarrassment. She had then shown them into the handsome big hall, where the three juniors had waited in still further embarrassment while various Spaldingites passed through and eyed them curiously.

But at last Cousin Ethel had appeared, greeting them brightly, and Arthur Augustus cleared his throat and began his rather delicate task.

"Ethel, deah gal—"

"Yes?" she said encouragingly.

"About Wacke!" said Arthur Augustus firmly.

"Oh!"

"And—ah—poor old Figgay," continued the swell of St. Jim's, with still greater firmness.

But Ethel's face was not encouraging. A faint flush had come into her cheeks, and her eyes were sparkling in rather a grim way quite unusual with her.

"Well?"

"I heah that there has been wathah an unfortunate occuwnence this aftahnoon," continued Arthur Augustus. "I have come to explain that Wacke is weally a fwihtful boundah, quite unsuitable to be a fwiend of yours, Ethel! Whereas Figgay, although he is a New House ass, is, at any wate, a gentleman, and—ah—a decent chap at heart, though a little wuff and weady at times—"

Arthur Augustus broke off, and eyed Ethel a trifle anxiously. She had listened in silence to what he had to say. But the expression on her face had not changed.

"Really?" said Cousin Ethel icily.

"Oh deah! I feah you do not sound vewy pleased, Ethel," murmured Arthur Augustus anxiously.

"If you have come to try and excuse Figgins' behaviour," the girl went on in the same frigid tones, "I am afraid you have rather wasted your time. I do not want to hear any more about it."

"Oh cwumbs!"

"But, I say, Miss Ethel," put in Tom Merry quickly, flushing with embarrassment, "Gussy's right, you know! Figgins was an ass this afternoon, but he's sorry about it, and—"

"It is no good trying to defend him," said Cousin Ethel quietly. "His behaviour was utterly inexcusable. Whereas Racke behaved like a gentleman!"

"But Racke's a frightful worm!" broke out Blake—rather tactlessly perhaps.

Cousin Ethel eyed him scornfully.

"I know Racke is not popular," she announced, in cutting tones. "But I judge people by their behaviour to me—not by listening to other people's disparagement of them!"

"My hat! Yes, of course!" mumbled Blake. "That's only right. But I can assure you Racke is the world's worst worm—"

"Indeed? I do not think it very sporting to talk about him like that behind his back," said Cousin Ethel. Blake went crimson.

"I—I'd say it to his face, any day," he answered uncomfortably. "I jolly well have, in fact!"

"It's like this—" began Tom Merry.

"Pway listen to weason, deah gal—"

"You see, Miss Ethel—" cut in Blake.

"Pway shut up, Blake, and leave this to me!" said Arthur Augustus sharply. "As a chap of tact and judgment—"

A bell was heard ringing.

"I must go," said Cousin Ethel. "Good-bye!"

"Oh deah! But, weally—"

"I'll show you the way out," returned Cousin Ethel frigidly.

"You're not seeing Racke again, anyway, I hope?" put in Tom Merry quickly.

The girl's lips tightened.

"Really," she exclaimed, "I think it rather impertinent on your part to dictate to me who my friends shall be!"

"Oh dear!" mumbled Tom Merry. "You see—"

The door behind them opened, and Miss Finch entered, her gimlet eyes fixed upon the St. Jim's juniors.

"I am afraid Ethel has to come now," she said. "This is the way out."

"The order of the boot," muttered Blake ruefully, as the three juniors passed out through the doorway on the heels of Miss Finch and Cousin Ethel.

And Arthur Augustus, Tom Merry, and Jack Blake emerged into the road again from Spalding Hall realising that Figgins was deeper in disgrace than they had imagined. The only result of their visit seemed to be to have hardened Cousin Ethel's resolution to be friendly with Racke!

"Girls are dashed difficult to deal with," groaned Blake. "You never know how they'll take a thing!"

"Bai Jove! You are wight, Blake, deah boy! The deah gal was quite offended with us for tellin' her what a boundah Wacke weally is!"

In the road, the waiting juniors hurried up to their three spokesmen, eager for news. Their faces fell when Tom Merry told them what had taken place.

"It's rotten!" declared Monty Lowther gloomily.

"Putrid!" agreed Herries.

"Poor old Figgins!" put in Manners.

Arthur Augustus snorted. He was feeling very sore at his rebuff. On behalf of Figgins, of whom he did not entirely approve, he had laid himself open to a big snub from Cousin Ethel—and the snub had been duly administered.

Consequently, sympathy for Figgins was not exactly an overwhelming force within the swell of St. Jim's at that moment.

The juniors mounted their bikes and turned in the direction of St. Jim's.

"Yes, poor old Figgy!" said Digby thoughtfully.

There was an angry sniff from Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Blow Figgy!"

CHAPTER 14.

School House v. New House!

NOW, we've got to give these School House cuckoos the licking of their lives!"

Fatty Wynn made that remark, in the changing-room at St. Jim's, on the following Saturday afternoon. In a few minutes the match between New House and School House was due to start.

"Hear, hear!" agreed Dick Redfern heartily. "We've got a strong team out to-day, and we ought to pull it off, I fancy!"

The New House fellows all agreed with Redfern, with cheers—all except Figgins. Figgins was very quiet.

He had not been cheerful since that unfortunate Wednesday! And though Figgy was not the kind of fellow to try to inflict his troubles upon other people, his face was clear evidence of his dismal mood.

"There's the whistle!" exclaimed Kerr. "Come on!"

There was a cheer from the New House supporters as their team came trotting out on to the field.

A big crowd of juniors had gathered to watch the game, which promised to be an exciting one.

Figgins, leading his team across the touchline, through the crowd, gave a sudden gasp.

A familiar feminine figure was standing among the spectators. Cousin Ethel! And Aubrey Racke was at her side, grinning across at Figgins with scarcely veiled maliciousness.

Figgins paused in his stride.

For a moment he met Cousin Ethel's eyes. The girl started. She evidently had not realised that the match was against the New House, and that Figgins would be playing. But the next moment she turned her head away coldly.

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There was no mistaking the meaning of that action. Cousin Ethel had seen him, Figgins knew. But she did not want to have anything to do with him.

Figgins stumbled on to the footer field, and the teams lined up after the toss, which Tom Merry won. The referee's whistle sounded sharply. Tom Merry tapped the ball across to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, and with a yell from the watching juniors of both Houses, the game had started.

The School House forwards set things moving with a rush. They swept through the New House front line, and were on the backs almost before the New House could even think of stopping them. Then the backs stemmed the rush. Fatty Wynn, in goal, relaxed as the ball was sent shooting up to the centre line again by the New House left-back.

Owen got the ball, and passed it to Figgins.

As a rule, Figgins would have been off like a streak, with the leather at his toes, and it would have taken a good man to stop him. But now Figgy seemed utterly at a loss.

The fact that Racke had brought Cousin Ethel over to watch the game was filling his mind, to the exclusion of all else. Cousin Ethel—and Racke!

Tom Merry & Co. had been rather taken aback when they had found Racke and Ethel on the touchline. But their shock was nothing to the shock Figgins had received.

Figgins fumbled wildly with the ball, and the next moment Blake had swept it away from his feet and it was soaring off towards the New House goal once again.

There was a blank silence from the New House supporters. It was not like Figgins to muff anything like that.

"Rotten!" sang out Chowle from the touchline. "Rotten, Figgins! If you want to learn to play footer, come round and see me after the match!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins crimsoned.

A minute later the ball came his way again. Again he made a mess of it, and the New House supporters stared at one another blankly.

And on the touchline Aubrey Racke grinned a satisfied grin.

With Figgins all at sea, the New House team had lost its inspiration. They seemed to go to pieces from the very first, and by half-time no less than three goals had been scored against them, despite the heroic efforts of Fatty Wynn between the posts.

It was a dismal eleven that sucked slices of lemon at half-time. And, though when the second half began, it was with the determination on their part to pull themselves together, the New House team had no luck. Figgins was still hopeless. Within five minutes of the start of the second half another goal had been slammed into the net by Tom Merry.

The School House yelled delightedly.

Then Arthur Augustus D'Arcy put the ball under the bar, and School House fairly let itself go. Five—nothing! It seemed almost too good to be true.

And that was not the finish of the rot. A few minutes before the final whistle sounded Fatty Wynn was beaten by an unstoppable shot from Levison, bringing the score to six—nothing in the School House favour.

"Six—nil!" roared Dick Julian joyously from the edge of the field. "My hat! It's about a giddy record!"

It was a smashing defeat for the New House! They almost crawled off the field in their dejection, their one thought being to hide their diminished heads as soon as possible.

"Licked to the wide!" groaned Lawrence. "Six—nil! Oh, my hat!"

As they left the field Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with Blake, Tom Merry, and Monty Lowther, approached Cousin Ethel. "We want you to come and have tea with us, of course," said Arthur Augustus, eyeing his cousin a trifle anxiously.

"Thank you so much; but I have promised to have tea with Racke," answered Cousin Ethel sweetly.

"Come along to the shop before it gets too crowded, Miss Cleveland," suggested Racke, grinning. He was enjoying himself thoroughly. "See you fellows later!"

Racke and Cousin Ethel hurried off towards Dame Taggles' little shop, leaving Tom Merry & Co. gazing after them very disconsolately.

"Well, that's clear enough!" grunted Tom Merry a trifle sheepishly. "She wants to let us know what she thinks of us for slanging Racke."

