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THRILLER

Week Ending January 4th, 1930. No. 571 (New Series).

A QUICK-ACTION YARN OF THE WEST!

BLACK GEORGE!

By
RALPH REDWAY.

Like a black, menacing shadow, the road-agent stands by the trail. As the coach rattles up, the contents and passengers are rified by this new terror, and then, as mysteriously as he has come, Black George disappears—into the unknown!

THE FIRST CHAPTER. The Road Agent!

THE Rio Kid awakened, as he was accustomed to wake, without a motion, and without a sound. He lay perfectly still, rolled in his blanket and slicker, listening. The grey mustang, by whose side the Kid lay, did not stir. Side-Kicker was as well trained in the ways of a hunted life as the boy outlaw himself. Only a gleam of intelligent eyes showed that the mustang, too, had awakened at the sound of a tramping horse in the thickets.

The Kid listened—and wondered.

There was a tangle of thickets round him. The Kid had picked his camp with care. Post-oaks and tangled juniper, mingled with evil-smelling greasewood, made an almost impenetrable screen round the Kid's solitary camp. It was cold weather in the Kicking Mule country, but he had lighted no fire; no trickle of smoke above the thickets betrayed his resting-place. Yet the tramping horse, unseen as yet, was heading direct for the spot where the Kid lay by his mustang.

For a full minute the Kid lay and listened; and the steady tramp of the horse, the crackling of disturbed underwoods, grew nearer and clearer. The rider was approaching slowly—but he was approaching. And the Kid sat up at last, still without a sound, and dropped a hand on the walnut butt of a six-gun.

If some guy had spotted his camp, and was heading for it, the Kid was ready for him when he came. And if it was by chance that the horseman came, still it was necessary for the boy outlaw to be on his guard. The Kid was breaking new country in the Kicking Mule section; but in every part of Texas he had more foes than friends. When there was a reward of a thousand dollars on a galoot's head, a galoot needed to keep his gun handy.

The Kid's camp lay a hundred yards or more from the well-worn stage-trail that ran to the cow-town of Kicking Mule. From the trail the ground rose in easy slopes, to a low range of hills, thickly wooded. It was from the high ground that the tramping horse came, and it was likely that the rider was

coming down from the hill, aiming to reach the stage-trail that ran through the valley bottom. But if so, chance was leading him close to the Kid's camp.

Nearer and clearer came the tramping hoofs, the crackling of twigs, the jingle of stirrup and bridle.

Every moment now the Kid looked to see the horseman break into sight. His gun was ready to rise to a level the moment he appeared.

Tramp! Tramp!

The Kid smiled.

It was not to his camp that the unseen rider was coming. He was passing the Kid's camp.

So close did he pass that the swaying twigs brushed the Kid, and through the bush he had a glimpse of a black horse, and of a rider wrapped in a baggy Mexican serape.

The tramping passed on.

Tramping of hoofs, crackle of twigs, jingle of bridle and stirrup grew fainter as the rider of the black horse pushed on down the slope towards the trail.

He was gone.

The Rio Kid's hand relinquished the walnut-butted gun.

The horseman had passed on, ignorant of the Kid's camp in the thickets, never dreaming how closely he had brushed by the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande.

The Kid wondered idly who the galoot might have been. Some man from the cow-town of Kicking Mule, probably, who had taken a short cut across the wooded hill instead of following the trail that wound round the base. It did not matter to the Kid. And, anyway, the galoot was gone; the sound of him was dying away down the slope towards the trail. The Kid had ridden long and hard that morning, and he



needed his midday rest; and now that the horseman had passed he prepared to settle down to resume his interrupted slumber. Only, he waited, with the caution that was second nature to him, for all sound of the horseman to die away.

The sounds ceased—abruptly.

And the Kid, instead of rolling comfortably in his blankets and slicker, and closing his eyes, sat up and took notice.

The horseman had halted.

The Kid's ear, that nothing could deceive, told him that. The tramping of the black horse had grown fainter as the unseen man went on towards the trail, and the Kid had expected it to die away in the distance, fainter and fainter till it was gone. Instead of which, the tramping, the crackling, the jingle, ceased all of a sudden, at a distance, the Kid reckoned, of a hundred yards or so.

That meant that the horseman had halted at the stage-trail.

Quietly the Kid rose to his feet, dropped his blankets, and drew a six-gun from its leather holster.

There was a glint in the Kid's eyes.

If this was some foe, who had spotted his camp in passing and gone on, thinking to throw dust in his eyes, intending to return by stealth and take him by surprise, the Kid was ready to deal with him.

Side-Kicker raised his head, but at a sign from the Kid laid down quietly again.

On foot, the Kid moved down the hill, the way the rider of the black horse had gone; and he made no sound as he went. Carefully as an Apache or a Yaqui stealing on a foe, the Kid parted the branches and the creepers, stepping slowly, stepping carefully, giving no warning of his movements. He was going to know what that galoot's game was, and put paid to it, if need were.

There was no sound from the stranger. If he was moving in the thickets he was moving as cautiously and silently as the Kid.

Towards the stage-trail the thickets thinned, and through them the Kid had glimpses of the open trail; and suddenly he glimpsed the black horse and its rider.

The boy outlaw stopped, and, keeping in cover, watched the man.

The figure in the folded serape sat the black horse. He had not dismounted, he had not crept back through the thickets. The Kid's suspicion had been unfounded.

Evidently, as the Kid had at first supposed, the man was unaware of anyone's presence on the lonely hillside. The Kid returned his gun to its holster.

But he still watched—perplexed. The rider of the black horse was not aware of the Kid. But why was he there, and what was his game? Half-hidden by the post-oaks and pecans at the side of the trail, the man sat his horse, motionless, evidently waiting and watching. His back was to the Kid, and his face unseen. All the Kid could see of him was the thick serape, wrapped like a cloak round him, the riding boots that emerged below it, and the Stetson hat above it. Motionless the horseman sat in the saddle, watching the trail, like a statue.

Minutes passed, and the horseman did not stir.

The Kid wondered.

The man was watching and waiting—for somebody. Not for a friend, that was certain. He was keeping in cover of the trees as he watched, carefully keeping out of sight of anyone approaching from either direction on the open trail. It was fairly clear that he was in ambush. If he was looking for some expected enemy, and there was going to be gun-play, it was no business of the Kid's, and the boy outlaw had no hunch to horn in. The Kid was debating in his mind whether to depart as silently as he had come and take no further heed of a matter that he now saw did not concern him personally when a sound from the distance caught his ears.

It was the distant, echoing sound of wheels and harness, coming up the valley trail from the direction of Juniper. It meant that the stage from Juniper to Kicking Mule was approaching.

The horseman made a sudden movement.

From a slit in the folded serape his arm emerged, and a six-gun glistened in his hand.

The Kid grinned.

He understood now.

The man he was watching was a road-agent, a hold-up man, and he was waiting on the trail for the Kicking Mule coach.

There could be no mistake about it,

and the Kid called himself a gink for not guessing it earlier.

For a moment the Kid's hand stole to his gun.

A hold-up on the trail was about to take place, and the Kid was powerfully tempted to horn in and prevent it.

But a bitter smile crossed his face, and he shrugged his shoulders at the thought. It was not for a hunted outlaw, a guy upon whose head was a reward of a thousand dollars, to do the work of sheriffs and rangers. It was no business of the Kid's. They had made him an outlaw, in spite of himself, and it was not for an outlaw to stand in defence of law.

But the Kid did not go.

He remained where he was, silent, alert. He was rather curious about this galoot who was aiming to hold up a stage single-handed. He reckoned that the galoot had plenty of gall, for there might be half a dozen passengers on the stage, and in the Kicking Mule country every man packed a gun.

The horseman moved, drawing a little nearer to the open trail as the clatter of the approaching stage rang louder. And as he did so, the watching Kid had a view of his face.

He barely suppressed an exclamation. He had figured that the man would be masked, but there was no mask on the face of the horseman. In the sunlight that glinted down through the trees the Kid, from his cover, stared at the rider's face—stared at the black skin, thick lips, and flattened nose of a full-blooded negro.

"Gee-whiz!" the Kid whispered under his breath.

He stared blankly.

The Kid, in his time, had struck many a hold-up man, of many and various races, but this was the first time he had struck a "coon" in the hold-up business.

The horseman, utterly unconscious of the astonished puncher watching him, moved out into the trail as the stage came clattering up.

"Halt!"

The Kid heard a startled cry from the stage-driver.

"Black George! by gum!"

The stage was dragged to a halt so sharply that the horses stumbled. The Kid was a stranger in the Kicking Mule country, but he reckoned that Black George was well-known there, and that Black George was a name of fear to the Kicking Mule galoots. The black horseman rode towards the halted stage, and the Rio Kid remained an interested onlooker—in cover.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Hold-Up!

THE stage was at a standstill.

From within came two or three startled voices, calling to the driver. Jerry Cook, the driver, called back tersely:

"It's Black George! I guess you guys want to put your hands up pronto!"

The black horseman rode nearer to the stage.

Startled faces looked out at him.

Wrapped in his Mexican serape, with his Stetson hat pulled well down on his head, the trail-rider showed only his black face, and not all of that, for the edge of the serape came over his chin, and the hat covered him down to the eyes.

But enough was to be seen of his face to show that it was the face of a negro—black as the ace of spades, gnarled and wrinkled and grim. The eyebrows were so thick and heavy as almost to hide

the eyes. It was a savage and ferocious face, almost inhuman in its ferocity.

"Light down!"

Black George rapped out the words.

The door of the vehicle was flung open, and the passengers alighted in the trail.

There were four of them—a fat storekeeper of Kicking Mule, a Chinese laundry-man, a "drummer" with a case of samples, and a man with a bronzed face, who wore "store" clothes and a Derby hat.

The horseman eyed them as they lined up in the trail, with their hands above their heads.

"That the whole caboodle, Jerry?" he asked.

"Yep."

The six-gun in the road-agent's hand was raised, and it seemed to each of the four that the muzzle threatened him.

Three of the passengers showed their terror plainly.

The drummer was white as chalk, the storekeeper's fat knees knocked together, and the Chinaman's slanting eyes were widely distended.

But the fourth man seemed cool and self-possessed, and he was watching the black rider quietly.

But he, like the others, had put up his hands.

Black George was well known for a great distance round the cow-town of Kicking Mule for his swift and deadly shooting, and on a dozen occasions, at least, he had shot up victims who had attempted resistance. It was not healthy to touch a gun when Black George called halt.

"Pony up, you 'uns!" said the black rider. "Drop your stuff in the trail, and I guess if you keep anything back it will be the last thing you'll do in this world!"

Three of the passengers hastened to obey, lowering their hands for the purpose. The road-agent's gun swayed from one face to another, his eyes under the bushy, over-hanging brows gleaming over it. But the man with the bronzed face seemed to hesitate.

Black George's eyes glinted at him.

He followed the example of the others, after a second's hesitation. Pockets were emptied into a little heap in the trail.

"You, Chink!" rapped out Black George.

The Chinaman eyed him in terror.

"Pick up that stuff and stack it in this grip!" Black George indicated a little leather sack strapped to his saddle.

The laundry-man obeyed.

"Hop into that horse, you!"

The Chinaman jumped into the stage again.

"Now you, Silas Shook," said Black George, addressing the storekeeper. "I guess you can pony up more than that! You want me to believe you only got fifty dollars in your rags?"

"I guess that's every cent—"

Bang!

The six-gun roared, and the storekeeper gave a yell and a jump as the bullet clipped a strip of skin from his head.

"That's a warning, Mister Shook!" said Black George. "The next goes through your think-box! Pony up!"

With a ghastly face, the Kicking Mule storekeeper fumbled in his pockets and produced a roll of two hundred dollars. He dropped it into the sack at Black George's saddle.

"That's better!" said the road-agent.

"Next time you meet me on the trail, Mister Shook, don't you try any gum-game with me, or the next heir will

to running your store at Kicking Mule! You get me?"

The storekeeper's teeth chattered.

"I've sure shot galoots for less'n that! Get in, and chew on it, you gink!"

Silas Shook clambered trembling into the stage.

"You next!" snarled the horseman.

The drummer followed the storekeeper in.

"Stand back, you!"

Black George made a motion with his revolver as the man in the Derby hat would have approached the vehicle.

"Say, feller, I've sure handed out all my dust," said the passenger. "You can search me."

"Likely enough," said Black George. "But I guess it ain't only your dust that I want from you."

The bronze-faced man eyed him, and a tense look came over his face. But the road-agent's revolver was looking him full in the face, and if he had thought of reaching for a hidden weapon he gave up the idea.