"Yaas, I am afraid that is it!" nodded the swell of the Fourth. "Oh deah!"

And the chums entered the dressing-room, looking almost as dejected as Figgins had done when leaving the field.

Without doubt, as Tom Merry had said, Cousin Ethel was "letting them know!"

CHAPTER 15.

Blake's Great Idea!

"I SAY, you School House jabberwocks," remarked Fatty Wynn, putting his head into the dressing-room, where the School House team were changing back from their footer kit, "can I come in?"

"I should think the door is just wide enough," nodded Monty Lowther.

David Llewellyn Wynn rolled in.

Fatty Wynn had changed back from footer kit. By now most of the School House team had done the same and hurried off for tea. Tom Merry & Co. and Study No. 6 were the only fellows left.

"This won't do!" announced Fatty Wynn firmly.

"What won't?" inquired Manners, fastening his tie at the mirror.

"Why, this Figgins business!" said the Welsh junior, sitting down gloomily on one of the benches. "Something's got to be done about it!"

"Hear, hear!" agreed Digby.

"It's all vevy well to talk," commented Arthur Augustus tartly. "But what can be done, deah boy?"

"Somebody's got to think of something," said Fatty Wynn vaguely. "We simply can't have Figgy going round like a blessed boiled owl! Why, it was through that that you asses licked us this afternoon!"

"It wasn't a licking; it was a giddy massacre!" chuckled Monty Lowther.

"Oh, rats!" glared Fatty Wynn. "If Figgy hadn't muffed everything like he did, he'd have put some spirit into the chaps, and we'd have given you the licking of your lives!"

"Bow-wow!" grinned Blake.

"Look here—"

"Chuck rowing, you asses!" cut in Tom Merry. "Fatty's right in saying that it was Figgy's fault they got so badly licked, anyway. We know that. And we know, too, that something's got to be done about it. But what?"

"Echo answers what!" nodded Manners.

There was a sudden exclamation from Jack Blake. The others glanced at him quickly.

"I've got a scheme!" declared Blake.

"Get it off your chest, deah boy!" Arthur Augustus, taking great pains with the adjusting of his waistcoat in front of one of the mirrors, forgot even that important matter, and turned a gleaming eyeglass on the leader of the Fourth.

"We all know what a worm and a funk Racke is," said Blake.

"Tell us something we don't know!" suggested Herries. "The thing to do is to persuade Cousin Ethel that he is; no need to tell us!"

"Suppose," went on Blake coolly, "Racke were seeing her home this evening, and a crowd of roughs attacked them and tried to steal Miss Ethel's bag—what would Racke do? Would he show up as a giddy hero, or would he bunk?"

"He'd bunk, deah boy!"

"Exactly!" grinned Blake. "But would Figgins?"

"Of course he wouldn't!" snorted Fatty Wynn. "But—but—"

"Then the thing to do is to arrange for Figgy and Racke to be with Ethel when she is attacked by roughs," went on Blake, with gleaming eyes. "The way those two behaved would prove to Cousin Ethel that Figgy is true-blue, and that Racke is just a worm!"

"Yes. But how the dickens can we hope that roughs would attack them, you idiot?" growled Herries.

Blake gave him a withering look.

"Why, you champion chump, that's easy! Suppose we arranged it with some of the village roughs; you know, the Green Man crowd. They'd do it like a shot for five bob apiece. All they would have to do would be to pretend to attack them until Racke had bolted; then they could let Figgy drive them off."

The others stared at Blake.

It was a daring scheme. But there seemed to be no reason why it should not work well.

(Continued on next page.)

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"Rippin' wheeze, deah ooy!" said Arthur Augustus warmly. "I pwoopose we cawwy it out."

"Rather!" cried Fatty Wynn excitedly.

"I don't see why not," agreed Tom Merry, grinning. "It's up to us to show Racke's true colours, for Miss Ethel's own sake, as well as Figgy's."

"But, look here!" objected Manners. How are we going to get Figgins to go back to Spalding with Racke and Miss Ethel? Figgy's in disgrace at present. He won't dare to ask her if he can see her home."

"That's so," nodded Digby gloomily.

"Rats!" snapped Fatty Wynn. "We'll tell Figgy he must try to heal the breach, by asking to accompany her back to Spalding this evening. She can't refuse if he insists."

"That's so," agreed Tom Merry. "Good idea!"

"I'll buzz down to Rylcombe now," said Blake, "and fix up the 'attack.' Somebody go off and persuade Figgins to tuck himself on to Miss Ethel and Racke this evening."

Blake hurried from the dressing-room. Tom Merry gripped Fatty Wynn's arm, and took him out in search of Figgins. They found him leaving the New House dressing-room, and tackled him promptly.

"Do you really think I ought to?" said Figgins dubiously, when Tom Merry had told him what they wanted him to do—though not explaining why they wanted it. "I—I mean, I shall get frightfully snubbed!"

"Never mind," grinned Fatty Wynn. "What's a snub?"

"Miss Ethel isn't the sort of girl to nurse a grievance, you know," said Tom Merry quietly. "It's up to you to make the first move towards peace!"

"You really think so?"

"Sure of it!" nodded Fatty Wynn. "Dead sure, old boss!"

"I'll try it," said Figgins dismally. "But I bet I get frightfully snubbed."

"Of course you'll get snubbed!" exclaimed Fatty Wynn. "You mustn't mind, that's all. You must insist on seeing her home, with Racke."

"But, hang it all—"

"I tell you, you've got to insist!" hooted Fatty Wynn. "That's the way to deal with girls—be firm!"

"Do you agree with that, Tom Merry?"

"I do," said Tom, smiling.

"Then—then I will!" said Figgins, with sudden firmness. "I know I don't know anything about girls. You're more likely to be right than I am."

And Figgins went off in search of Cousin Ethel. He found her emerging from the tuckshop, with Aubrey Racke in close attendance.

Racke gave Figgins a very supercilious stare as the New House skipper came up, crimson to the roots of his hair. Cousin Ethel, seeing that he intended to speak to her, gave him a very cold glance.

She was anything but the kind of girl who likes to keep up a quarrel. But she had not yet forgiven Figgins for what she considered his disgraceful behaviour in her presence. She could not like a fellow who would use his fists as Figgins had done.

"I—I say," mumbled Figgins, "I—I wanted to see you!"

"Really?" replied Cousin Ethel.

"Y-yes! I—I never got a chance of apologising the other day, you know. I'm sorry I biffed Racke—I mean, that I hit him, you know—"

"I don't wish to discuss that," Cousin Ethel retorted warmly. She turned her head away abruptly.

"Well, I'm jolly sorry, anyway," stammered Figgins miserably. "And—and I thought it would be rather good if we called it pax."

"I don't think I understand you," said Cousin Ethel, in the same cold tone.

"Well, let me see you back to Spalding Hall?" blurted out Figgins, standing first on one foot, then on the other.

"Racke is seeing me home, thank you."

At that, Figgins would have turned tail and bolted had he not remembered his chums' insistence that he must not accept a rebuff.

He breathed hard.

"Well, I'd like to join you," said Figgins.

A surprised look came into the eyes of Cousin Ethel. Then she shrugged her shoulders.

"If you insist, you may, of course."

It was clearer than daylight that she did not want his company! And it went against the grain for Figgins to force himself on anyone. But he stuck to his guns doggedly.

"Thanks!" he said. "Then I will!"

"Look here—" said Racke. Then he broke off, with a grin. "Very well."

"When are you going?" asked Figgins uncomfortably.

"We are going now," said Cousin Ethel.

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"Oh, right-ho!" mumbled Figgins.

So far, his chums' advice did not seem to be working too well. He was still in deep disgrace—as deep as ever!

But Figgins meant to go through with it, now that he had begun.

Looking about as cheerful as a martyr at the stake, George Figgins passed out of the gateway of St. Jim's at Cousin Ethel's right, with Aubrey Racke striding jauntily on her left, and turned in the direction of Rylcombe railway station.

CHAPTER 16.

The Plot that Failed!

"HERE they come!" muttered Jack Blake.

He peered out through the bushes. Far up the road three figures could be seen. Before long they would pass the spinney where he and his henchmen were waiting in hiding.

Blake had wasted no time. On his bicycle, it had not taken him long to get into Rylcombe, and there he had come across a local youth named Roker—the very man he wanted!

Roker was not a savoury character by any means. He was one of the hangers-on at the Green Man, and the leader of the local young roughs. But for once Blake had been pleased to see Roker.

It had not taken long to gather together three other of like kidney, and five shillings apiece had made them quite willing to do what ever Blake required of them.

"Now, you know what I want?" muttered Blake.

"Rather, gov nor!" grinned Roker. "We're to pretend to try an' snatch the young lady's purse, an' treat the two young gents a bit rough—"

"That's it," nodded Blake. "Don't hurt 'em, if you can help it, but put enough beef into it to look convincing. One of 'em is sure to run—the pasty-looking chap. The other will put up a good scrap. Well, you must let him. Don't mind taking a few biffs. But when the pasty-looking worm has scooted, you must clear off, too. All clear?"

"Yus!" growled one of Roker's friends. "All clear!"

"Here they come!" breathed Blake excitedly. "That chap on the left—he's the one who'll bunk! When he's shown the white feather, you can clear off yourselves. Well, I mustn't risk 'em seeing me!"

And Blake turned and vanished hastily among the trees.

Figgins was making a gallant effort to join in the conversation, and be bright, as he and Ethel and Racke came up the road. But it was heavy going for Figgy, and he was not making much headway. Suddenly there was a scrambling sound at the edge of the road, and four tough-looking youths came scrambling down the bank.

"Hallo, hallo!" muttered Figgins. "What's this?"

The roughs cut across the road, and halted, barring the path of the three. Cousin Ethel gave a startled exclamation. Racke's face went a trifle pale—but only for a moment.

Then an odd look flashed into the face of the black sheep of the Shell.

And the roughs, for their part, seemed suddenly to lose all spirit for the job as their eyes fell on Racke!

For they all knew Aubrey Racke, who was a familiar figure at the Green Man, and a personal friend of Mr. Joseph Banks, the dingy landlord.

"My heye!" gasped Roker, in dismay.

He would not have touched Racke for the world!

Blake's five shillings were in Roker's pocket, and he had undertaken to carry out Blake's instructions. But Roker did not worry much about promises.

Blake was very well as far as he went—but he did not go far. No farther than five shillings, in fact. But Racke was an habitue of the Green Man, and spent his money freely, to the great benefit of Mr. Roker and his friends.

Figgins, who had fancied for a moment that the roughs intended to attack them, had clenched his fists swiftly. But now he saw the odd pause of Mr. Roker and his friends, he unclenched his fists again, wondering what was in the wind.

"My heye!" repeated Roker, very taken aback, eyeing Racke sheepishly.

Racke glanced swiftly at Figgins. Then he gave the leader of the ruffians an unseemly wink, and jerked his head in the direction of Figgins significantly.

His meaning was clear enough.

The roughs understood that they were to attack Figgins, and they did not want to know the reason why. They knew that a good reward would come their way from Racke's purse if they did as they were bid.



Figgins was within fifty yards of the school gates when his tyre punctured on a fragment of broken glass. There was a sharp report, and the tyre peeled off, and Figgins went shooting over the handle-bars into the hedge. At that moment, Racke's taxi sped past, and Figgy caught a glimpse of the grinning, triumphant face of Aubrey Racke! (See Chapter 9.)

So, as one man, they flung themselves at Figgins. With a shout, the New House leader went down.

He staggered up blindly, surrounded by four young hooligans. Struggling desperately, Figgins yelled to Racke.

"Help!"

Racke grinned an inward grin. Here was his chance of shining before Ethel!

In a moment Racke waded into the fray.

The roughs tumbled to the idea at once, and they played up well. They went down like ninepins before what seemed to be powerful blows from Racke, but which were, in reality, the gentlest of taps. Figgins on the other hand, was getting some real, hard, slogging knocks, and was helpless to defend himself against the overwhelming odds.

Then, at a sign from Racke, Roker and his cronies broke and "fled," vanishing into the trees.

Racke, smiling serenely, utterly untouched and unruffled, stooped over the dishevelled figure of George Figgins and helped him to his feet, with a murmur of kindly sympathy.

"Ow!" gasped Figgins. "Oh! Grooh! Wow!"

He dabbed at his streaming nose with a handkerchief, and massaged a thickened ear, and blinked with a rapidly blackening eye.

"Oh! Grooooooh!"

"Hurt?" murmured Racke. "Hard luck!"

The cad of the Shell flicked a speck of dust from his sleeve.

Cousin Ethel turned an admiring glance upon him. The calm way in which Racke had sailed in to Figgins' rescue and dispersed his formidable attackers, had impressed her tremendously. Her eyes were shining.

"You were splendid!" she said warmly.

"It was nothing," murmured Aubrey Racke carelessly.

"Are—are you very much hurt?" Cousin Ethel asked Figgins falteringly.

"Ow! Yes! I mean, no!" gasped Figgins. "I'm all right!"

He dusted himself down. He was far too dishevelled, however, to contemplate accompanying Cousin Ethel any farther. Some of the blood from his streaming nose had stained his coat, and the knees of his trousers were torn. He was no companion for a lady just then!

"I—I think you'd better get on without me," mumbled Figgins. "Ow! By doze!"

"I—I'm sorry," said Cousin Ethel, "that you are hurt."

"Yes, it's bad luck," agreed Racke, with great heartiness. Figgins glared at him.

"Do—do you mind going?" he muttered. He did not like being seen by Cousin Ethel in his present condition.

"Certainly," grinned Racke. "By the way, Figgins, you must let me give you some boxing lessons."

Figgins glared at him speechlessly, with one half-closed eye.

"Come along, Miss Cleveland," said Racke smoothly.

"We mustn't miss that train."

"Good-bye," said Cousin Ethel distantly.

She felt sorry for Figgins. But, really, she told herself, his own misdoings were not atoned for by the fact that he had had a taste of his own medicine!

Figgins stood dabbing his swollen nose and watching Cousin Ethel and Racke vanish up the lane.

"Oh dear!" groaned Figgins. "I never knew Racke could scrap like that! He wasn't even touched!"

There was no doubt at all that it had all been very surprising.

But no one would have been quite so surprised as Jack Blake had he only stayed to watch the proceedings.

Blake's little scheme had gone very badly wrong!

CHAPTER 17.

A Shock for Blake!

FARTHER up the lane Jack Blake emerged on to the road again, safely out of sight of the scene of the "attack."

He had to be careful not to risk being connected in any way with that affair. But he was eager to find out if things had gone well—as he felt sure they had. Blake could not foresee a possible hitch. That Racke would bolt he had not the slightest doubt—knowing Aubrey Racke! And he had equally little doubt, on the other hand, that Figgins would turn up trumps and show himself a bit of a hero in the eyes of Cousin Ethel.

And so it was with a light heart that Blake turned up the road on his bicycle, which he had wheeled out from its

hiding-place in the trees and pedalled leisurely towards the spot where Roker and his cronies had staged the ambush.

That he would soon meet Cousin Ethel and Figgins, once again the best of friends, Blake would have wagered his very boots!

"Blake would have lost such a wager!"

"My hat!"

Rounding a corner in the road the Fourth-Former gave a gasp. He stared blankly ahead.

Two figures were coming towards him down the road. One was Cousin Ethel. But the other was not Figgins.

To the utter amazement of Jack Blake, Cousin Ethel's companion was Aubrey Racke.

"What the thump—"

Blake almost fell off his bike in surprise. As it was, he wobbled into the hedge. He scrambled up dazedly, and fumbled with his cap. Racke raised his own cap in his most polished manner.

"H-h-hallo!" stammered Blake.

"You seem quite surprised to see us!" smiled Cousin Ethel.

"Nunno!" said Blake hastily. "N-not at all!"

"We haven't much time to catch our train, so we must hurry on," explained Racke loftily. "I am seeing Miss Ethel back to Spalding Hall, of course."

"But—" blurted out Blake, in wondering surprise.

"Eh?"

"Oh, nothing!" said the Fourth-Former lamely. "At least, I had an idea Figgins might be seeing you home, Miss Ethel."

The girl's face set in rather disencouraging lines. Blake saw it, and his heart sank. Something had gone wrong somewhere! Not only was Racke still with Cousin Ethel and in as good favour as ever, but Figgy was evidently still in disgrace with Gussy's pretty cousin.

"As a matter of fact," grinned Racke, "he was coming with us. But some roughs attacked us. I don't know what the idea was, unless they had some personal grudge against Figgins—must have been that, I fancy. They attacked us, anyway, and I had a bit of a tussle—so did Figgy. I rescued him—"

"You rescued him?" echoed Blake.

"Yes," nodded Racke coolly. "He got knocked about a bit, though. He's gone back to the school. Well, we ought to be hurrying, Miss Ethel."

And Cousin Ethel and Racke hurried on together towards the railway station, leaving Blake in a mystified whirl.

What could have happened to upset his plans so badly? Why had Roker & Co. attacked the wrong fellow? It seemed to Blake that they must have misunderstood his directions, after all. There could be no other explanation.

"Oh crumbs!" groaned Blake. "Poor old Figgy!"

And with a face longer than any fiddle Blake jumped on his bike again and sped off up the road to overtake the unlucky New House skipper.

He could not, of course, admit to Figgins the truth. Even had things gone right he could never have done that. Now that things had gone wrong he was still less in a position to explain!

But he wanted to sympathise with Figgy.

Figgy, however, was nowhere to be found!

"Funny!" muttered Blake, when he had covered half the distance to St. Jim's without catching sight of his quarry. "Where the dickens can the chap have vanished to?"

The mystery was soon solved. As he cycled into the quad Blake caught sight of George Figgins wheeling a cycle out of the bicycle-shed. Figgins glanced up at Blake's approach.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Blake, a trifle sheepishly. "I say, old chap, Racke told me you'd been badly smashed up by some roughs in Rylcombe Lane!"

"That's right," growled Figgins; and Blake saw now that the New House skipper's battered features bore eloquent testimony to the fact. Figgy's nose was like an overripe tomato, his left eye was assuming nearly all the colours of the rainbow, and one of his ears strongly resembled a cauliflower. Altogether, the unlucky leader of the New House seemed to have been so much in the wars that his face was hardly recognisable.

"Ahem!" Blake coughed. "Why the dickens do you think they went for you?"

"Goodness knows!" said Figgins disconsolately. "Unless it was that they wanted to pinch Cousin Ethel's purse. I found it lying in the road afterwards. Here it is."

He displayed a girl's purse, slipping it into his pocket.