"Say, you through, George?" asked Jerry Cook. "I got to get this here shebang to Kicking Mule on time, you want to know?"

"Shut your head, Jerry Cook!" snapped Black George. "I guess you'll wait till I'm through, if I keep you till sundown!"

The driver grinned.

"It's your say-so, Black George," he answered. "I sure ain't arguing with you about it a whole lot. Take your time."

"Say, you!" The black road-agent's eyes glinted at the man in the Derby hat. "What you call yourself?"

"James Johnson!"

"Blazes is full of such Johnsons!" snarled the horseman. "What you doing in this section?"

"Buying cattle."

"Sho! You're a cattle-buyer?"

"You've said it."

"Where you hang out?"

"San Fernando."

"You've come here from San Fernando to buy cattle?"

"Right in once."

"You aim to locate in Kicking Mule to buy them cattle?"

"Sure."

"And you ain't no business to Kicking Mule, 'cept to buy cattle?" asked the horseman, with an inflection of savage sarcasm in his voice.

"I reckon that's my business," said the man with the bronzed complexion. "I'm buying for some of the San Fernando ranches."

"And your name's Johnson?"

"Jest that."

"Ain't you ever been called suthin' else?" asked Black George. "Ain't you ever been called Lieutenant Jim Dixey, of the Texas Rangers?"

The man in the Derby hat stood quite still.

"You gol-darned, double-crossing gink!" snarled the road-agent. "You talk about buying cattle at Kicking Mule, when you've been sent for special to hunt this country for Black George. You come byer as a cattle-buyer because if you come open, you know you won't have a chance of getting after the man you want. Say! You've met up with me sooner'n you allowed—sooner'n you wanted, I reckon. You get a good look at me now, Lieutenant Jim Dixey, and you'll know me ag'in."

The man in the Derby hat breathed hard.

"You'd have pulled on me, in the stage, and chanced it, if you'd knowed I was wise to you?" jeered the black rider. "I'd have riddled the hearse with lead if you had, and put paid to the

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whole caboodle. But if you'd knowed I was wise to you, you'd have chanced it."

"How'd you know?" asked the bronzed man quietly. "I ain't denying it, seeing you know. But how'd you get wise to it that I was sent for to pick up your trail in this section?"

The horseman laughed savagely.

"I guess I'm wise to more'n the guys at Kicking Mule reckon," he jeered. "I got you down fine, you gink! Get into that hearse, and be durned to you!"

The Ranger stepped into the stage and took his seat.

The horseman, sitting his saddle close beside the vehicle, followed his movements with the revolver muzzle. The Ranger's bronzed face betrayed nothing, but all knew that he was watchful for a chance to draw a gun. But it was instant death, and he knew it, and he did not make the attempt.

Jerry Cook gathered up his reins.

"You through?" he asked.

"I'm through," said Black George. "Tell them in Kicking Mule that they'll want a better guy than this to get Black George."

"I'll sure hand that message to Seth Starbuck, the town marshal, when we get in," said Jerry Cook; and he cracked his whip.

The black horseman stared in at the window at the passengers, his revolver still threatening them. He rode beside the stage as Jerry Cook started his team.

"You, Jim Dixey!" he said. "You're going to Kicking Mule in this hearse. When you get there I guess the galoots will be wise to it that they want a better man to pick up Black George. I guess they can send you home in a pine packet, and ask for a better man."

He fired at the last word. There was a sharp cry, following the roar of the six-gun, and a dead man rolled on the floor of the vehicle.

A yell of terror broke from the other passengers as they started away from the falling body of the Ranger.

Jerry Cook uttered a startled oath, and dragged in his starting team.

"Thunder! What—"

"Take him to Kicking Mule—what's left of him!" shouted Black George; and he gave his horse the spur and dashed away down the trail.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Rio Kid Horns In!

"GEE-WHIZ!" The Rio Kid stood transfixed, in the thickets by the trail.

The hoofs of the black horse clattered in the distance. Jerry Cook was holding in his team. From the interior of the stage came the startled cries of the passengers.

For several seconds the Kid was motionless.

The hold-up had passed, under his eyes, and he had looked on and listened to the talk, never dreaming of the tragedy that was to follow.

When the horseman had announced his knowledge of the Ranger's identity, the Kid's hand had sought a gun. The hold-up was nothing to him, but he would not see a man shot under his eyes, and for a moment, then, he had suspected that to be the road-agent's intention. But when the black rider allowed the Ranger to get back into the stage, the Kid supposed that the affair was at an end, and he was turning away when the roar of the robber's Colt was followed by the death-cry of the man he had ruthlessly shot.

It was almost unbelievable to the Kid. He had seen much reckless and ruthless shooting in his time, but this was the limit in the Kid's experience.

He stood still, amazed, and then, with a blaze in his eyes, he leaped out into the trail.

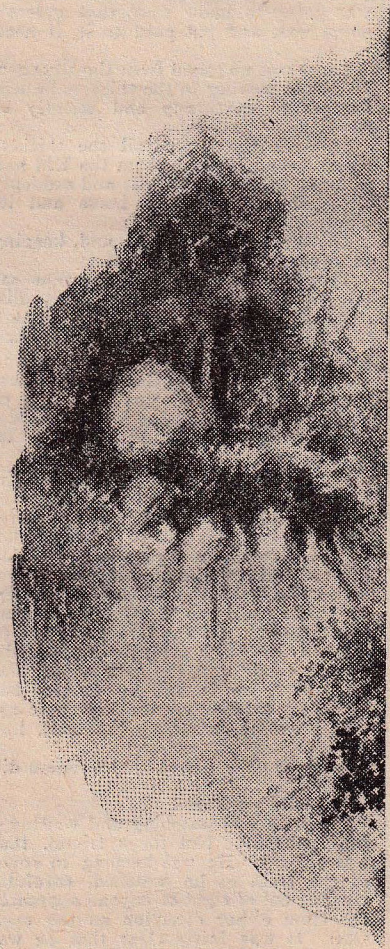
A gun was in his hand now, and had Black George been still at hand vengeance would have been swift.

But the road-agent was galloping, and he had already disappeared from sight down the winding trail at the base of the hill.

"The dog-goned scallywag!" panted the Kid.

He ran towards the stage.

"Say, is that Ranger guy sure shot up?" he called out.



"I reckon!" answered Jerry Cook, staring at him. "Say, where you jump from, stranger?"

The Kid, without replying, looked into the coach.

Three terrified faces were turned towards him; but his gaze was fixed on an upturned face on the floor.

Lieutenant Jim Dixey, of the Texas Rangers, lay there, still and silent, never to stir again of his own volition. He had been shot through the heart.

The Kid removed his Stetson.

"Sho!" he said. "I guess that was the durndest dog-goned game I ever struck! That scallywag knowed the guy would take a chance and reach for a gun, and he let on to be through with him, and then—"

The Kid turned away.

"Say, you puncher," said Jerry Cook, looking down at the Kid. "Where you jump from, I want to know? I never seed—"

He eyed the Kid curiously.

"You got a dead guy to carry to

Kicking Mule, hombre," said the Kid. "Say, I'm a stranger in this section, and I guess I never heard of Black George till I see him to-day. But I reckon he's some all-fired firebug from what I've seen."

"You've said it," agreed Jerry Cook. "Say, that Ranger was asking for his, if he come along here to cinch Black George. That pesky coon is wise to everything that goes on in Kicking Mule—there ain't nary a stunt that he don't get wise to. I guess he stopped this hearse special to shoot up that guy." Jerry Cook picked up his whip. "Waal,

Cook. "I guess you got gall, for a kid puncher. Say, your friends won't get to hear of you any more, if you follow Black George into the hills."

The Kid did not heed. He shook out his reins, and dashed down the trail in the direction taken by the road-agent.

Jerry Cook stared after him and whistled.

"I guess that guy don't know what's healthy for him!" he remarked; and he drove on the stage.

The Kid vanished down the trail in a few seconds.

The crashing and crackling of the thickets came quite clearly, as Black George drove his horse over the hill.

The Kid followed as fast as the heavy undergrowth allowed. Had he needed a trail to follow, that left by the black horseman was plain enough for a blind man to pick up. But he did not need sign to guide him, with the crashing of the black horse audible to his ears.

"The dog-goned skunk!" the Kid muttered. "The pesky, ornery, all-fired scallywag! Shooting up a guy that a-way; it sure does get my goat! I guess I ain't quitting till that dog-goned lobo-wolf has got his!"

The Kid pressed on. A hold-up on the trail was no business of the boy outlaw's; it was the business of sheriffs and rangers. But the dastardly shooting of the Ranger in the stage was another matter. It got the Kid's goat, as he said. Rangers were no friends of the Kid's. The man who had been shot up would have been as keen to take the Kid's trail as Black George's. But that cut no ice with the Kid. That savage, merciless shooting got his goat; and, to his eyes, the black horseman was a wild beast, and the sooner he was wiped out the better. And the Kid was pursuing him with the fixed intention of wiping him out as ruthlessly as he had wiped out the Ranger.

A bullet tearing through the leaves and twigs warned the Kid that the road-agent was wise to his pursuit.

The Kid smiled grimly. Shooting in that tangled thicket could only be at random, though his keen eyes were watchful for a chance at the black rider ahead.

Crack, crack! The Kid rode on, regardless of the flying lead. The crackling in the underwood told that Black George was riding on again.

Ere long, the Kid figured, he would sight him. The belt of thickets extended up the hillside, but on the upland the woodland thinned, as the soil grew more rocky. Once through the woods he would call the black rider to a grim account. Deadly as was Black George's reputation in the Kicking Mule country, the Kid reckoned that he was as good a man with a gun as any hombre in Texas. He was only eager to get a sight of the man in the serape.

"Sho!" ejaculated the Kid suddenly. He dragged in his mustang, almost on the edge of a deep, wide barranca that split the hillside.

It extended right and left across the Kid's path, and yawned wide and deep in front of him, and it was clear that Black George had leaped across it to ride on his way.

The thickets grew to the very edge of the chasm. On the opposite side the thick undergrowth, mingled with pecans and post-oaks, recommenced.

"Whoa, Side-Kicker!" said the Kid. He dropped from the saddle, and drew his horse back into thicker cover. The roar of a six-gun from across the barranca came a moment later.

The thicket on the opposite side of the chasm, mingled with pecans and post-oaks, recommenced.

He dropped from the saddle, and drew his horse back into thicker cover. The roar of a six-gun from across the barranca came a moment later.



Keeping in cover, the Kid watched the opposite side of the chasm. His own gun roared in response to a stirring in the thickets, and there was a yell from the unseen road-agent.

I reckon I got to make the grade, all the same. I aim to get this hearse into town on time. You want a lift, puncher?"

The Kid shook his head. "Nope! I'm going after the road-agent."

The Kid gave a clear whistle, and Side-Kicker came plunging through the thickets to the trail.

Jerry Cook opened his eyes wide. "You aiming to trail Black George?" he ejaculated.

"Sure!" "Let up on it, puncher," said Jerry. "You stay where you're safe! Black George wouldn't make more'n one bite at you, kid."

"I guess I'll give him the chance." The Rio Kid swung himself into the saddle.

"You mean it?" exclaimed Jerry

At a gallop, he passed round the bend that had hidden the road-agent, and disappeared from the sight of the stage-driver and his passengers.

The Rio Kid's face was hard set, his eyes gleaming, and a walnut-butted gun was in his grasp. His eyes searched the trail ahead for the black rider.

Black George was only a few minutes ahead of him, and the Kid did not figure that he would be going all out, for the hold-up man had no suspicion, as yet, that there was pursuit behind him.

But the black rider had already left the trail, turning into the rough thickets that clothed the hillside. The Kid had a glimpse of swaying branches, and of a Stetson hat that appeared and disappeared.

He turned from the trail, and rode up the rugged slope of the hillside, the way the hold-up man had gone.

The Kid had guessed that the road-agent, knowing that he was pursued, would stop at such a favourable spot to deal with his pursuer. And he had been right. Had Side-Kicker taken the leap, the ruffian, in the thickets on the other side of the barranca, would have riddled the Kid with lead as he leaped.

Thrice the six-gun roared across the chasm, the lead tearing leaves and twigs around the Rio Kid.

Keeping in cover, the Kid watched the opposite side of the chasm. His own gun roared in response, at a stirring in the thickets, and there was a yell from the unscen road-agent. The lead had gone close.

"Say, Side-Kicker, old boss, I guess this puts paid to us!" murmured the Rio Kid.