"You got back here pretty quick, didn't you?" asked Blake. "I expected to catch you up."

"I got a lift in a car, luckily," explained Figgins. "You see, I've got to take this purse over to Spalding Hall. She ought to have it at once—there's money in it, and I don't

want her to get worried, thinking it's lost for good. But I couldn't go over there with my togs as they were—I was in a pretty bad mess."

Blake saw that Figgins had changed into a clean suit. He had certainly been quick about it.

"I'm just off to take the purse back now," went on Figgins. "I'm biking over."

He prepared to jump into the saddle. But Blake detained him.

"I—I say, old chap," mumbled Blake, looking anywhere but at Figgins, "how—how are things with Cousin Ethel?"

"Rotten!" grunted Figgins. "I'm a rough-and-ready sort of ass, I know, and I dunno how to heal the blessed breach at all. And Racke put up a good show against the roughs, too—I never thought he had it in him. But he did, I must say. And so he's more in favour than ever!"

Blake said nothing. He was feeling that he could kick himself for the part he had played in unwittingly helping Racke at the expense of Figgins—although his intention had been just the reverse.

Blake's brow was as gloomy as Figgins' own, as the New House skipper jumped on to his cycle and pedalled out of the gates.

Then, with a sigh, Jack Blake turned to put away his bike before telling the chums of the School House what a ghastly mess he had made of things.

And in the gathering dusk George Figgins cycled on towards Spalding, in a very unhappy frame of mind. He did not intend to see Ethel—he would merely give the purse in at the porter's lodge, with an explanation as to how it had come to be in his possession.

As Figgins had told Blake, he had given up all hope of healing the breach between himself and Ethel.

Thanks to everything having played so amazingly into the hands of Aubrey Racke, Figgins felt that his case was hopeless. Racke had beaten him.

CHAPTER 18.

The Tables Turned!

"TAXI!"

Aubrey Racke, in the station yard at Wayland, yelled for a taxi, but no taxi came.

He and Ethel had just missed the train at Rylcombe, and so had had to wait for the next, twenty minutes later. That bit of bad luck was now capped by the fact that by the time they emerged from the station exit, at their destination, all the taxis had been already commissioned.

"Afraid we shall have to walk, Miss Ethel."

"Never mind," said Ethel brightly.

And Racke was secretly not sorry that they would have to walk. The evening was fine and dry, and a stroll through the darkening lanes between Wayland and Spalding was not an unpleasant prospect—in such delightful company as was provided by Cousin Ethel!

With a grin of satisfaction, Racke set off at the girl's side for the walk to Ethel's school.

Racke had set out to become friendly with Ethel in order to achieve his object—a breach between the girl and George Figgins. That object had been achieved far more easily than Racke had expected. But now that his chief reason for desiring to win Cousin Ethel's esteem had gone, Racke intended to continue winning her favour for the sake of Ethel herself.

The more he saw of her, the more was the black sheep of the Shell being attracted by D'Arcy's cousin.

"A ripping girl!" was Racke's inward verdict. And he preened himself to think how easily he had won her regard. Racke told himself that there was no doubt at all that he was a regular lady killer!

He did not realise that it was really largely to teach Figgins, and, to a lesser extent, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and his chums, a lesson, that Cousin Ethel had consented to go over to St. Jim's in his company that afternoon, and to allow him to see her back to Spalding Hall afterwards.

Had he realised that, Racke might have been a trifle less pleased with himself.

But there was no doubt that Ethel was beginning to like Racke very much. The way in which he had seemed to rescue Figgins from the toughs, struck her as being very brave and generous. And she admired those qualities in anyone.

"It was splendid, the way you went to Figgins' rescue," she said again, suddenly, as they were passing through

Spalding village, a little time later. "I daren't think what would have happened if you had not been there!"

"Yes, poor old Figgy was bashed about a bit," nodded Racke complacently.

"Poor Figgins!" exclaimed Cousin Ethel impulsively.

"Eh?" Racke did not look too pleased at that remark.

Cousin Ethel coloured slightly. In her heart she felt very sorry for Figgins. She was secretly beginning to wonder if she had been too hard on him.

of the village had now been left behind, and they were approaching the big gates of Spalding Hall, a couple of hundred yards away. "I hope you aren't afraid of the dark, you know," he went on in a confidential murmur. "I mean, if you would like to take my arm you can, you know."

Cousin Ethel did not speak. She began to walk very fast.

"I say, what's the hurry?" leered Racke.



"I choose to call her Ethel," said Racke. This was too much for Figgins. He took a step forward, and his clenched fist landed on Racke's jaw, sending the cad of the Shell sprawling on to the pavement. At the same time the door of the shop opened and out stepped Cousin Ethel! (See Chapter 11.)

After all, Figgins was such a nice fellow as a rule, even though he had behaved so disgracefully at Wayland that other afternoon!

Then she tightened her lips. Figgins must learn that he must not behave like a sulky child with her, as he seemed to have been doing. And he must learn, much more, that he must not use his fists in her presence—against her friends!

For Racke was one of her friends now. He had proved himself such a thoroughly nice—

"Ripping moon, isn't it?" said Racke suddenly, breaking in on her thoughts. He nodded ahead, to where a big moon was rising above the dark trees.

"Yes, it's lovely, agreed Cousin Ethel.

"Quite—er—romantic, the moon, you know!" said Racke dreamily.

Cousin Ethel glanced at him with a little puzzled look.

"Romantic?" she echoed, a trifle blankly.

"Yes," murmured Racke, with an oily smile that was meant to be fascinating.

Cousin Ethel felt a sudden, unpleasant shock go through her at sight of that rather leering smile.

"I—I don't think I quite know what you mean," she said coldly.

"Ha, ha!" laughed Racke fatuously. He glanced round. It was growing rapidly darker in the lane. The cottages

The girl's cheeks had gone rather white, with two bright spots of colour burning in them. She did not reply.

Racke put out a hand, and laid it on her arm.

"Not so fast!" he urged.

She shook his hand off, but he caught hold of her arm again, tighter this time, forcing her to stop.

"Let me go!" cried Cousin Ethel hotly. "How dare you?"

"Well, we're friends, aren't we?" grinned Racke. "I say, you know, I think I ought to have a reward for the way I saved you from being knocked about by those roughs! What about a ki—"

Cousin Ethel gave a cry as he tightened his grasp on her arm.

It was at that moment that George Figgins came pedalling round the corner of the lane behind them.

It took Figgins about three seconds to grasp the situation. It took him another three seconds to leap from his bicycle, grip Racke by the collar, and swing him away from Ethel Cleveland.

"Ow!" roared Racke, startled and scared. "Let me go—"

His words were cut short.

Figgins had released his hold on Racke's collar, and had

drawn back his arm. His fist flashed forward like a streak of light, straight to the mark. There was a thud as it connected with Racke's jaw.

Crash!

Racke went over like a ninepin before the strong right arm of George Figgins, and lay writhing in the road. Figgins stood over him, his eyes blazing.

Instinctively Racke scrambled up. Figgins promptly knocked him down again. And this time Racke, glaring up with unspeakable hatred, thought it better to remain where he was. He did not attempt to rise again.

Figgins, his rugged face set like stone, turned to Cousin Ethel.

"Come on," he said shortly.

Without another glance at Racke, Figgins began pushing his cycle in the direction of the distant gates. Cousin Ethel went silently at his side.

No word was spoken till they reached the gates. And not till then did Figgins glance again at Ethel.

"I came over to bring you your purse," he said quietly. "I found it in Rylcombe Lane. You must have dropped it when we were set on by those roughs. Here it is."

He handed her the purse. She took it silently.

"Good-night!" said Figgins.

He turned his cycle and was about to jump on, when she caught his arm.

"Oh, but—but—"

Figgins glanced at her. His face looked quite haggard, she noticed, in the light of the lamp over the gateway.

"You—you're not going to—to—"

"I'm going to give him the licking of his life," said Figgins.

"Oh, you mustn't—"

Figgins stared at her in silence for a moment. Then he shrugged his broad shoulders.

"All right!"

Cousin Ethel smiled a shaky little smile.

"You mustn't punish him again," she said quietly. "Because it was really my fault for being friendly with him. I see that now. You were right all the time—you and the others. I—I rather resented you telling me not to be friendly with him. But I know now that you were right, and I was mistaken."

Figgins said nothing.

"I'm sorry," said Cousin Ethel frankly; and she held out her hand. "Let's be friends again, shall we?"

"Shall we?" echoed Figgins. "You bet we will!"

And his eyes were dancing as he gripped her hand. Figgins' rough-and-ready ways had won, after all!

True to his promise, Figgins let Racke alone when they met again at St. Jim's. But Racke quaked in his shoes whenever he saw Figgins, for many days afterwards!

And the black sheep of the Shell knew that if he ever again tried his "lady-killing" tactics on Figgy's girl chum he would be in for the roughest treatment of his life! He was not likely to try the experiment, however.

The chums of the School House were delighted that Figgy had come out of his feud with Racke with such flying colours, after all! Strangely enough, even Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was thoroughly satisfied with the way that things had turned out. As the swell of St. Jim's remarked to Tom Merry & Co.: "Figgay—though admittedly a bit of a nuisance—was a better friend for his cousin than Wacke, any day!"

There was no cloud on the horizon now to spoil the St. Jim's chums' delight over the arrival of Cousin Ethel at the new school at Spalding. George Figgins' breach with his girl chum was healed for good, and in his cheerfulness at that extremely satisfactory state of affairs it was not likely to be long before he forgot the time when he had been Up Against It!