The Kid was reckless enough, and danger had no terrors for him, but he was not the man to throw away his life. To leap the barranca, while the road-agent was watching on the other side, was death. But to go along the side of the chasm, seeking another crossing, was to lose his man. The fugitive, if he sought escape, would be gone, long before the Kid could cross in safety and get round to him. And Black George, though likely enough he did not fear to meet a single puncher in conflict, was not likely to lose more time than he could help. When the stage got into Kicking Mule, with the murdered Ranger, the country would be up, and

the black rider would be hunted far and wide. Minutes would be precious to Black George then.

The Kid soon made up his mind. Keeping in cover, he led Side-Kicker away, threading the wood along the barranca, to seek a crossing at a distance. He knew that the ears of the halted road-agent would pick up the sounds he made, and that Black George would guess his intention easily enough. In a few minutes, he figured, the rascal would be in the saddle again, riding. But his trail would be left for the Kid, and there was no Apache or Comanche in Texas keener at picking up a trail than the Rio Kid.

And that trail the boy-puncher would follow, whithersoever it led him, to Black George's death or his own.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER. A Mystery!

"LEVANTED!" granted the Rio Kid.

He had expected it.

The road-agent had long gone when the Kid reached the spot where he had stopped on the farther side of the barranca.

The Kid had followed the rift a quarter of a mile, and leaped his mustang across it, and then worked back on the farther side. He could not

afford to act in haste, for it was possible that Black George was still there, deep in cover, guessing his intention, and waiting for him. And it was not the Kid's idea to let the matter end with a bullet through his heart from cover.

Cautiously he worked his way through dense thickets, on foot, his mustang following him. He picked up the spot at last where the road-agent had stopped. Black George was gone—the trail of his horse leading away up the woody hillside.

"I guess he was winged," said the Kid, as he examined the traces left by the road-agent.

It was evident that the Kid's bullet across the barranca had gone close, for he picked up several spots of blood on the herbage where the black outlaw had crouched in cover. He had not been hard hit, but the lead had touched him and drawn blood.

The Kid mounted the grey mustang, after a careful examination of the spot, and followed the trail that lay plain to the eye through the tangled thickets.

He went cautiously enough, wary of an ambush; though he reckoned that the road-agent was not wasting time. By this time the stage would have reached Kicking Mule; and it was likely that a score of riders would pour out of the cow-town to hunt for the

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LIKE a lot of extremely muddy and giant moles, the men of "A" Company, of a certain regiment numbered early up on the roll of the First Hundred Thousand to volunteer for active service with Britain's Old Contemptibles in the early days of the Great War, wallowed breathlessly but happily in an excessively flooded front-line trench somewhere in Flanders.

Breathlessly, because they had just staggered over endless miles of treacherous duckboards to relieve the Tommies who had done duty in that same trench for the previous seven days. Happily, because they had finished with those duckboards for a similar period—duckboards which, in the awful darkness of a Flanders night, would roll suddenly under your feet and top you sideways into bottomless liquid mud.

Another reason for their happiness was the fact that this was New Year's Eve.

But scarcely have they settled in their appointed stations at the firing-step in each trench traverse than there comes word that something really is afoot. A raid on the enemy trenches!

Headquarters passed it on to various High Functionaries until it came to the ears of the General. Gradually the order to carry out this Christmas Eve raid dribbled down to the battalion's colonel. He passed the order on to the Major and the Adjutant. The Adjutant told the Captain. The Captain told a Lieutenant of "A" Company, who told a sergeant, who straightway proceeded to pour the message into the ears of six privates.

"The General wants a bloomin' captive. We've gotter go birds'-nesting," said the sergeant with a grin. "General wants a real live Jerry—and we've gotter fetch him!"

So at midnight, as New Year's Day was coming in, there crept over the parapet from the British fighting line one lieutenant,

one sergeant, and six Tommies. Like enormous rats they crept out into No Man's Land on their stomachs, flattening themselves incredibly whenever a Verey Light shot up from the enemy trench—fifty yards distant—and remaining utterly immobile till that tell-tale soaring flare had spent itself.

Twenty-five yards they crawled, spread out in line an arm's length apart. Now they were up against something at which even the bravest of fighting men always shuddered. Especially in darkness such as smothered this New Year's Eve. It was barbed wire—miles and miles of it, twisted and tangled and splayed about on corkscrew iron supports, and many feet in depth.

The raiding party had to cut a passage through it, with big wire-cutters with which each of the eight was armed, additional to the lieutenant's revolver and the short club and bombs (the latter safely pocketed) with which all were provided.

But on the face of each—officer, non-com, and private—was the set grin of the British warrior put to the test. The smile that won't come off! Somehow they fumbled with their massive cutters, and strand by strand the savage, spiked wire parted. Then it flipped about, searching like a live thing for living flesh to lacerate.

With the art they had long since learned, they avoided the flailing ends, and after hours it seemed, of working on their stomachs, the procession enemywards recommenced—this time in single file, the officer leading. Then they spread out once more, safely through the barbed wire gap, and wriggle by wriggle the enemy parapet was reached.

Each gripped his club and held his breath, waiting for the spring from the lieutenant which should be the signal for a united leap down into Jerry's trench. Only one enemy head was visible above the parapet, and that not-too-sharp-eyed sentry was yards to the right.

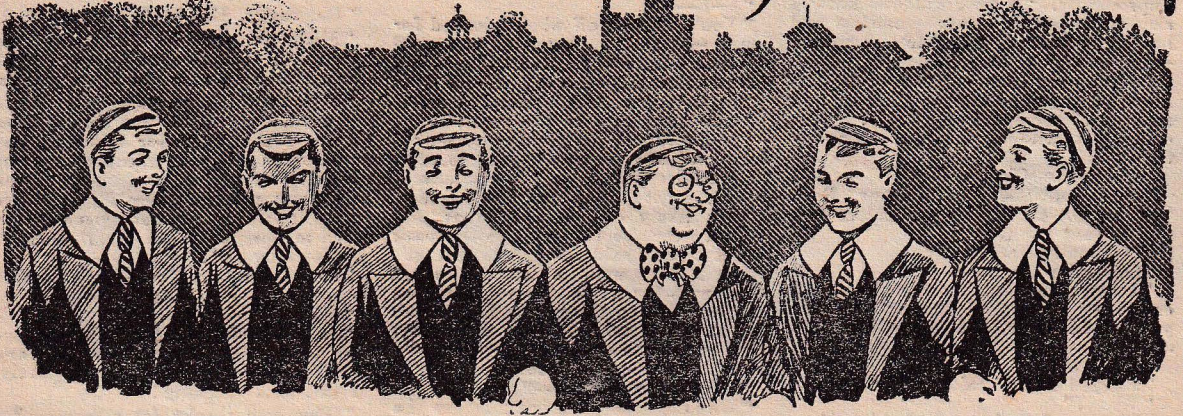
But the little band of raiders, flying into the trench, discovered otherwise; the first step was lined with drowsy figures in field-grey.

Instantly the night was punctured by shouts and shots and sounds of heavy blows. But for a short half-minute only. The British were not there to do battle. The General wanted one live German only—and the information of the coming attack which that German could impart.

As swiftly as they arrived the eight departed. Only this time they were nine, for in their hurrying midst was a scared captive. Shots whistled after the retreating stooping figures, but the luck of New Year's Eve held, and beyond torn trousers and tunics in the passage of the cut barbed wire there were no British casualties.

Back in the trench the captive was despatched under safe escort General-wards, the raiding party had their tot of rum, the lieutenant went off to report to the captain, and the battalion settled down to prepare for the reciprocal attack which was bound to come with the dawn.

The ROLICKING ADVENTURES of:— HARRY WHARTON & Co. of GREYFRIARS!



From a waif of the roads, without name and home, Ragged Dick becomes a scholar of Greyfriars School. How this amazing transformation takes place you will read in this topping school tale by Frank Richards.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Good Samaritan!

"I SAY, you fellows—"
"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Here he is!"

"You fat villain—"
"Collar him!"

Billy Bunter jumped back. He met Harry Wharton & Co. as they came up the Remove passage at Greyfriars, and he met them with his most ingratiating and propitiatory smile. But the chums of the Remove did not seem to be in a mood to be propitiated.

"I—I say, you fellows, hold on!" exclaimed Bunter.

"That's what we're going to do!" grinned Bob Cherry.

And he held on to Bunter's collar. "Bring him into the study," said Harry Wharton.

"Yaroo! I say, Toddy, rescue!" roared Bunter, as he was propelled towards the doorway of Study No. 1.

Peter Todd, looking out of Study No. 7, grinned.

"What's the row?" he asked. "The fat boulder burgled our picnic!" growled Johnny Bull. "We went as far as Compton Park, and we saw a brute lamming a ragged kid, and while we chipped in to the rescue this fat cad bolted with our tuck."

"Ha ha, ha!" "It's not a laughing matter," roared Johnny Bull indignantly. "We're famished."

"The famishfulness is terrific!" "It's a misunderstanding," gasped Bunter. "I—I never bagged the tuck, you know. I wouldn't! You see—"

"Roll him in. I've got a fives bat for him," said Wharton. "Yaroo! Help an old pal, Peter—"

Peter Todd chuckled. "Keep your fat paws from picking and stealing, old fat man," he answered. "Don't I keep on giving you that advice?"

"Beast!" Peter went back into his study, apparently not keen to distinguish himself in the role of rescuer. Vernon-Smith and Tom Redwing came up the stairs together, and stopped to look on as Bunter was propelled into Study No. 1.

"Smithy, old chap, lend a fellow a hand!" yelled Bunter.

The Bounder grinned. "Will a foot do?" he asked.

"Whoop!" Smithy lent a foot, and Bunter rolled into the study and sprawled on the carpet.

Nugent closed the door. Bunter sat up, with five wrathful faces looking down on him. The captain of the Remove picked up a fives bat.

"Shove him across a chair," he said. "I say, Harry, old chap—"
"If you call me Harry, old chap, you fat worm, I'll give you one extra."
"Bob, old man—"
"Cheese it!"

This Week:

"The Luck of the Waif!"

"I—I say, you fellows—"
Four pairs of hands grasped the Owl of the Remove, and he was extended, wriggling, across a chair, in a favourable position for the application of a fives bat.

"Yow-ow-ow! Let a fellow speak!" howled Bunter. "Can't you let a chap explain, you beasts?"

"What is there to explain?" demanded Bob Cherry. "You bolted with our tuck, and we had to walk home all the way from Compton Park without our tea."

"I—I say, I was awfully hungry when I got in, you know!" gasped Bunter. "I don't believe I should have got in at all, only I got a lift in the carrier's cart. And I was too late for tea, and that beast Toddy wouldn't lend me a bob, and my postal-order hasn't come, and now—"

"And now you're going to have a dozen with this bat to complete the tale of woe!" chuckled Bob. "Lay it on!" "Hold on!" yelled Bunter. "Let a fellow explain. I—I didn't scoff the tuck, you know—I wouldn't."

"Where is it, then?" demanded Wharton.

"I—I say, you fellows, I—I— Let a fellow speak! I—I can explain the whole thing!" gasped Bunter, "Rot!"

"Give him a dozen, and let him explain afterwards," said Johnny Bull. "It will only be gammon, anyhow."

"Honest Injun!" yelled Bunter. "Look here, this isn't the way to treat a chap who's been helping the poor, and feeding the hungry, and all that!" "What!"

In their astonishment the juniors released Bunter. He squirmed off the chair and set his big spectacles straight on his fat little nose, and blinked at them indignantly.

Owing to the windfall of a lift in the carrier's cart, Bunter had reached Greyfriars well ahead of the Famous Five; and he had had time to think out his defence. Bunter and the truth had never been well acquainted; and the greater the scrape in which the Owl found himself, the further and further he departed from veracity.

But Bunter had the gift—very valuable to an habitual deceiver—of taking his own tremendous "whoppers" seriously.

Having thought out what he considered to be a good yarn, he considered that the fellows ought to believe it, and almost believed it himself by this time. So he was feeling quite genuinely indignant as he blinked at the five Removes.

"I say, you fellows, I expected you to take it a bit more decently," he said. "Of course, a fellow doesn't like to lose a spread. I shouldn't myself. But when a poor chap's starving, what's a really kind-hearted and generous fellow to do?"

"Eh?" "What?" "Do you want us to believe that you gave that feed away?" asked Bob Cherry, almost dazedly.

"Exactly!" "Oh, my hat!"

"Great pip! That's the limit, even for Bunter!" exclaimed Harry Wharton, staring at the Owl of the Remove. "You don't really expect us to get that down, Bunter!"

"I suppose you can take my word!" said Bunter, with dignity.

"Your word! Oh crumbs!" "Oh, really, Wharton—"

"Let's hear the yarn," said Bob, with a chuckle. "We'll give him six extra for telling lies if he doesn't prove his case. Now, then, go ahead, Bunter!"

"I say, you fellows—"
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"Cut it short!" growled Johnny Bull. "You—you see——" gasped Bunter. "We don't see," said Nugent. "We are waiting to see."

"If you'd seen that ragged kid, you'd have been sorry for him," said Bunter impressively. "A poor kid, you know—chap about our own age—homeless and hungry and starving and famished, and—and in want of food."

"Must have been in want of food if he was hungry as well as starving and famished," agreed Bob Cherry. "Get on with it, without piling on the agony too thick!"

"Oh, really, Cherry——"

"Buck up!" roared Johnny Bull. "We've got to wallop you before tea, and I want my tea!"

"Oh, really, Bull——"

"Give him the bat——"

"I say, I'm explaining as fast as I can, ain't I?" yelled Bunter. "I tell you you'd have felt sorry for that chap!"

"What chap?"

"Ragged Dick!" said Bunter.

"What?"

"That's what he called himself—a poor tramp, you know, homeless and nameless and hungry, and——"

"Have you come across that kid Ragged Dick?" asked Harry Wharton, in astonishment.

For once Bunter found believers. The Famous Five knew that Ragged Dick had a real existence, for he was the boy they had saved from a brutal flogging outside Compton Park.

Bunter's task was easier than he had anticipated, as he had known nothing of the affair with Ragged Dick and Pedlar Parker. He had not even taken the trouble to wonder what had called the juniors away when they had so fortunately left him alone with the tuck. All he knew was that some person unknown had been yelling in a field, and that they had run to the scene.

"That's what he called himself," said Bunter—"Ragged Dick. What a name, you know! Ragged and hungry and starving and famished——"

"We've had that before!" grunted Johnny Bull. "Look here, we'd have handed over that feed to that poor kid without waiting to be asked if we'd had the chance. If you did——"

"Just what I did," said Bunter. "I—I was going to take a snack, and then he came up, and—and I—you know my generous nature——"

"Phew!"

"I gave him the lot," said Bunter. "I said: 'Here you are, kid!' and handed it over to him. He thanked me with tears rolling down his cheeks."

"Rats!" from Johnny Bull.

"If you don't believe me, Bull, you can ask the fellow himself."

"Where is he, then?"

"How should I know?"

"You silly ass! How can I ask him when I shan't ever see him again?" demanded Johnny Bull.

"Look here! If this is true, all serene!" said Harry Wharton. "We're jolly hungry; but we wouldn't mind handing over our feed to a chap who was hungrier. But you're not built that way, Bunter, and it's too jolly steep!"

"Oh, really, Wharton——"

"Good Samaritan, I don't think!" grunted Johnny Bull. "Looks like it, doesn't he? Good Samaritans don't grow as fat as Bunter!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Now, as it happens, we saw that kid Ragged Dick," went on Wharton. "We collared a pedlar chap who was whack-

ing him and gave him a chance to get away."

"Oh!" ejaculated Bunter.

"He cleared off before we could get a look at him," said Harry. "You had cleared off with the grub, too——"

"I—I——"

"You'd cleared off when I looked for you," said Bob. "And that ragged kid was out of sight, too. Where did you meet him if you met him at all?"

"In Compton Park," said Bunter.

"You trespassed in the park?"

"I—I told you Sir Henry was an old friend of my pater's," said Bunter.

"I just dropped in——"

"Oh, can it!" growled Johnny Bull.

"It's likely enough that that kid dodged over the palings into the park to get clear," said Harry, "and that's where Bunter went, of course, to get away with the grub. So you came on Ragged Dick in the park. I dare say that much is true, as you were both there at the same time. But you didn't hand him the feed, you fat fabricator!"

"If you'd seen him——"

"We did see him, ass, before he cleared off."

"Well, then, you ought to be able to understand how I—I pitied him," said Bunter. "It—it would have done you good to see him eat! It would really! Fairly bolted it, you know, and I—I stood by, you know, helping him and not touching a morsel myself. I thought that you fellows wouldn't really mind letting the grub go to feed the hungry——"

"We wouldn't," said Frank Nugent.

"So it's all right, then," said Bunter brightly. "You say yourselves you'd have given him the grub. So what have you got to complain about?"

"Well, then, you ought to be able to understand how I—I pitied him," said Bunter. "It—it would have done you good to see him eat! It would really! Fairly bolted it, you know, and I—I stood by, you know, helping him and not touching a morsel myself. I thought that you fellows wouldn't really mind letting the grub go to feed the hungry——"

"We wouldn't," said Frank Nugent.

"So it's all right, then," said Bunter brightly. "You say yourselves you'd have given him the grub. So what have you got to complain about?"



Billy Bunter was bent over the chair, and the five-bat was set into motion. Whack, whack, whack! "Yarooop! Ow!" howled Bunter. "Stoppit, you beasts!"

The Famous Five eyed Bunter.

But for the fact that they had met Ragged Dick themselves, certainly they would not have believed a word of the story from beginning to end. But there was, at least, a nucleus of truth in Bunter's yarn. It was clear that he had met the waif—whether he had played the Good Samaritan or not.

"After all, if he whacked the grub out with that hungry kid, that's something for Bunter!" said Bob Cherry.

"Yes. But——"

"You should have seen him eat!" said Bunter impressively. "It would really have done you good!"

"Pity we didn't see it!" agreed Johnny Bull. "We might have believed you then."

"Oh, really, Bull——"

"Shall we give the fat villain the benefit of the doubt?" asked Bob Cherry, looking round at his comrades.

"I don't think you ought to doubt my word, Cherry. As for the grub, of course, I shall pay for it when my postal-order comes. I'm expecting it by the first post to-morrow morning. And I tell you what—I'll use my influence with Sir Henry to get you fellows asked to Compton Hall—I will, really."

"You silly owl!"

"And I must say I'm a little shocked at you!"

"What?"

"It seems to me that you grudge that feed to a hungry, starving, and famished chap," said Bunter severely. "I call that shocking!"

"Why, you cheeky fat villain——"

"As for the value of it, I'll settle that out of my postal-order. I certainly do not want you mean fellows to pay for my—my charitable actions!" said Bunter loftily. "Mean—that's what you are! One of the eggs was whiffy, too! I shan't pay for that one; I couldn't eat it."

"You couldn't eat it?" said Bob, staring at him.

"No, I couldn't!"

"But the others were all right, were they?"

"Well, I've tasted better," said Bunter. "As a matter of fact, it wasn't much of a feed, though you fellows make such a song about it. The cake was gritty."

"Was it?"

"Yes, it was. And the lemonade was thin stuff, and didn't have enough sugar in it. Muck, in fact!"

"Have you ever heard the proverb that fars should have good memories, Bunter?" inquired Bob.

"Eh?"

"Did Ragged Dick tell you that the egg was whiffy, and that the cake was gritty, and that there wasn't enough sugar in the lemonade?"

"While he was thanking you with tears rolling down his cheeks?" roared Johnny Bull.

"Eh! I—I mean——"

"Up-end him!"

"Yarooooh!"

Bunter went across the chair again. As usually happened with the hapless Ananias of Greyfriars, he had given himself away after an elaborate series of inventions. The chums of the Remove had been prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt. But there was no longer any doubt; so they gave him the benefit of the five-bat.

"Whack, whack, whack!"

"Whoop! I say, you fellows——"

"Whack!"

"Yaroooh! I say, I really did give him some cake, and it wasn't my fault he chucked it at me——"

"Whack! Whack!"

"Yow-ow-ow! You beasts, stoppit! I've been kicked—yow-ow-ow!—in the same place—yow-ow-ow! That beast of a keeper, you know!"

"Whack!"

"Yaroooooooop!"

Bunter rolled off the chair. He backed into the doorway, and shook a fat fist at the Famous Five.

"Owl! Beasts! I won't pay for the grub now, when my postal order comes!"

I was going to, and now I won't! Beasts!"

And Billy Bunter rolled wrathfully away, after delivering that Parthian shot, leaving the chums of the Remove chuckling, and not at all dismayed by the prospect of losing their just share in Bunter's celebrated postal-order—when it came.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
The Spendthrift!

"MR. ROGER COMPTON!" Sir Henry turned his wrinkled face, with something like a snarl upon it, towards the gentleman who was shown into the library at Compton Hall.

He did not rise from the deep-backed chair in which he sat by the crackling log fire. There was no welcome in his looks—no courtesy in his manner.

He fixed his eyes on the man who came towards him, with a glint of animosity in them, under his grizzled, wrinkled brows.

The visitor was a man of perhaps forty, though at the first glance he looked younger. He was dressed well, almost fastidiously—a contrast to the baronet, who, late as the hour was in the evening, had not changed out of his shooting-clothes. The man had been handsome, but there were very visible signs in his face of a loose and reckless life. He came towards the grim old baronet, and held out a well-manicured hand, which Sir Henry Compton did not touch.

"Come, come, cousin Henry!" said Mr. Roger Compton. "You will not shake hands with your kinsman?"

"Kinsman or no, I will not touch your hand!" said Sir Henry. "It was in my mind to refuse even to open my door to you, Roger Compton. Why are you here?"

Roger Compton smiled—a smile that was not pleasant.

"How long is it since we have met?" he answered. "Finding myself at Court-field—"

"For the races?" interposed Sir Henry, with a curl of the lip.

"Precisely—for the races, precisely! Finding myself there, as I said, I decided to see my nearest relative before I left, and to ask—"

"To ask what?"

"After your grandson, Sir Henry—little Richard, whose delicate health has caused me more concern than you may have supposed."

The baronet's face set hard.

"I quite understand your interest in my grandson's health," he assented—"quite!" His hand pressed his breast for a moment, where, in an inner pocket, reposed a crumpled telegram—the telegram that announced the death of his grandson. "A delicate boy's life is all that stands between you and Compton Hall—when once an obstinate old man is laid with his fathers."

Roger Compton made a deprecating gesture.

"I should scarcely look on the matter in that light, Sir Henry," he murmured.

"You would scarcely look on it in any other," retorted the baronet. "I know you, Roger! I have known you from your youth upwards, and never known any good of you. Is there a disreputable night club in London, a racecourse in the country, where you are not known for what you are—gambler, blackguard, adventurer, a disgrace to the name you bear?"

"As bitter as ever, Sir Henry!" said Roger.

He sank into a chair; the grim, old master of Compton Hall had not even asked him to be seated.

"Quite! Again I ask, why are you here? Have you any reason to suppose that my grandson is worse, and that you are nearer to your inheritance?" said Sir Henry sardonically.

And again his hand crushed the crumpled telegram which had shattered

means," smiled Roger. "If Richard dies—"

"If!" muttered Sir Henry.

"And I have a right to know how he stands," said Roger. "I learn that for the past year he has been in a foreign country—in the hands of medical specialists. I am entitled to know more. He is now of an age to be placed at school—more than of an age for that. It may be taken as a matter of course that he will be sent to Greyfriars, as his father was before him. Is he going to Greyfriars?"

"That is my business!"

"Mine, too, if you will excuse me, Sir Henry!"

"What rights have you over my grandson?" demanded the old baronet, with a fierce bending of the brows.

"None! But I have a right to know how the matter stands, and"—Roger Compton paused a moment—"where he is, and whether he still lives. I do not know that for a fact; you have told me nothing. If my young Cousin Richard no longer lives—"

"The moneylenders would grant you better terms in that case," said Sir Henry sardonically.

"Exactly. For that reason, if for no other, I require to know more of the boy Richard," said Roger coolly.

Sir Harry Compton rose to his feet.

"You will know nothing from me," he said. "We have never been friends, Roger, and now we are enemies. If you come here again I shall give orders that you are not to be admitted."

"You will tell me nothing of Richard?"

"Nothing!"

The spendthrift's eyes gleamed.

"I shall make inquiries, then—"

"Make them!"

"You lead me to suspect—"

"Suspect what you please! But go!"

said Sir Henry grimly. "After my death you may disgrace Compton Hall with your presence; while I live I am master here!" He touched a bell. "Walton, show this gentleman out. And if he should call again I am not at home."

Roger Compton rose, his eyes glittering, his cheeks pale with rage and mortification.

Without a word he walked out of the library.

The door closed.

Sir Henry sank back into the deep chair. His brows were knitted, black, and gloomy.