THE END.

GUSSY LENDS A HAND!



The title alone of next week's extra-long school story of Tom Merry & Co. will give you some idea of the treat in store, for all "GEM-ites" know what a fellow Arthur Augustus D'Arcy is for doing "good deeds". Gussy's intentions are always well meant in matters like this, but they have a happy knack of coming unstuck. His intention of doing Taggles a good turn in his hour of need is no exception to the rule. To say more now would be tantamount to spoiling a good thing in advance. So I'll leave you chaps to find out for yourselves just how our one and only Gussy "Lends a hand!" in next week's bumper number of the GEM!—Ed.

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By PERCY A. CLARKE.

CHAPTER 1.
Meeting Steve!

"THE gate's open!" exclaimed Sydney Dyson, who had a reputation for keen observation. Bob Crompton, his pal, scowled darkly. It was a sultry, oppressive sort of day in late autumn, and he was not in the best of tempers.

"I've got a forty horse-power, double-barrelled, six-cylinder thirst on," he growled. "So pack it up, Syd. I don't care two pins whether some idiot of a butcher's boy has left the gate open—"

"But it wasn't a butcher's boy," protested Syd, as they crossed the lane towards the open gate set in the thick thorn hedge. "Everybody in those parts knows how mad your uncle gets if that garden gate is left open. Besides, a tradesman, or errand-boy, would have left the gate ajar. Someone has gone and is eager to have a ready means of escape if desired. Not only is the gate open, but it is wedged open with that big stone to prevent it closing again. And Gyp is barking his head off."

But Bob refused to be interested.

"I'm too hot and thirsty to be worried," he growled. "Pack it up, Syd!"

Syd shrugged his shoulders and walked on in silence. He knew, from observation, that something unusual was afoot at the Grange—not that it was necessarily anything to worry about.

Both the pals were plucky, athletic, and cute. But of the two, Bob Crompton was a shade the better in athletics and physical strength, while Syd was a shade the better in using his eyes and brain. There was not a lot in it, either way.

They had been pals for years. Bob Crompton had been invited for the holidays, to bring his chum to the Grange, the residence of his uncle, Sir Charles Crompton, a wealthy business man who had made his money years ago in the Australian gold-fields.

And on this particular afternoon the pals had been for a ramble, and were returning, hot, thirsty, and tired, and looking forward to a wash and tea. Maybe, in the circumstances, it was only natural for Bob to get hot under the collar when Syd started observing things. He didn't feel in the mood for abstract reasoning.

They crossed the dusty lane and went in at the gate. Very

deliberately, Syd dislodged the big stone and closed the gate. And Bob sneered at him.

"Lock the burglar in," he said. "And cook will tell you that the coalman—"

"Shut up!" snapped Syd, staring straight ahead.

Bob followed the direction of his gaze, and saw the great rhododendron bushes agitated strangely—very strangely, considering that there was not enough wind to lift thistle-down.

Syd stepped on to the grass at the edge of the path, and Bob followed suit. Quietly, cautiously, they approached the shrubbery that backed the lawn against the house. The bushes swayed and rocked, and as they gazed they saw a man—a stranger—rise from amongst the shrubs and calmly attempt to clamber in through the open library window.

"My godfathers!" exclaimed Bob. "You're right, after all, Syd! Come on! Nab him!"

Together they sprinted forward. Regardless of the prize viols and the well-being of the rhododendrons, they broke across the flower-beds, burst through the shrubs, and the stranger rapped out a curse, and half-turned to face them. Bob was there first and grabbed him.

"You thief!" he snarled. "Come out!"

"Half a mo'," the stranger began.

But Bob refused to listen. He flew at the man, grabbed his arm and hauled, and the fellow slipped from his perch on the window-sill.

Then Syd arrived. The stranger saw he was cornered. He swung his arm, flail-like, and his enormous strength was obvious, for the movement lifted Bob off his feet. But Bob hung on like the terrier he was.

The stranger's other arm shot out towards Syd, but missed, for Syd had seen the danger, and his swift-acting brain told him what to do. He ducked, dived, and grabbed the man round the knees—as fine a tackle as ever was seen at Twickenham, and—crash!—he brought the stranger to the ground with a thud!

"You cubs!" he roared. "You wait, can't you! Listen!"

But the pals were all over him, hitting him, trying to hold his thrashing arms and legs. He was enormously strong. It was like a great buffalo attacked by fox-terriers. He flung them about ruthlessly. Syd had his breath knocked out against the wall. Bob felt his teeth rattle when his

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head hit the ground. But they hung on, and all the man's brute strength could not shake them off.

"You meddlers!" he growled. "I'll beat you to a pulp! Why the dickens can't you listen. Get off! Let go me leg! Great snakes, if you don't let go—"

And then Sir Charles Crompton came to the library window wondering what on earth the row was about.

"Bob! Syd! What ever—"
"Burglar, uncle!" cried Bob. "Grabbed him—get the p'lice—quick! He was getting in the window, and—"

"Burglar!" snarled the man. "I'll burgle you, you meddling cub! Jumping wallabies, if you don't let go my arm, I'll—"

"Stars above!" roared Sir Charles, leaning out over the window-sill. "It's Steve Barrett! Steve, old chum! What the dickens does it mean? Bob! Syd! Let him go! You hear? He's an old back blocks chum of mine. Let him go!"

Dazed, the pals let go, and scrambled to their feet. Scowling, the stranger followed suit, and as he stood there for a moment, the pals wondered at their own temerity, for he was six feet high, broad in comparison. The sleeves of his jacket fitted tightly over his great muscles. He glared at them a moment, then grinned.

"Plucky young cubs," he said. "You wouldn't let go, and I didn't want to hurt you too much. But—"

"But, Steve—old timer!" put in Sir Charles. "What's the idea? Hang it all—"

"Had to get in without being seen if I could," said Steve Barrett tersely. "Karl Sweetman and his gang are wise to me. They've trailed me to this country. Had the dickens of a job to fool 'em. You got my letter?"

"Yes. But—"
"But I've got it. And they know it!"

"Got what? Not—"
"Yes. The Black Ruby! In my pocket. Let me in and—"

Sir Charles moved to one side.
"Quickly!" he said hoarsely.

Steve Barrett clambered in over the window-sill. Sir Charles waved one arm at his guests.

"Clear out, you boys!" he said curtly. "Tell the servants I'm not to be disturbed on any account! Cut out of it!"

And—slam!—the window was closed and the catch slipped into place.

Bob scratched his head in perplexity.
"Now, what d'you make of that, Syd?" he said.

But Syd was as perplexed as his chum.
"Apparently," he said, "there is something mysterious afoot that calls for great secrecy."

"Quod erat demonstrandum," sneered Bob. "Which was to be proved, I don't think, use no hooks and stow away from boilers! What a brain! How did you think of it?"

"Haven't had time to think yet," retorted Syd. "And I'm hot, dirty, fed-up, and generally in a mess. And we're not wanted round these parts, so I'm off for a wash and brush up, something to eat—"

"And drink," put in Bob. "And let me tell you, Mister Sherlock Dyson, that's the most sensible thing you've said for a darned long time. Let's go."

They went, entered the house by the back door, told the servants that Sir Charles was in the library with a visitor and was not to be disturbed on any account, and so to the bath-room for the much-needed wash and brush up. They changed their clothes, which had suffered in the scrap, then went downstairs to scrounge something to eat and something to drink.

And having appeased his appetite, and feeling cooler, Bob was more amenable to reason.

"Seems to me," he said, "as if we have stumbled on a prize mystery and nearly muffed it."

"It certainly is a mystery," agreed Syd. "And I'll admit it's got me guessing. They spoke of a Black Ruby! Now, all the rubies I have ever seen or heard about are red, so it must be a rare kind of gem."

"And this back blocks chum has been trailed by a gang of crooks," Bob went on. "Just our luck! We might expect a bit of excitement and something out of the ordinary over this, but two more days and the hols will be all over and back we go to maths, French grammar, Euclid—the same old grind day after day—history, physics, geometry, algebra, impots, and—"

Crack!
"What the dickens!" cried Bob, starting to his feet.

Syd was by the door already. He wasn't scared, and yet he was white to the lips.

"Revolver shot!" he said hoarsely. "In the library!"

"And the Black Ruby! Karl Sweetman—the gang! Come on, Syd!"

The pals didn't stop to argue. They ran out of the room, along the corridor, heedless of the startled servants crouching together at the foot of the stairs. Into the library they

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burst, then halted on the threshold, as a husky, vicious voice addressed them.

"Curse! Put 'em up, you whelps! Reach for the ceiling—smartly—or I'll let daylight through you!"

And the pals put their hands up, their faces white, tense, their eyes agog with amazement.

Sir Charles Crompton lay on the hearthrug, strangely still, blood trickling from a wound in his head. Steve Barrett stood in the far corner of the room, scowling darkly, his huge hands raised over his head. And on the other side of the room, by the window, now smashed and forced open, stood the ugliest man the pals had ever seen, and in each hand he held an automatic.

He was, for all the world, like a great ape. He was comparatively short, but tremendously broad. His jowl and lower part of his face protruded, and was dark with a very short, crisp beard. His forehead receded back into his scrubby, erect hair. Great black shaggy eyebrows veiled his beady eyes. Enormous hairy ears stuck out from the sides of his head. His huge hands were hairy. His legs were bowed and set well apart. His neck was so short that his head seemed to rest on his massive shoulders. He looked exactly like a gorilla. He drew his fleshy lips back in a snarl that displayed yellow, fang-like teeth.

"Don't you move—not an eyelid—or you go to glory!" he rasped.

And then the pals saw it—on the writing-pad on Sir Charles' desk! The Black Ruby—an enormous jewel, as big as an egg. It lay there, temptingly, the sunlight glinting and scintillating on its facets!

CHAPTER 2.

In the Air!

THE ape-man—it was the only title for him—was backing, cautiously, watching the others in the room for the slightest hostile movement. Slowly—terribly slowly it seemed to the watchers—he went, with sliding, cat-like steps, back against the desk.

He laid down one gun on the top of the desk, within reach of his hand, so that, in the event of the merest flicker of an eyelid he could snatch the weapon again and let fly. Then he reached for the great jewel. His enormous, hairy hand closed on it, hastily stuffed it into his pocket. Steve Barrett half-stirred, and, as quick as a flash, the ape-man grabbed his gun again.

"Steady, now!" he warned. "I don't aim to have the p'lice of this island on me trail; but you drive me too far, Barrett, and I'll pull the trigger on you, I will!"

Barrett scowled but made no answer. What was the use of bandying words? The man with the guns held the whip hand. He backed towards the open window, keeping the trio covered all the time, and stepped out over the low window-sill. Then—crack, crack!—twice he fired. Barrett ducked. The pals ducked. It was instinctive. But those bullets passed high over their heads and were embedded in the wall behind them. And when the smoke cleared away the ape-man was gone.

Immediately Steve Barrett, livid with rage, became galvanised with activity.

"After him!" he roared, dashing towards the window.

But Syd stopped him, hanging on to his arm.

"Not that way!" he cried. "He'll expect pursuit that way, and if he sees you he'll shoot. This way! Quickly!"

He raced out of the library and into the drawing-room, Bob and Steve Barrett close on his heels. He bounded out on to the lawn by way of the french windows, and across to the fence that separated the grounds from the road. Nimble he climbed over, Bob vaulted over, while Steve Barrett leapt over like a hurdler.

"Where is he?"

The rhytmical hum of a car supplied the answer. Far away down the road sped a yellow sports car, heading for the London main road. Barrett brandished his fist at the fast disappearing motor.

"Curse 'em!" he growled. "To be beaten at the last minute like that! But I'll get it back. They shan't have the laugh of me! You got a car here? I know where he's making for. He's going to London—the West End—the Hotel Metropolis. I know! And, jumping wallabies, Bully Mahon won't get the drop on me again 'n a hurry. You got a car? Smartly, now. No time to lose—"

But Syd was already clambering back over the fence.

"Must see to Sir Charles first," he said calmly. "What is a jewel compared with a man's life?"

"But, dash it all," protested Bob.

Syd wasn't listening. He was running across the lawn, and whether they wanted to or not, the others followed, into the library.

Sir Charles was sitting, dazed, ghastly white, in the arm-chair. He had recovered consciousness and had managed to get that far.

"Old timer!" cried Barrett. "He got you, and—
"It's nothing!" rasped Sir Charles. "Stars above, it isn't the first time I've been shot at! But did he get it?"

Steve explained that the ape-man had got away with the Black Ruby.

"But that's a minor matter," said Syd. "Your wounds, Sir Charles—"

"A mere scratch," rasped Sir Charles. "I can phone for the doctor. Never mind me. I'm all right. You've got to get that sparkler back, Steve. You hear? Get it back. I'll finance you, Steve. You boys help. It's important. Carry it through to the bitter end, Steve. Chase 'em across the world and back again if need be, only get the ruby back again and stake our claim. They shan't have it! You boys help. I'll do the paying."

Weak from loss of blood, he staggered across to the safe, unlocked it, and swung open the heavy door. He thrust in his hand, took out a bundle of banknotes, and tossed them across to Steve Barrett.

"Let me know, later, where to send you credit. I'll pay every ha'penny I possess to beat Sweetman to that bonanza. You hear, Steve? I'm backing you all the way."

"I hear, Charley," growled Steve. "And take it from me, you won't regret this. I'll chase them crooks from here to Kingdom Come and back again. But if you're all right we'll get on the trail before it gets cold. Can't afford to waste a second. Lost too much time already."

"I'm all right. Clear. You boys get the car out. Leave it anywhere. It doesn't matter. Only get that ruby. Go on, now! What are you waiting for? I can phone the doctor."

And as he reached for the phone the three of them left him, raced out of the garage, and a few moments later Sir Charles' big saloon car was speeding away towards London with Bob at the wheel, and not paying much attention to speed laws.

In the tonneau Syd sat beside Steve Barrett. There was a lot to talk about, and yet neither felt much like talking. All the same for that, Syd's six cylinder brain was working overtime.

It was obvious that, valuable as the Black Ruby might be, it was not the end-all and be-all of the mystery. There was more behind that great jewel, it meant more than the casual observer could guess at. What else could be deduced from Sir Charles Crompton's words? He had exhorted them first to get the Black Ruby from the crooks, and then to stake their claim. Their claim to what? That was the mystery. Syd was convinced that the great jewel was merely the key to something greater and more valuable, but from the glare in Steve Barrett's eyes and the set of his mouth it was doubtful whether the correct moment for pumping the Australian had yet arrived.

But Syd wanted to know a lot. And firstly the immediate pursuit worried him.

"Look here," he said, "how do you know we shall find that ugly chap at a big London hotel? Is it usual for such hold-up men to stay at posh hotels?"

"No use you asking questions just yet, sonny," rasped Barrett, "cause I'm not answering. But I'll tell you this much. Karl Sweetman's gang are not ordinary crooks, and Mahon—Bully Mahon—the chap you saw pull his guns on me—only does what he's told. I know all about that gang—I ought to, seeing that they've trailed me from the back blocks, across two continents. I've had to keep an eye on 'em to protect myself. The pity of it was that at the last minute I got careless. I thought I had fooled 'em, that they didn't know I was making for Charley's place. And Mahon got the drop on me and grabbed the sparkler. I guess he'll double back to Twisty Baker at the Hotel Metropolis. Twisty Baker is Sweetman's right hand man, as strong as a conger, and as thin and as slippery. Maybe I'll tell you more later on, but not now. Only don't think this Hotel Metropolis is the Hotel Metropole, because it isn't."

And having got that off his chest he pulled out a short, blackened clay pipe from his pocket, rammed it full with a dark shag, lit up, and leant back against the upholstery, smoking furiously, emitting clouds of acrid, pungent smoke. He was thinking hard and angrily, to judge from the glare in his eyes and the deep furrows in his forehead, and Syd deemed it best to keep silent.

Barrett kept silent, too, until they were in the neighbourhood of Trafalgar Square. Bob Crompton was heading for Northumberland Avenue and the Hotel Metropole. That subtle difference in the name of the hotel was leading him astray. Barrett put him right.

"Up the Strand, sonny, and turn when I tell you."

And under the Australian's directions Bob steered the car up a side street, and brought it to a standstill outside a second-rate hotel—the Hotel Metropolis. There was not a sign of the yellow sports car in which Mahon had driven away from the Grange.

Barrett leapt from the big car and bounded across the pavement towards the revolving doors of the hotel, but a burly commissioner barred his way.

"Only residents to dinner, sir," he said. And, considering that Barrett was dressed rather shabbily, maybe there was some excuse for the sneer.

Not that Barrett worried.

"I don't want dinner," he growled. "I'm after a chap named Mahon. He's staying here, and I mean to see him, and, what's more—"

The commissioner grabbed the Australian's arm.

"Not so fast!" he rasped. "You can't ride the high horse like that in this—"

But Steve held other ideas on the subject. His arm crooked suddenly. His fist flashed out, and—biff!—the uniformed man stopped those bunched knuckles with his jaw. He went down like a log.

"Stop me, would you, you gaudy son of a popinjay!" roared Steve. "I haven't got time to argue—"

But Syd saw the danger signal. Men were running to the spot. Another second and a policeman would come along, and then the trail of the Black Ruby would come to an abrupt end.

He grabbed Steve's arm.

"Idiot!" he hissed. "You'll spend the night in Vine Street."

Steve Barrett paused and ground his teeth.

"It's my old complaint," he groaned. "I always did hit first and talk afterwards."

"One of those banknotes. Quick!" hissed Syd. And Steve obliged.

Syd was taking command of the situation. He thrust the note into the commissioner's hand as he scrambled to his feet.

"Don't make trouble, there's a good chap," he pleaded. "Here, pocket this. My friend comes from a country where they have to hit hard and often. He doesn't understand. We're after an ugly chap named Mahon—like a great ape. He was staying here—had a yellow car. We want to see him—"

"Well, you won't!" snapped the commissioner. "He's gone with his pal, a long, thin fellow. Came back from somewhere in a hurry, paid their bill, and went again in a taxi, leaving their yellow car in the garage. I heard 'em say Victoria—"

"Continental express!" exclaimed Steve. "We've got to rush!"

And before the dazed commissioner knew what was happening they were back in the car, and Bob Crompton was steering in and out amongst the traffic towards Victoria Station.

"Hi!" bawled a policeman, as they whizzed into the station yard through the wrong gate and missed a bus by inches. But what mattered. They were on the trail of the Black Ruby.