He had refused to give the heir of Compton Hall the information he sought. But he must learn it ere long; the announcement of Richard Compton's death would enlighten him. He would know that only an old man stood between him and the estate; his creditors would know, his moneylenders would know. It would mean a fresh accession of borrowed wealth for the spendthrift—a fresh orgy of waste and reckless extravagance, to be paid for when the Compton estate came into his hands, when the entail could be broken, and the lands sold, the ancient house given to a stranger. Some newly-rich profiteer would dwell where generations of Comptons had lived and died—while the last of the race was drinking himself to death.

Was there no way?

If the boy had lived—and he had lived only to nearly fifteen years, and then all that medical skill could do, all that a soft Southern climate could do to save him had failed.

The hard old man had seen little of the hapless boy, had cared little for him; cared only for him as a Compton,



Sir Henry pointed a shaking finger to the door. "Go!" he said. "After my death you may disgrace Compton Hall with your presence; while I live I am master here!"

all his hopes of keeping the Compton estate out of the hands of the man he despised and detested

"I know that Richard is delicate—that his life for years has been spent with doctors and nurses," said Roger. "I am naturally anxious to know whether he shows signs of being restored to health. And—little as you may believe it—I feel for your deep anxiety concerning him!"

There was a sneer with the last words.

"I have had time to become used to my anxiety," said the old man composedly. "I have seen little of my grandson—and I am not of an affectionate nature, as you know. You know, too, that I should think little of him if it were not that he alone stood between you and Compton Hall when I am gone."

"I am aware that you would disinherit me if the entail were not too strict!" sneered Roger

"And I am aware," said the old man, "that you, the last of the line, will have power to break the entail, and break up the property that has been in our family since the time of Edward the First. I am aware that your countless creditors would drive you to do so, even if you had the decency to respect your name—which you have not. I am aware that but for my grandson, when I go, everything goes, and the Comptons will disappear for ever. I am aware of all that, Roger—a stranger will rule here when I am gone, while you waste the proceeds of your baseness in drink and gaming. If there were any means—"

He broke off, biting his lip

Roger Compton smiled again.

"If there were any means to get rid of your cousin and heir, you would not hesitate," he said.

"No."

"Fortunately for me, there are no

to carry on the name and save the estate. All that there was of softness or affection in his nature was buried with his only son in a nameless grave in Flanders.

To save the old estate from the clutches of Roger Compton and a ravenous crew of usurers—that was almost an obsession in the old man's mind now. Had he been able to will it away he would have willed it to the veriest stranger rather than to the dissolute blackguard who was his natural heir. But he had not the power. Compton dead and gone long ago had tied up the estate too carefully, to keep the lands in the family, to preserve the family name, never foreseeing or dreaming that a Compton might be the one to bring ruin and oblivion upon the old name.

Was there no way?

Long the old man sat there, thinking, thinking, with wrinkled brows, his hands clenched on the dark oak arms of the chair. Was there no way? No way to keep up the old house, to keep the wide estate together, to save it from the gambler and his hungry crew? If his grandson had lived, if he had had another grandson, if he had had the power to make an heir of an adopted son; if he had been able, by any stratagem or trickery, to cheat the law laid down by dead men long ago, by a secret adoption— But Roger Compton was not the man to be deceived. And yet—

In the dark recesses of the old man's troubled brain the scheme was born at last. His grandson had died in a foreign land. No one in England knew of the death—could know until he chose to tell. What if he did not tell? What if the lad appeared at Compton Hall in the name of Richard Compton; went to Greyfriars School as Richard Compton—Richard, restored to health—Richard, grandson of Sir Henry and heir of Compton Hall?

His eyes glittered fiercely under his knitted, grey brows.

Better than the breaking-up of the old estate to satisfy a hungry crew of moneylenders, to provide Roger with a last wild orgy to wind up his career of riotous blackguardism.

But how?

And then into the baronet's mind came the remembrance of a boy's face that had bent over him in his seizure in the old summer-house in the park. The boy whom Sir Henry had placed for lodgings in his keeper's house.

A boy unknown, nameless, friendless, forlorn; all that he needed for his purpose!

Long into the night the baronet sat, staring at the dying fire.

When he rose at last his plan was formed and fixed, irrevocable—the plan that was to save Compton Hall from the spendthrift, and to bring about an amazing change in the fortunes of none other than Ragged Dick, the boy whom Harry Wharton & Co. had met.

THE THIRD CHAPTER. A Dazzling Prospect!

"SEND the boy in!"

"Yes, Sir Henry!"

Jenks retired respectfully from his little parlour, through the window of which the morning sunlight gleamed.

Sir Henry Compton sat down.

He had given instructions that the tattered lad was to be well cared for, and on the Compton estate Sir Henry's instructions were always carried out to the very letter.

Probably Jenks had been surprised by the baronet's concern for the wretched, ragged lad, whom he had brought to the lodge the evening before. It was not like Sir Henry Compton to trouble his lofty head about the poor and needy and friendless; it was more like him to drive them off his land without pity or ruth. Of the baronet's seizure, and of the aid the boy had given him, Jenks knew nothing. He did not know that the old man, hard as he was, did not choose to remain under an obligation; that his pride impelled him to pay richly for a service received. So far as Jenks was concerned, he only knew that it was Sir Henry's lordly will and pleasure that the homeless boy should be cared for—and cared for Ragged Dick had been, under the keeper's roof.

He entered the little room a few minutes later rather timidly.

Sir Henry looked at him.

There was a change in the boy—a change so startling that he was scarcely recognisable. He was washed clean, his hair had been trimmed and combed, and he was dressed in a suit of clothes, plain but neat and good, that had belonged to the keeper's own boy, and had been given over to the waif.

Clean and neat clothes and boots in the place of his tattered rags made a wonderful difference; but still greater was the difference made by scrubbing and rubbing off the dirt and dust of the roads, trimming and combing the unkempt hair; still greater the difference brought about by plentiful food and a quiet and peaceful night's rest in a comfortable bed.

The baronet looked at the lad who

stood before him as if scarcely able to believe his eyes.

Ragged Dick—no longer ragged—looked a handsome lad, well-set-up, sturdy, active; his face good-looking and pleasant in its expression, a little sunburnt, but so clean that it was clear that cleanliness was the boy's own taste, his previous griminess forced upon him by his wretched circumstances.

A smile of satisfaction came over the old man's face.

He had resolved upon his scheme—a scheme in which Ragged Dick was to play his part as an unconscious tool in his hands—a pawn in a game he did not understand. But doubts had troubled him. It was not easy, he realised, to change a slinking tramp into a fellow who could pass as a Compton, brought up in the lap of luxury. But he was reassured upon that point now. This boy was no slinking tramp; circumstances had been against him, but he had the power of rising above his circumstances. The pride he had shown in his talk with the baronet the previous evening had offended the stiff old gentleman at the time; now it pleased him to remember it.

Pride that was, in his estimation, out of place in a ragged vagrant was an asset when that vagrant was to play the part of heir of Compton Hall.

For a good five minutes the baronet scanned the lad before him without speaking, but thinking deeply, more and more satisfied with the trend of his own thoughts.

Dick stood waiting uneasily.

The stern old brown face scared him a little; there was something awe-inspiring in this grim old man, though Dick was not easily scared.

What was wanted of him he could not guess.

Sir Henry spoke at last.

"Good—good boy!" he said, apparently commenting on Dick's improved appearance. "Now, my boy, I have something to say to you—something very serious."

"Yes, sir," said Dick.

"You have told me that you have no relations, no parents, no name?"

Dick coloured a little.

"That is so, sir."

"Is there no one with a claim on you?"

"No one, sir." The boy hesitated a moment. "For the last few weeks, sir, I've been tramping with a pedlar. But he has no claim on me."

"Where is he now?"

"I don't know, sir—gone, I hope. I ran away from him yesterday."

"Why?"

"He was a brute." Dick flushed. "He—he wanted me to steal chickens for him from the farm, and—and beat me because I wouldn't. Some school-boys interfered, sir, and I got away from him and cleared off. That was why I came into your park, sir—to keep clear till the man was gone on his way."

Sir Henry gave him a searching look.

"Is that the truth?"

Dick's lip quivered.

"If you don't believe me, sir, it's no use my saying anything," he answered. "It's the truth, but if you don't believe me, I suppose you won't give me a job. I can't give you any character."

"A—a what?" ejaculated Sir Henry. "Oh, you mean employment! I am not thinking of giving you employment."

Dick's face fell.

"Very well, sir," he said quietly. "I know I've no right to expect it. But after what you've done for me already I shall find it much easier to get work—looks mean a lot to a fellow like me, and I look respectable now. I hope

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you'll believe that I'm grateful, sir—and I'll go now."

"You will not go" said Sir Henry coldly. "Tell me once more—you are absolutely certain that no one who lives has a right to claim you?"

"I don't know of anyone, sir," answered Dick, surprised by the old man's inexplicable interest in such a detail.

"But you had a father once, I presume?"

"I suppose so, sir. I never knew him," said Dick.

"It's an odd story," said the baronet, eyeing him.

"There are plenty of fellows in the same boat, sir, if you look for them along the roads and hedges," said Dick.

"It is possible, I suppose. But you must have had some care in infancy. Have you had no education? Cannot you read or write?" exclaimed Sir Henry, struck by a new difficulty.

Dick smiled.

"Oh, yes, sir! I've never been to school, but I've picked up a good deal—fellows can if they like. I once tramped on the road with a man who had been a Master of Arts at Oxford."

"A Master of Arts—tramping the roads!" exclaimed Sir Henry.

"There are all sorts on the roads, sir," said Dick. "A gentleman like you wouldn't know, sir. The man I'm speaking of was a drunkard—he had been to prison, too. He was a good man in his way, and I was with him for two or three years. He used to teach me when he was sober, and I used to take care of him when he was drunk."

"Good heavens!" muttered the old baronet. It was a glimpse of a life new and strange to the master of Compton Hall—as strange as the life of a different continent.

"He taught me a lot of things," said Dick. "You see, sir, I was keen to learn—I didn't want to be a tramp all my days. When he was drunk he used to spout Latin and Greek, and I asked him one day to teach me some Latin. He laughed and said he would—and he did, too. We hadn't any books, but I used to pick up old pieces of paper, and keep them for my exercises, and I learned Latin verses by heart from him; and he taught me some French, too. And I learned some more from a Frenchman I tramped with afterwards. I—I could do accounts, sir, if—if you wanted—"

"Where is he now?"

"I don't know, sir. He was run in."

"He was what?"

"I mean, taken up by the police, sir, when he was drunk, and sent to chokey—I mean, prison."

"What was his name?"

"Poynings, sir; but the tramps always called him Spouting Billy."

"How long since you have seen him?"

"More than a year, sir."

"He would scarcely know you again," said the baronet musingly. "Anyhow, a meeting would be very unlikely. Boy, what were you thinking of doing when you left here?"

"Looking for work, sir."

"What kind of work?"

"With the farmers, sir. A fellow can often pick up a job on the farms."

"Would you like to stay here?"

Dick's face brightened.

"I would, sir! If you would give me a job—I mean, employment, you'll find that I am honest, sir and—"

"Tut, tut! Listen to me, my boy. See that that door is closed."

Dick looked to the door.

"Very good!" The baronet sank his voice a little. "I have reasons, my boy,

which I do not choose to explain to you, for taking you under my care. You have no name—I shall give you my own name. You have no father—you will call me your grandfather. I shall adopt you as my grandson. But that will be a strict secret. All others will suppose that you are really my grandson, Richard Compton. Do you understand?"

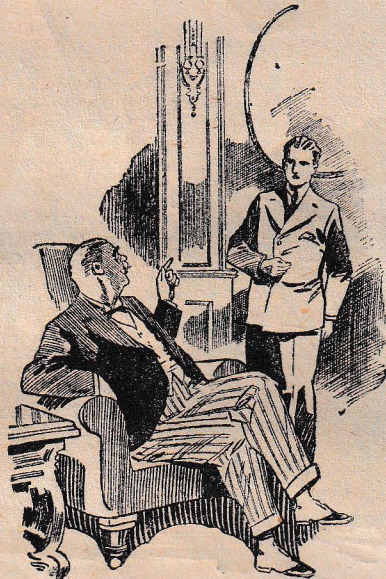
Dick's eyes opened wide.

The baronet had asked him, did he understand, but assuredly he did not. His impression was that the old gentleman was wandering in his mind.

He stared blankly at the gnarled old face.

"Answer me, boy!" snapped Sir Henry. "You are not a fool, I hope. Do you understand what I say?"

"I—I—" stammered Dick helplessly.



"You will go to a public school—Greyfriars School—you will go there as the grandson of Sir Henry Compton," said the baronet. "Ragged Dick" almost tottered at his words.

"You are taken by surprise, of course," said Sir Henry. "Listen to me carefully. I choose to adopt you as my grandson, and to make you, subject to good conduct, my heir—heir to these lands and to the house yonder. Heir to twenty thousand pounds a year, if you please me and if you prove yourself worthy of the position in which I think of placing you. You will go to a public school—Greyfriars School; you will go there as the grandson of Sir Henry Compton. Does that prospect please you?"

Dick almost tottered.

"You can't mean it, sir!" he panted.

"Do I look like a man who says what he does not mean?" almost snarled the old man.

"N-n-no, sir. But—but—"

"You are surprised—it is natural enough. You may take time to think over it, if you choose. But you will scarcely refuse such an offer, I presume?"

"Hardly, sir!" gasped Dick, in utter bewilderment. "But—but why should you do this for me, sir?"

"That is my own business, and you are not to ask questions. It is my will, and that is enough."

Ragged Dick gasped for breath. He was inclined to pinch himself to make sure that he was awake.

"But one caution, boy," said the baronet. "You are not to utter a word on this subject, or on the subject of your

past. You are to be my grandson Richard—in name and in fact. That you are only my grandson by adoption is a secret. You understand?"

"Yes, sir," gasped Dick.

"I shall take you away from here immediately—to London. There you will be fitted out for school. I shall arrange with the headmaster of Greyfriars to admit you there as soon as practicable. By the time the holidays come round you will have shaken down into your new position. You will come down here for the holidays as my grandson. You understand?"

Dick gasped.

"I will do anything you tell me, sir, of course. It seems like a dream to me what you are saying."

"No doubt—no doubt," said the baronet, more kindly. "But you will grow accustomed to it."

"But this keeper man, sir—Jenks, he knows—"

"Jenks will keep his own counsel," said Sir Henry. "You will say nothing to Jenks of what I have told you, and by the time you appear here as my grandson, Jenks will be gone."

Dick winced.

The old baronet, watching his face, read the thought that was passing in the boy's mind.

"So you have learned to think of others, tramping the roads," he said ironically. "But you need not trouble your head about Jenks. I am not the man to discharge a faithful servant to suit my own convenience. Jenks will be sent to my estate in Scotland, and he will not suffer."

"Yes, sir," gasped Dick.

"No one else here has seen you, and no one else will see you," said Sir Henry—"not till you come as if you were my grandson Richard, returning from school for the holidays." Sir Henry rose. "Not a word, mind! I rely upon your discretion. Make ready for a journey. In an hour I shall come to take you to London. Stay. I will not come for you here. Leave as if you were leaving for good, and wait for me at the railway station."

"Yes, sir."

With a curt nod the baronet left the room and the house.

Ragged Dick sank into a chair, his brain in a whirl.

Was it real, or was he dreaming? The adopted grandson of Sir Henry Compton. Heir to the lands upon which the previous day he had crept as a vagrant and a trespasser! It was a dream—it must be a dream!

The boy was still dazed as he left Compton Park and tramped to the railway station. It was a dream. It must be a dream! But the tall, gaunt figure of Sir Henry Compton was there. He beckoned to Dick, and spoke a sharp word.

"Take your ticket to London. Here is the money. Join me at the London terminus."

That was all. And the baronet entered a first-class carriage. Ragged Dick travelled third, his brain still in a whirl.

It was not till the express disgorged its passengers at Charing Cross that he saw the baronet again.

In the crowd on the platform Sir Henry beckoned to him, and they left the station together—Sir Henry to the task of completing his scheme, Ragged Dick to the new life that had opened so strangely and amazingly before him.

THE END.

(There will be another topping long complete tale of Harry Wharton & Co. in next week's issue, entitled, "Ragged Dick at Greyfriars!")

THE POPULAR.—No. 571.

OUR EXTRA-LONG
DETECTIVE-THRILLER!

The Holt Heirlooms

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Ten Years Too Late!

WHEN Evering Holt, squire of many broad acres in Suffolk, disappeared a few weeks before he was due to be married to Miss Neville, the daughter of Sir Oswald Neville, a neighbouring landowner in Suffolk, Ferrers Locke and Jack Drake regarded the case as a comparatively simple one.

At Miss Neville's request, the famous detective let all his other work slide and concentrated upon the problem, with the result that the missing man was in a very short time traced to a neighbouring lunatic asylum, where he was discovered to be impersonating one of the patients. Inspector Harker, of Scotland Yard, was engaged at the time in dragging ponds in the surrounding districts, naturally without any results.

Ferrers Locke realised, of course, that there must be some explanation of Evering Holt's extraordinary action, and he was very much interested when the young man made a clean breast of the matter and implored the detective's assistance.

It appeared that many years before, the Holt family jewels, valued at more than eighty thousand pounds, and comprising many treasured heirlooms, had been stolen by a man named Adams. Adams had been caught and sent to prison, but had never revealed what he had done with the plunder except to a fellow convict named Dent.

Adams died in prison, and the man Dent was now in Ports-down Prison and due to be released in a few days.

Dent had been interviewed by Evering Holt's late father some years ago, but refused to give any information except at the price of his release from prison—a price that was refused. The position now was, however, that Evering Holt had recently been approached by three men who apparently knew all about the matter, and were themselves awaiting the release of Dent, in order to share the treasure with him. These men warned Holt not to make any attempt to recover his property, and threatened to kidnap him to prevent his interfering between them and Dent. For this reason Holt had decided to disappear until such time as Dent was released, when he hoped to persuade him to reveal his secret.

The great desire of Evering Holt was to regain the jewels in order that his bride might wear upon her wedding-day the famous Saracen's Ring, in accordance with the traditions of the Holt family since the time of the Crusades.

The story so interested Ferrers Locke that he agreed there and then to give the young squire all the assistance in his power.

Dinner at the Grange on the night of Evering Holt's return was a very merry meal, and everyone most concerned was present.

When Harker was introduced to Holt his astonishment was unbounded. But if he felt any chagrin at the success of Locke's methods he did not show it.

THE POPULAR.—No. 571.



When the meal was over and the servants had gone, Holt explained the reason for his disappearance to Miss Neville, Sir Oswald, and the inspector, and a discussion followed on the best course of action.

"I think I've got a line on those three men who are after you, Mr. Holt," remarked the Yard man. "Three men put up at a cottage in Canfield, but they cleared out at noon to-day. I got descriptions of them, and found that they caught a train from Culford Junction to London. One was particularly conspicuous—a big fellow with the jib of a Hoxton pugilist. Would you like me to round them up, Locke?"

"I think that our trouble, if any, will come from them," replied Locke. "The big chap appears to be the leader, and I think it more than likely that he is acquainted with Dent, in which case the convict has probably come to some understanding with them. Now, if you arrest them the only thing you can charge them with is an assault on Mr. Holt, and, at the most, they will receive only a short term of imprisonment. If Dent is in league with them he will, without doubt, keep his mouth shut until they are free again, when they will all be on their guard against us. Added to all this is the fact that it means some delay in regaining the jewels, and I think that you will appreciate Mr. Holt's wishes to obtain them as soon as possible."

"Now, look here," began Harker stolidly. "you leave Dent to me. I'll deal with him."

"Just the thing we can't do," Ferrers

Locke said dryly. "We are not certain that he has any active connection with these three rogues, and he may be prepared to reveal his secret to us. I doubt it very much, but we are going to give him the chance. You have only to put yourself in the man's position to understand how he will regard official interference by the police. He will shut up like a clam. In my opinion, he will need very judicious handling, and probably have to be substantially bribed before he will tell."

"I can guess the kind of gaol-bird he is!" growled Harker. "I'm not a lover of harsh measures, but when it is a matter of eighty thousand pounds' worth of jewellery, it needs a strong hand."

"Gentleness, tact, and a knowledge of human nature are all that one requires, if the man is prepared to come to terms," said Locke. "I think, Harker, that you had better leave it to us. If Mr. Holt and I fail, then, perhaps, we shall see the wisdom of stronger measures."

"Well, it is Mr. Holt's funeral!" growled Harker, with a very wry grimace.

"I am content to leave the whole matter in Mr. Locke's hands," said the owner of Holt Grange cheerfully.

"Another thing I should like to make clear," Locke went on, "is that if we get nothing out of Dent, we have only to keep on his track for him to lead us to the jewels. It will be a difficult business, I have no doubt, but it seems to be the only course. The way in which you can help us, Harker, is to

Mystery

Another sensational episode from the thrilling careers of FERRERS LOCKE, the famous Baker Street Detective, and his daring boy assistant, JACK DRAKE!



discover who these three men are. If you could identify the ringleader—"

"A description isn't much to search the records on."

"Drake may assist you there; he has seen the man. He could go up to the Yard with you and run over a few likely photographs."

"I'll be catching the first train down in the morning."

"Surely you needn't hurry back, Mr. Harker?" remarked Holt. "Mr. Locke and I will be leaving before lunch. Can we not all go together?"

"We are going to Portdown tomorrow," explained Locke, "when I shall see Colonel Arden and pay Dent a visit. I have an idea, too, that we shall find our three friends down that way."

"You're going to get to Kingsville at a nice time!"

"In the evening. We shall put up at the Angler's Rest for the night. And I might say, Harker, that I think we're more likely to discover the big man's identity at Portdown than you are at the Yard."

"How do you make that out?"

But Locke only smiled.

The next morning all four travelled to London. Drake parted from his master and Holt and went on the Yard with Harker. Locke arranged that he should ring Drake at Baker Street to learn if the search of the records had been successful, and to give him any instructions.

It was dark when Locke and his companion arrived at Kingsville Junction, and they hired a trap to convey them to the Angler's Rest. After a brush-up

and a hasty meal, they set out for the governor's house at the prison.

A keen wind blew over the rolling waste of the bleak moors, there was no moon, and clouds hid the stars. The few lights of the junction town twinkled behind them; before them, the road stretched greyly over, to be lost in the cheerless darkness. The road was bordered on either hand by a ditch and a thin hedge, beyond which was a little cultivated ground and then the barren heath.

"You seem to know the way," remarked Holt, as they moved quickly along in the direction of the prison.

"It is not the first time I have been here," replied Locke. "Colonel Arden is, I have told you, a friend of mine, and I have often been obliged to visit him professionally."

"I see. I have met him once or twice, and I saw him when I first came down here about Dent. By the way, there is one thing I would like to ask you, about a remark of yours last evening. Why did you say to Harker that there was more chance of your finding out down here who that big man is than the inspector has at Scotland Yard?"

"Well, it is really only surmise. It is an indisputable fact that he knows Dent possesses certain information about the hiding-place of your jewels. It is unlikely that Adams, the man who stole them in the first instance, told him anything, and he certainly has not an appearance that would inspire confidence

from Dent. Therefore, he must have accidentally gained his knowledge. Adams told Dent by word of mouth, and then informed your father—"

"I follow now. You think that the big man may have seen the letter to my father?"

"Exactly. But Colonel Arden will help us there, because the only person who could have seen the letter between the time it left Adams' hands and reached your father is some prison official."

They walked on in silence a little way, then Holt said:

"I really cannot see what you propose to do if Dent refuses to assist us."

"I have prepared for that contingency. I think you can safely leave it to me, but you—" Locke broke off suddenly, then went on: "I don't wish to alarm you, but do you know that someone is following us?"

"That's interesting!"

"If I am not mistaken it is your old friends. Evidently they have seen you; it is flattering to think that they still consider us dangerous to their plans. What shall we do—run for it? It is barely half a mile to the governor's house."

"I should think not. Let's give them what they are asking for!"

"Just what I wanted you to say!" exclaimed Locke grimly. "When I give the word, turn round and go for them."

"Right-ho, Mr. Locke! I owe them one or two!"

They walked on for another hundred yards before Locke made any further

move, then, with a shout to Holt, he wheeled round.

The three men were only a few yards behind, and walking on the soft turf that bordered the road.

They were taken completely by surprise. One man was unfortunate because he caught the full weight of a blow on the jaw that had all the force of Mr. Locke's sudden rush behind it. It lifted him clean off his feet and bowled him into the ditch beside which he was walking. The blow may have knocked him out, or it may have removed any inclination for further fight. In any case, he did not reappear, and Locke turned his attention to the big man, who was running towards him, while Holt engaged the third ruffian.

For all his bulk the man moved quickly, and he evidently knew how to use his fists. With the width of the road to work in there was plenty of room, and if there had been more light Locke would have enjoyed the tussle.