The big car shot under the arch and pulled up sharply. Steve and Syd were out and bounding towards the gates. But the ticket inspector was already taking down the destination boards, and the train was half-way out of the station.

"Too late!" groaned Steve. "And we can't even be sure that they've gone that way."

"Yes, they have!" cried Syd. "Look!"

He pointed frantically. Mahon had made a bad mistake. Curious to see how close the pursuit was, he had poked his head out of the carriage window. Steve Barrett's eyes glinted menacingly at the sight of that repulsive, grinning face. And as he glared the last carriage of the train slid from the station into the gleaming sunlight beyond.

"Too late, anyway!" he moaned. "What can we do now?"

At his elbow Bob Crompton answered his question with one word.

"Croydon," he said grimly.

"Croydon?" echoed Steve.

"Rather!" cried Syd. "The very idea! Air route to Paris."

Steve's eyes lit up with renewed hope.

"Boys," he exclaimed, "you sure are a couple of mascots! Charley Crompton knew what he was about when he told you off to help me. Come on. Let's be moving."

Syd took the wheel to give Bob a rest, and he left the station yard by the Wilton Road gate to miss the traffic policeman at the other gate. He stepped on the accelerator and drove down to Vauxhall Bridge, under the railway arches, and out to Croydon as hard as he could send the big car along.

Inside the hour they had reached the aerodrome, arranged passports, chartered a plane, and were sitting in the frail cabin, with the landscape slipping away beneath them.

Steve Barrett took out his blackened clay pipe, but Syd stopped him.

"You can't smoke here!" he said.

"Can't smoke!" echoed Steve. "Dingoes! D'you think I can rest easy without me pipe between me teeth? I'm a fighter, I am, and nothing else. This waiting game plays Old Harry with me nerves. And what can I do if I don't smoke?"

"You can talk," suggested Bob dryly. "I reckon there's a lot we want to know about this gang we're trailing. I think we ought to know more than we do."

Steve grinned and slumped back in his chair.

"Boys," he said, "you're right! You've stood by me up to now, not but what there's worse to follow, if I'm any judge. That gang trailed me to England after that ruby; and now they've got it they won't part with it very easily, I'll warn you. I came by an outlandish route, too, to shake 'em off. I came from Queensland via a tramp steamer to Singapore, then across India to Bombay; then to Brindisi, and overland to Calais and Dover. You get me?"

"They were close behind all the time; but I lost 'em between Lyons and Paris, and hedged about to make sure where they were. That's how I happen to know that Karl

"Then there's Ah Wong—a Chink, and a bad 'un. And the guy you saw at the Grange—Bully Mahon—gunman, a tough, who hires himself out for killings.

"You see, I figured it out this way. Bully Mahon grabbed the sparkler; but, having no grey matter, he didn't know what to do, bar getting back to Twisty Baker with it. And the long, thin 'crook couldn't do anything else bar getting back to Sweetman and Ah Wong—who, I know for a fact, are staying at the Hotel Generale, in Paris. And that's where we go when we land. We ought to get there before Baker and Mahon, and we'll lay our plans then. Can't plan anything at present, because we're in the air—in more ways than one."

"H'm!" Syd grunted. He leant back in his seat and closed his eyes. He was thinking, and thinking hard.



Just as Bob reached the sideboard on which lay the Black Ruby, there was a ping, and a knife came whizzing across the room, to pass clean through his sleeve, pinning his arm to the wall. With a cry Bob turned to find himself face to face with Ah Wong! (See Page 27.)

Sweetman stayed in Paris while Twisty Baker and Mahon followed me to London; only I never stayed more'n one night in London. I thought I'd fooled 'em proper. I went into the Bank of England, walked plumb through the building, and out the other side; took a taxi to Paddington, and out to the Grange to see old Charley Crompton. You see, I wanted money to make money. I wanted someone to put up the money to help me make a fortune; and, naturally, I turned to Charley Crompton, who years ago was my pard in the gold fields; only we parted company before he made his pile. I guessed he'd help me. And when I showed him that Black Ruby and explained, he was as keen as mustard on the idea."

"Then," said Syd, watching Steve closely, "there is more in this than just stealing a rare gem."

Barrett's weather-beaten face wrinkled up.

"Sonny," he said, "you sure do see farther than the tip of your nose. But, see here, a secret's a secret, and the fewer that know it the smaller the chance of other people finding out. And that's as much as I'll tell you—at present—except that we've just got to get that Black Ruby back—or bust!

"And we're up against a tough gang, boys, believe me. The boss, Karl Sweetman—the man of all nations, so to speak—dresses like a dude and uses his brains; but he's bad—a beast—and kills at the drop of a hat.

"And his right-hand man is known as Twisty Baker; just as bad, only with less brains. Tall—six feet and more—thin as a lath. But keep clear of his hands. He has fingers like wire, and could choke a rhinoceros with one squeeze.

CHAPTER 3.

Ah Wong Butts In!

"NO offence meant, and none taken, I hope," said Steve Barrett to Bob Crompton, as they sat in their room at the Hotel Generale, in Paris. "But your pardner's daddy wasn't Sexton Blake, by any chance?"

Bob grinned and shook his head.

"Not exactly," he said. "But he's always been looked upon as—"

And then suddenly the door opened, and Syd walked in, a smile of satisfaction on his face. He closed the door and sat down very leisurely.

"Well?" queried Bob impatiently.

"The Black Ruby is in this hotel," said Syd, with irritating slowness. "I saw Baker and Mahon arrive. Ah Wong met them in the lounge and took them up to Sweetman's room. I followed them."

"Then you know which room!" exclaimed Barrett eagerly.

"I do. They went in next door."

Bob started to his feet, lips apart, eyes agog with amazement. Steve Barrett seemed to freeze. His right hand stole round to his hip-pocket for his gun. But Syd, stern eyed, rose and went to the window. He opened it, peered out. For a moment the roar of the busy city below reached

their ears; then Syd closed the window and turned to his pals, as if satisfied.

"Listen!" he said. "I've thought this out. That sparkler is in the next room. So are the crooks. We dare not rush them. We must not steal the Black Ruby back, because we would run foul of the police that way. But if we can't get it back we must find out the crooks' plans. Outside is a ledge that runs just beneath their window—"

They understood immediately.

"Dingoes!" cried Barrett. "I get you, sonny! I'll do it. It's my affair. I don't like you boys running into danger over it."

"Rats!" retorted Bob. "You'd never manage to wriggle along there; you're too big. I'm lighter and smaller. Go on, Syd, back me up."

Syd nodded curtly.

"It's your job, Bob. Only be careful. Get to their window and try to listen to their talk. If you can snatch a look in, do so; only be careful. If they spot you—"

"Leave it to me," said Bob, glad to be able to do something.

"Quiet, then!" said Syd. "I'll open the window. Go steady, Bob. We're five storeys above the ground here."

Bob just grinned. He was more in his element now. Fearless, athletic, he craved action.

Steve Barrett eyed him with unconcealed admiration, but said nothing. All he did was to grip Bob's hand. Syd squeezed his arm affectionately. The next moment he was out on the ledge, crouched low, and edging along gingerly to the window of the next door room.

Bob's pulses pounded. Nearer and nearer came the light as he wriggled along the ledge. The fact that a sheer drop was only inches from him did not worry him at all. He was thinking all the time of the four desperate, ruthless crooks in that lighted room.

He came to the edge of the window and stopped. The window was open at the top, and he heard a voice—a suave, educated man talking with the tones of someone in authority.

"Smart work, Mahon. But now that we've got the sparkler it is up to us to get away. We have half an hour to catch the Marseilles express at the Gare du Lyons, and we must get away from there as opportunity offers. If you had arrived two hours earlier we could have caught the P. & O. boat for Melbourne; as it is, we must chance our luck. You sure you didn't see anything of Barrett?"

"Nope!" came the answer. Bob reckoned it was Twisty Baker talking. "Bully saw him at Victoria with a couple of school kids. They missed the train, and we saw nothing of 'em either at Dover or Calais."

"Well, there is always the Airways," said Sweetman, the man with the polished voice. "But Barrett is not over-blessed with brains, and a couple of boys can't hurt us. Let's pack, and clear out. Our baggage is in the next room. All right, Wong. Leave the sparkler there. I'll carry that in my pocket, but I shan't want it till I've changed. Can't travel in these glad rags."

Then came silence. Bob guessed that the crooks had gone to the adjoining room to prepare for their journey.

Greatly daring, he edged forward along the ledge until he could peer in at the window. He saw an empty room, furnished like most hotel sitting-rooms with the modicum of chairs, and a round table, and a sideboard, or something very much like a sideboard.

And on that sideboard gleamed the Black Ruby. For the second time in his young life Bob drew in his breath sharply at the sight of the enormous jewel. It fascinated him. Then he was filled with rage to think of it being in the hands of Sweetman and his gang. If he could once grab it—the room was not large—a sudden entry, a rush, a grab, and back to the window. It was worth trying.

He gripped the lower-sash of the window and raised it as far as it would go. He listened, but heard nothing. The door leading out into the passage was closed. The door leading into the adjoining room was closed. The risks were tremendous, but the Black Ruby seemed to be beckoning to him. It drew him like a magnet.