As Locke cleared the fallen body of the first man he caught his opponent a right hook above the heart that sent him back with a surprised grunt. But he came on again, feinted cleverly, and shot out his left for Locke's jaw. The detective ducked slightly, thrust under the man's guard, and got home a couple of lightning blows to the body, and another to the face, as he jumped clear. But he was not quite speedy enough, for the other's left came round in time to catch him a stinging cut on the side of the head.

The man expected Locke to retreat, but instead the detective stepped in and planted two steam-hammer blows on the man's jaw that shook him off his balance, and as he staggered back landed another rattling blow over the heart that had all his weight behind it and all the strength of his supple muscles.

The man went down like a log, and Locke turned to see how Holt was faring. The young aristocrat stood near, adjusting his necktie.

"Easy!" he exclaimed. "The fellow could not box for little apples. I put him in the ditch with the other one. What are you going to do with them?"

"Well, I think it best—"

"Look out!"

Locke jumped forward in time to dodge a wild swing from the big man, who had gained his feet while Locke's attention was distracted. Holt leaped forward, but the fellow evaded him and ran off down the road.

"We have got the others, though," said Holt.

Locke pulled out his electric torch, and flashed the light along the ditch. The nettles were crushed down in two places, but there was no sign of the men.

"Where the deuce have they gone?" exclaimed Holt.

"Through the hedge," said Locke, with a laugh, and pointed to where two indistinct figures were scuttling across the field.

"Is it any use chasing them?"

"I think not; we ought to get along. Colonel Arden won't welcome us if we delay our visit much longer."

They resumed their walk, and soon the high wall of the prison loomed up before them. Locke led the way to a tall iron gateway; it gave on to the house and small grounds occupied by the governor. He pulled a handbell, and in a few moments his ring was answered by a stalwart porter.

"I want to see Colonel Arden. I wired him from London that I was coming. My name is Locke."

"Yes, sir. The governor's expecting you."

The conversation had taken place through the bars of the gate, and the man now opened it, relocking it when they had passed through.

They followed him up the short drive, and the colonel himself opened the door.

"Hallo, Locke! I began to think you were never coming! How are you?" asked the governor, as he shook Locke's hand. "What! Mr. Holt as well! I hardly expected to see you."

"We are both on the same errand," said Locke, as they entered the governor's cosy sitting-room.

"Let me see. Ah, of course! That man Dent, I suppose?"

"That's right, colonel. Is it possible for us to have a few words with him?"

"To-night?"

"Yes, if it can be managed."

"Certainly, Locke—certainly! But I doubt if you'll get much out of him."

"I shall have, at least, the satisfaction of offering him fair treatment," put in Holt.

"He isn't the class of man to appreciate it, Mr. Holt. I suppose you would like to see him at once. I'll have him taken to my office, and we can interview him there. He is to be released in the morning. I suppose you know that?"

"Yes," replied Locke. "He goes on licence to London, I think."

"That's right. Excuse me a moment, and I'll ring over."

Colonel Arden went to the wall telephone, and spoke into the mouthpiece for a few seconds.

"Has Dent had any visitors to-day?" Locke asked, as the governor resumed his seat.

"Yes; a rather privileged visitor in a way. He—"

"A big man, brown eyes, heavy jaw, low forehead, and outstanding ears?"

"That's the man, Locke. He is—"

"I can tell you! A one-time official here."

"Yes; a warder until six months back. As Dent will be free to-morrow, and I know Megan, I let him have a few minutes' conversation with him."

"Megan is the man's name?"

"Yes."

"How long has he been here?"

"Twelve or fourteen years, I believe."

"The scoundrel!" exclaimed Holt.

"He isn't a particularly nice man," said the governor, "but I—er—have nothing against him."

"I must ask you to excuse any explanations now," Locke remarked. "We can tell you everything later on. Was Dent in Megan's section?"

"I can't say off-hand."

"Has he done hospital duty, Colonel?"

"I really couldn't say. I only took over here since that time, but I have no doubt he has. I've got records in my office. Well, shall we go over?"

The three walked across the prison grounds to the governor's office, and found Dent already there in charge of two warders.

He was a prematurely-aged man, and he gazed at them askance from beneath lowering eyebrows. He had a sulky, obstinate appearance that did not look very promising to Locke.

"Colonel Arden sent the two warders from the room.

"Now, Dent, these gentlemen have something to say to you. I would advise you to give them your attention, and consider well what they have to offer you."

The convict made no reply, but gazed down at his boots.

"I think you'd better talk to him, Mr. Holt," said the governor.

Dent raised his head at that.

"He don't want to do no talking!" he exclaimed. "I know who he is—"

he's the dead spit of 'is father, the old cove what I saw ten years ago, an' he won't get nothin' out o' me. I ain't stuck in this rat-hole all this time to blab what I know for the sake of bein' asked!"

"Now, Dent," put in the governor, "be reasonable."

"Reas'nable! Reas'nable!"—and a little colour tinged the man's pallid features. "You're too bloomin' late!

When the old man came to me, was he reas'nable? 'E was a Member of Parliament, an' wouldn't take up my case—"

said I was a felon, and 'e wouldn't divert the course of justice. Justice! I've done my time for 'ousebreaking and manslaughter and all the while I'm innocent as a new-born babe!

If he'd got me out I'd 'ave told him what he wanted to know, but 'e wouldn't move a finger! Justice!"

The convict shook with passion, and menaced Holt with clenched fists.

"It's no use you going off like this," said Colonel Arden sharply. "Will you listen—"

"He's ten years too late!" exclaimed Dent.

There was a silence for a few moments, then Locke bent over and whispered:

"I don't think it is any use, Holt."

"If this were not unofficial I'd teach him to shout in my office," said the governor sternly. "Apparently he has made up his mind about this, and I'm afraid you'll get no satisfaction from him. I'd better send him back to his cell."

"One moment," said Locke. "Do you mind if I ask him a few questions?"

"No, Locke—go ahead."

"Do you hope to keep the jewels for yourself?" asked Locke of the convict.

"Never you mind what I 'ope to do!" snarled the man. "It ain't the likes o' you I'll tell!"

"You may tell someone else and get infinitely worse treatment. I know to whom you are going when you leave here."

"You do, do you? Well, you'd better keep your nose out of 'is business or you'll get a bashing! I suppose you're that clever cove, Ferrers Locke? I've 'card about you!"

The man's tone was full of vicious passion, and Locke turned to Colonel Arden.

"I think that is all, Colonel."

The governor called to the warders, and the convict was taken away.

"I think that settles it, Mr. Holt. He will go straight to Megan when he goes out."

"To Megan!" exclaimed the governor.

"Yes; he is mixed up in this. If you could turn up those records you were speaking about, I think you will find that he was on hospital duty ten years ago. Do you happen to remember

the date when your father received that letter, Mr. Holt?"

"Some time in June, I know."

The governor went to one of the shelves along the wall and took down a book marked "Hospital Staff."

He ran through the index and presently turned to a page.

"Yes, Megan was on duty from April to October. He had a poisoned hand, and was put down for light hospital work."

"Sick prisoners are allowed letters, I suppose, colonel?"

"Yes; in those days it was once a month."

"And I believe that the letters which go out are read by some official."

"Yes, they are."

"That clears up the mystery of how he got the information," said Holt.

"H'm! Our next step is fairly plain, then. Colonel, do you think I could put a call through to Baker Street?"

"Certainly, Locke."

Ten minutes later the detective heard his assistant's cheerful voice over the wire.

"Hallo, gov'nor! I was just going to turn in."

"You won't sleep in Baker Street to-night, Drake."

"How's that?"

"I want you to come down here. Did you have any luck at the Yard?" asked Locke, knowing the answer he would receive.

"Gov'nor, I've seen thousands of photographs of the ugliest men in England, but the big fellow isn't among them."

"I know all about him now, my lad; I'll tell you when you come down. Will you get the car out—no, I think you'd better come down by train—you can sleep on the way. There is a train leaving Paddington a little before midnight—catch that. Wear some pretty rough clothes—you will probably be prowling round the East End to-morrow, so you can guess the make-up you'll need. I'll meet you at Kingsville when you arrive. Is it all clear?"

"I'm on my way," said Drake; and Locke heard the receiver bang on the rest.

Locke spent some time gathering information about Megan, finding a great interest in the man's haunts and associates. Then the detective and his companion took their leave of the colonel, and were soon back in the Anglers' Rest.

A little after five the next morning they met Drake's train at Kingsville Junction. The lad was roughly dressed in a worn, ready-made suit; his boots were in bad condition; and he wore no collar, only a dirty neckerchief. He looked a typical London lout, and did not approach Locke on the station, but followed him out into the town, until his master entered a yard belonging to a timber merchant.

Behind a stack of timber, and concealed from prying eyes, Locke explained what had occurred at Portdown Prison, and gave Drake his instructions.

"I want you to hang on to Dent until he meets Megan—that's the big man—and the others. Then let me know at Baker Street. Don't take any risks on the job, lad; and, above all, don't let Megan or his companions see you. Mr. Holt and I had some trouble with them last night, and they might try and get their revenge on you."

In a few words Locke told of the fight in the road.

"How will I know Dent, gov'nor?"

"He is catching a train at eight-thirty. Here is a photograph of him I got from Colonel Arden."



Drake took the little portrait and studied it closely.

"I'll recognise him all right," he said as he handed it back.

"If you hang about near the station barrier you'll see him come up with a man from the prison, who will put him on the train. Mr. Holt and I are going to town right away. I am not sure if Megan is still in Kingsville or not. He most probably went back last night—in fact, I feel pretty certain that he did. Anyway, keep your eyes open while you are here."

"Right-ho, guv'nor!" said Drake, with a cheery smile. "Leave it to me. As soon as I run 'em down I'll let you know. Nothing else, is there?"

"Did you get some sleep on the train?"

"I did. Five hours solid—empty carriage and all."

Locke looked at his watch. "We shall have to get along to the station," he said. "Well, so-long, Drake!"

The lad exchanged grips with Locke, and shook Holt's hand, then sauntered out of the yard.

On the way to the station Holt remarked:

"Do you think it is quite—I mean, he seems so young. I hardly like—"

"My dear Holt, Drake will stick to Dent wherever he goes, and the man won't have the slightest idea of his presence."

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

A Lively Time for Jack Drake!

At eight o'clock Drake went to the station and took his ticket to London, then stood near the main barrier and watched for Dent and the man who was to accompany him from the prison.

He had memorised the convict's features, and had no difficulty in recognising him when he arrived. Dent was dressed in a new suit, and wore a collar and tie. His attire was in sharp contrast to Drake's, though it was obviously cheap and ready-made, and the lad wondered if for once he had chosen his disguise badly.

Dent's companion was in plain clothes, and looked a typical warder. If the lad had any doubts, they were set at rest by the ticket-collector's comment at the barrier.

He casually scanned the paper that the warder handed him, and asked:

"Going on to the platform, Jim? She's due in about ten minutes."

"Yes; must put him on the train," the man replied, as he and Dent passed through.

Drake had his ticket clipped, and following at a distance, stood watching the two as they waited for the London train. Dent gazed about him, and drew big gulps of the fresh morning air. He seemed in a very cheerful mood, and laughed a good deal.

Evidently, after his confinement in prison, he was enjoying the first few hours of freedom with a zest that Drake could hardly appreciate.

The train came in, and Dent shook hands with the warder and entered a carriage. Drake did not want Dent to see him at the junction, because if the man afterwards caught sight of him he might remember his face and draw his own conclusions. Yet the lad wanted to get as near to Dent's compartment as possible.

He doubled round and along another platform, approaching the carriage from the rear. The man was hanging half out of the window, staring up and down. Drake hid behind one of the big posts that supported the station roof



In a moment the three roughs were engaged in a fierce fight with Locke and his companion. One man caught a terrific blow on the jaw from the detective that sent him staggering into the ditch.

until the guard blew his whistle and waved his flag.

The commotion caused by the engine in starting up attracted Dent's attention, and, seizing his opportunity, Drake ran across the platform and slipped into the next compartment.

The run occupied a little over six hours, and when the train arrived at the terminus, Dent went straight to a restaurant. Drake was feeling a little hungry himself, but the place which the ex-convict entered was a little too stylish for the lad to enter. He was obliged to wait over an hour until Dent reappeared, all the time a prey to misgivings lest the man should leave by some other exit.

The restaurant was almost opposite the entrance to the terminus. At the top of the slope was gathered a number of newsboys and bookmakers' touts. Drake bought a paper and spent the time pretending to study the betting news, or talking to some of the men. He thus made himself inconspicuous, and was able to watch the shop in comfort.