Silently he clambered into the room over the window-sill. Noiselessly, keeping the table between himself and the door of the adjoining room, where the crooks were, he crept across the floor, thankful that the thick pile carpet deadened his tread. He gained the sideboard. He turned, his heart beating wildly. He stretched out one hand towards the gleaming jewel, and—ping!—some unseen force seemed to pin his arm to the wall.

Bob gasped. He went cold for the moment. A great knife had been hurled at him. It stuck quivering in the wall, holding his sleeve. A gaunt, yellow hand closed over the Black Ruby.

With a cry of rage, Bob snatched his arm free from the knife. The weapon clattered to the floor. He spun round, and found himself staring at a grinning Chinaman—Ah Wong. He was dressed in European clothes, but there was

no disguising the Oriental cunning and cruelty in those narrow eyes.

"White boy," he said softly, "muchee too slow enough—yes?"

Bob snarled, and then leapt at him! But thin, wiry hands seized him from behind, grabbed him by the throat, half-choking him. Bob could not see, but he knew. It was Twisty Baker! He squirmed and struggled, but those wire-like fingers throttled the resistance out of him.

It was obvious that Bob was in a tight corner. He saw his mistake in a flash. He had turned his back for half a second on that door that led to the adjoining room, and that half a second had been fatal. He realised he was not cunning enough yet to steal a march on these accomplished crooks.

Bob stopped struggling, and that door opened. In the frame of the doorway stood a tall, lithe man, faultlessly dressed for travelling, carrying a suit-case, and a rug hanging on one arm. Behind him, peering round him, was the Ape-man—Bully Mahon.

"That's him, boss!" he growled. "It means Barrett's knocking about some'eres. That's Charley Crompton's whelp, that is. Croak 'im, Twisty. One less on our trail!"

"Shall I?" queried Baker.

Karl Sweetman, the debonaire crook, smiled faintly.

"Oh, no!" he said carelessly. "We haven't sunk so far as to murder babies. Tie him up and leave him here, locked in. Barrett will waste a lot of time in Paris, trying to rescue him, while we get to Marseilles. Tie him up, Ah Wong."

The Chinaman grinned. He dived into the adjoining room, and came back with a length of cord. By the time he was finished Bob was prone on the floor, unable to move hand or foot.

Karl Sweetman stood over him, sneering.

"When you see Barrett again," he said, "tell him not to worry any more about the Black Ruby, if he values his miserable skin. And as for you, my friend, take my advice and go back to your Latin declensions. This game is far too subtle for you, and too rough."

"Too rough!" snapped Bob. "Untie these ropes and give me a fair chance, and I'll show you how rough I can be."

The debonaire crook grinned with amusement.

"Quite the game little bantam," he said patronisingly. "But we'll have to keep you quiet for a time. Can't have you raising the alarm here before our train leaves Paris. It would be very awkward. Ah Wong, can you suggest a way—"

But Ah Wong was already busy with a little box. Bob felt something being placed on his chest. He raised his head to look, and saw a snake! It was barely as thick as his finger, but the swaying head, the forked tongue that shot at intervals from the sinister mouth, filled him with dread, and made his blood run cold.

"You—you brute!" he hissed.

And Ah Wong chuckled callously.

"White boy no move," he said, "white boy all lite; white boy liddle just once, and white boy go all same glorly hallelujah!"

"Come on!" ordered Sweetman. And the crooks went, softly, quietly. Bob heard the door closed carefully, heard the key turn in the lock. But the eel man came back. Without a word he crossed the room, closed the window top and bottom, slipped the catch into place, and drew the heavy curtains. Then he switched off the light, plunging the room in darkness, and went, locking the door after him, and taking the key with him. Bob heard the final grate as the key was extracted from the lock.

And he lay there, not a muscle moving, unable to see an inch before him, very conscious of that slight weight on his chest—the snake—coiled there. In vivid, tense imagination, Bob felt that venomous head swaying—swaying! He dared not move. The silence was terrible. It pounded in his ears. If only they had left the light on! But all was dark. He could not see. And on his chest was the terrible snake. Its evil head swayed to and fro, its little, forked tongue stabbing out nearer and nearer to Bob's face.

CHAPTER 4.

Knocked Out!

DARKNESS—utter, impenetrable darkness! And Bob dared not move a muscle. He could see nothing, but he could feel something—the weight of that reptile on his chest. In all probability the snake barely weighed a pound on the scales, but to Bob it felt a hundredweight.

He lay there, every sense painfully alert. He tried to breathe slowly, softly, for fear of alarming the snake coiled there on his chest. He thought he could feel the slight movement of the reptile's horrible body as it swayed its head. He thought he could hear the pounding of his own

heart, and was afraid he would scare the snake—that the ghastly head would dart out in the darkness, the poison fangs bared!

Would Syd and Steve Barrett come in time to save him? What were they doing? What were they thinking about to let him remain there all that time? He had been there hours—hours! At least, it seemed like that to him, but in reality it was barely a quarter of an hour.

And in the next room Steve Barrett was getting fidgety. He knocked out his noisome pipe and stuffed it into his pocket. He rose to his feet and stared at the window.

"He's a long time," he said brusquely.

"Fifteen minutes," said Syd, his voice vibrant with suppressed anxiety. "But he may be listening."

"And he may not," growled Barrett. "I tell you straight, sonny, I don't like your pardner running this risk. It isn't fair."

He strode towards the window, and Syd started to his feet.

"What are you going to do?"

"Do?" echoed Barrett curtly. "I'm going to see what's doing. I can't sit still while a plucky youngster does my dirty work for me. I'm going to see what he's up to."

"But if you open that window—don't you see!" cried Syd fearfully. "The light will shine out. If Bob is still on the ledge it might scare him—make him lose his balance, and—"

"I've got to see," growled Barrett. "I've got an idea things are not what they ought to be. He should have been back by now."

"Wait a mo., then," said Syd. "I'll switch the light out."

Click!

Out went the light, and the room was plunged into darkness. Then, carefully, without causing the slightest creak, Barrett raised the lower sash of the window. The low roar of the busy city thundered in their ears.

The two leant out over the sill and peered into the blackness.

"You see!" hissed Barrett. "I told you so! Something's happened! He's not on the ledge!"

Syd went cold. He shivered with apprehension.

"Bob!" he called.

But only the roar of the traffic far below answered him.

"And them crooks next door," Barrett went on. "You see? They've drawn their curtains. Can't see their light now. Something's happened. And, by gad, I'm going to find out what!"

He withdrew his head from the window and went striding across the room towards the door. Syd went after him, grabbed his arm and hung on grimly.

"Not you!" he cried. "They'd recognise you. I'll go. You keep watch. You wait till I call. If anything happens I'll yell for you. It's better that I should go. Bob may have gone into their room."

"Dingoes!" exclaimed Barrett. "So he might! They went out for something, and he's gone in for the sparkler. It would be like him to do that. And if we barge in there we'll trump his trick, maybe. What on earth can we do?"

"I'll go along the ledge and find out," declared Syd.

And before Barrett could reply he was at the window, clambering out on to the ledge and sliding along cautiously towards the window of the crooks' room.

Barrett leant out and watched him. He saw him try to open the crooks' window, and fail—saw him try to force the window with his pocket knife and fail—saw him come creeping back, his face pale and tense.

"No good, sonny?" queried Barrett.

Syd shook his head as he clambered back into the room. "Bob is either in that room, or— His voice broke. "He's fallen off the ledge."

"Well, we've got to find out what's happened—and at once!" rasped Barrett, striding towards the door.

But again Syd was before him.

"I'll go. They'll recognise you. Quiet, now!"

Barrett hated the inactivity, but he knew that Syd talked sense, and let him go.

Slowly, cautiously, Syd opened the door. Someone was going downstairs, and he bobbed back until the footsteps died away.

When all was quiet he glanced out again. The corridor was deserted. He crept out and along to the door of the crooks' room. He tried the handle. The door was locked. He stooped to peer through the keyhole, when suddenly strong, wiry hands gripped him by the throat.

He opened his mouth to yell for Steve, but that grip tightened and choked him. He felt his lungs bursting. His ears pounded. His vision went black. Then—crash!—a fist struck him on the side of the head. He pitched sideways, sprawled full length, and all his senses went out in a smother!

He was hazy after that. It seemed as if he were dropping down a bottomless well, then being pulled up with a jerk and flying through space, then looping the loop, nose-diving, performing the fallen leaf stunt, then dropping again down that well that had no bottom. Water gurgled in his ears, closed over his head. He could feel the wetness of it on his face. It trickled down his cheeks—tickled him.

He opened his eyes and found Barrett bending over him.

"All right, sonny? No bones broken?"

Syd sat up with a start. He stared and found himself back in his own room.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Sure now," explained Barrett. "It's all guesswork, but I heard the thud and saw them toughs rushing downstairs. It was Twisty Baker who grabbed you, and Bully Mahou who dosed you the hushabye dose. And if you know what that means—"

Syd reckoned he understood.

"It means they didn't want me to go into that room—yet!" he snapped. "But I'm going!"

"We're both going!" rasped Barrett. "Like Lucifer, we are! You fit?"


Syd was pretty tough and little the worse for his knock-out. True his head buzzed, but with Bob in unknown danger, what did that signify? Syd grabbed the key of their own room, and boldly, with no attempt at concealment, they went to the door of the crooks' room.

(Syd and Barrett are determined to discover what has become of Bob. Will they be in time to save their chum from his terrible ordeal? Whatever you do, don't miss next week's thrilling instalment of this powerful serial—you'll enjoy every line of it!)

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