When Dent reappeared, he boarded an omnibus and mounted to the top. Drake went inside and took a ticket for the whole journey. The man alighted near Tottenham Court Road, and turned down a narrow side street. Drake, shadowing him skilfully, soon found that the ex-convict was leading him through the back streets and alleyways of Soho.

There were so many byways that Dent could take that Drake had to be continually on the alert. It was not so much a question of escaping observation as of making certain that Dent did not disappear unnoticed down some little alley.

The lad stuck to him well, and presently they emerged into the Piccadilly Circus end of Shaftesbury Avenue.

Drake successfully surmounted the comparatively easy obstacle of another

omnibus. During the ride he wondered just how much of Dent's turnings and twistings in Soho had been intentional, and came to the conclusion that Dent feared he would be followed, but was not certain that anyone was on his track.

The omnibus sped eastward, and Dent clambered down the steps from above when they were a little way along the Strand. The ex-convict left the congested highway, and, to Drake's disgust, entered the Adelphi Arches.

Drake let him get a little way down the first of these dark, vaulted, subterranean ways, and then followed.

The cobbled road dipped down, and then bent to the right. The corner was inadequately lit by a flickering lamp, casting a yellow glow that seemed only to accentuate the shadows in the arch walls.

The lad edged cautiously round the corner, and, as he half expected, saw no sign of the other. Dent had evidently hidden in one of the numerous cellar doorways, and was watching for any signs of pursuit.

An errand-boy, whistling shrilly, came down the dark passage, his heavy boots echoing noisily as he strolled along. He did not notice Drake, and the youngster watched him until his whistle died away as he turned into the sunlight at the other end.

When the boy had gone a shadow detached itself from the wall. It was Dent, apparently satisfied that no one was following him, and he kept to the middle of the cobbled way. Not until he was gone into the open again did Drake move; then he ran down after Dent, and was in time to see the man turn up the next archway.

It was clear to Drake that the ex-convict was following some line of action that he had previously thought out. The idea and his preparedness

for pursuit were good, but it could have been better executed.

It would have been a far more certain method of finding out if he were being followed if he had waited in the open near the end of the arches, where he would have been out of sight of anyone on the underground roadway, and a follower would then be obliged to reveal himself before he discovered his quarry's presence.

Dent worked his way back to the Strand again, but this time he did not take any precautions, and the young detective's task was comparatively easy. The man now appeared to be in no hurry, for he began to walk northwards, ignoring omnibuses and other vehicles.

Soon they were treading the streets of North London. It was evident that Dent enjoyed the luxury of liquid refreshment, for he made a stop at almost every public-house to which they came. His stay at each was of not less than fifteen minutes' duration, so that the time soon passed, and Drake began to wonder if he were going to wander about London on the man's trail for ever.

Eventually Dent, now a little thoughtful in his progress, gave up calling at the public-houses, and began to make his way along side streets. Arriving at a street running level with the canal, he looked about him as though in search of some particular building.

The street was flanked by dirty little houses on the one side and big, apparently disused and tumbled-down buildings on the other. Dent suddenly turned into the doorway of one of the most dilapidated, and Drake saw that it was a one-time warehouse, and that the ground floor at the front had been turned into a low-class coffee-shop.

He peered through the steamy windows, and saw that Megan and the other two were there. They greeted Dent effusively, then all four went into a room at the back.

It was impossible for Drake to enter the shop, owing to the risk of chance recognition; but it was necessary that in some way he should learn the men's plans. Looking about him, he found that the old warehouse was surrounded by a yard. This he promptly entered by way of the broken-down gates.

There seemed to be no windows on his side to the room in which the four men were seated, and he began to prospect round for some way of getting into the building. He saw that a window, some fifteen feet above his head, had neither glass nor frame, and that a rusty rain-water pipe ran up alongside it.

He tested the pipe; it was very shaky, and little scales of rust rattled down inside as he shook it. It appeared too rickety to bear his weight, and he went the whole length of the building in an endeavour to find something more promising. He was unsuccessful, and since the pipe offered the only available means of entry, determined to try his luck.

By getting some purchase on the wall and finding an occasional foothold in a broken brick, he gradually worked his way upwards. It was a very ticklish business, but finally he got a hold on the sill of the big window.

He pulled himself up, and, to get a better grip pressed one foot against the rainwater pipe. Already loose, the thrust was too much for the worn bracket, which broke away, and a big section went clattering to the paved yard below.

Drake clambered through the window

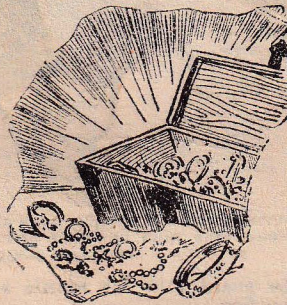
in desperate haste, and, dropping to the floor, bent down. It seemed to him that the whole neighbourhood was roused, but soon the disturbance died away and he felt free to look about him.

Pulling out his electric torch, he carefully flashed it on the floor. Many of the floorboards were missing, showing the big supporting joists, and at the end he saw a huge trapdoor or opening in the floor, through which the light streamed from below.

He picked his way across the rotten flooring, then, replacing the torch in his pocket, he lay down full length and peered over the edge.

Megan, Dent, and the two other men were seated about a small table directly beneath the hole, and Drake noticed that only a couple of candles standing on the table lit up the room.

The men were conversing earnestly, heads bent together, but their talk was couched in such low tones that Drake could not catch a word. For a few moments he was content to survey them and to watch their gestures. Megan appeared to be persuading Dent to some course that the ex-convict seemed reluctant to adopt.



Drake worked a little more forward until his head and shoulders were over the gap, and he was able to distinguish a word or two here and there.

It was tantalising to watch them conferring and yet not to be able to follow their conversation. Drake felt that everything depended upon him; undoubtedly Dent must soon reveal his secret, and Megan was probably trying to make him tell.

Some of the big man's words floated up to the lad:

"Can't get 'em yerself—after all this time—we'll play the game!"

Presently Dent appeared to agree to something, and their heads came ever closer together, and only the ex-convict spoke.

Drake strained every nerve to catch what the man was saying, but Dent's voice was so low that only a hoarse murmur reached the lad's ears.

He worked himself still more forward, and the men below must have seen him had they not been so engrossed. For fully five minutes the ex-convict talked, then Drake noticed that they became ever more attentive, and he guessed that the crucial moment, when the secret of the hiding-place of the jewels would be divulged, was at hand.

He rose to his knees, and, retaining his balance by a hand on the edge of the opening, bent downwards as far as he could. It was an awkward moment, and every muscle in his body was strained. But he could hear.

"Told me they were down there in the Saxon's Grave," said Dent's voice.

"Whereabouts?" asked Megan, rather hoarsely.

"Entrance at the back, and 'e said the entrance was behind a big elder bush, and—"

At that moment Drake felt himself overbalancing; he tried to pull himself back, but the rotten wood broke under his hand and he plunged downwards.

He fell clean on to the table, and it splintered under his weight. The candles were scattered and the room plunged into darkness.

Drake was badly shaken, but he found his feet, and, feeling grappling hands, struck out vigorously.

There was a terrific uproar all about him.

"Hold him!" shouted Megan. "Get a light somebody!"

A match was struck, and the weak light showed Drake in the middle of the room grappling with Dent and another of the men. He broke free and made for the door, but was tripped and fell just as the match burnt out.

He struggled up, but by that time someone had found a candle and lit it. With the light to guide him, Megan made a wild rush; but Drake dodged his swinging fists and crashed his head into the pit of the man's stomach. The fellow doubled up like a jack-knife, and grunted a curse; then Drake, putting all his strength into it, tumbled one of the other men over with a weighty blow on the side of the head, and once again broke away.

A leg of the broken table lay near him; he picked it up, and, swinging it above his head, dashed at them.

The table-leg was a fearsome weapon, and involuntarily they gave before him, leaving the way open to the door. Drake took the chance that was offered, and rushed through, expecting to find himself in the coffee-shop. In this he was mistaken, for the shop led to another broad room, and the shop was on the far side; a burly fellow stood there with outstretched arms awaiting him.

The lad glimpsed a passage on his right, and made for it. It was narrow and dark, and, following its short length, Drake soon found himself in the cavernous interior of the main building.

The floor was covered with rubble and bags of cement. Over these he stumbled, often falling headlong, with no light to guide him, and the cries of his pursuers to urge him on. He lost his weapon, and bruised himself in his continual falls, but hardly felt the pain. His one thought was to get out of the place and carry what little news he had gained to Ferrers Locke.

Presently Drake was brought up by violent contact with a wall. He turned to look behind him, and saw, across the lumbered floor, the flickering light of a candle.

Presently others were lit, and the four men came towards him in a line, turning over bags, and peering behind the bigger stacks of wood and rubbish. Evidently they had temporarily lost him.

Cautiously he edged along the wall, and, after moving some little distance, found a rusty iron ladder running upwards. His heart leapt at the discovery, and he hurriedly clambered up it. He could not see where it led, but guessed that it gave on to the floor from which he had fallen. He soon found that his presumption was correct, and, climbing through a small opening, stood upright. Away on the left he could see the big window through which he had gained entrance through the warehouse.

The flooring between him and his only means of egress had all been ripped up, leaving only the big joists, between which he could see the men searching for him below. To escape he would be obliged to step from one big beam to

the next. It was only a distance of a couple of feet, but not easy to gauge in the darkness, for he dared not use his torch as it would have betrayed his whereabouts to the men.

He began to walk forward, stepping from beam to beam, until he came to a spot immediately above his pursuers.

He stopped, afraid that the noise of his boots on the joists might attract their attention. When they had passed on he paced forward again.

Until that time he had proceeded with great caution, feeling with his toe for the next beam before he stepped. But, watching the men below, he became, for the moment, oblivious of his awkward position, and missed his footing.

He slipped between two of the joists, clutching wildly to save himself falling completely through. He stopped, with his body half above the floor and his

The lad had still some distance to go, and his whole body thrilled with impatience at his slow progress. He suddenly bethought himself of his torch, and the need for concealment now being gone he drew it out.

He was near the window, with perhaps a dozen joists still to traverse, when he heard a ladder being reared against the big opening, through which he had watched the men. The floor on that side was in much better condition. If a man reached the top of the ladder before Drake got to the window he

Two others were on him immediately, and he was flung to the rotten floor.

"Get a rope, one of you!" Megan ordered, and a few minutes later Drake was trussed hands and feet.

"I've never seen such a young demon!" Dent exclaimed. "No wonder that rampipe fell down! He's strong as a lion!"

"We'll give 'im a chance to get a bit weaker!" said Megan grimly. "We'll leave 'im here until we come back."

Drake was roughly gagged with a dirty rag and a piece of tape passed



Peering round the corner Jack Drake watched the ex-convict slouch past, his collar turned well up, and his cap pulled down.

legs dangling through to the hall below.

Megan heard the sound of his scuffling and caught sight of his boots as Drake pulled himself up.

"There 'e is!" cried the big man.

"Up there, on the next floor!"

The swift rush of footsteps reached Drake's ears as he hauled himself on to the beam again. Despite the need for haste, he could not hurry, but was obliged to feel for each joist before he moved, to prevent a repetition of his accident.

He could not give any attention to the movements of the men, and could only guess by the sounds he heard that they had returned to the room in which he first saw them. Apparently they knew he was making for the window, and it developed into a race as to who should get there first.

could catch the lad before he dropped over the sill.

Drake pressed forward, and as he leaped from the last joist Megan's head appeared at the top of the ladder.

He bellowed with rage as he sprang clear to the floor and bounded forward. He came in great leaps, jumping recklessly over the wide gaps, as Drake slipped one foot over the sill.

He got the other foot over, and glanced below, to judge the distance of the drop, and Megan's face appeared at the window opening as Drake lowered himself. The big fellow's great hand shot out, and grabbed him by the collar. Swinging the plucky lad clear of the sill, Megan hauled him in again.

"I got 'im! Give us a hand!" he cried; for Drake was struggling gamely but futilely in the man's clutch.

round and tied at the back of his head. Then they flung him on to a pile of sacks and cloth in one corner.

"You can stew there for a bit!" said Megan, prodding him with his foot. "You've been too clever, my boy! You stop there a day or two and think about it!"

All four men then returned down the ladder, and after conversing for a little while one of the men came up to make sure that Drake was securely bound. He tried all the knots and turns in the rope; then, with a parting kick and a malicious grin, he rejoined his companions.

Shortly afterwards the light was extinguished, and Drake heard the bang of the door as they left.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Double Crossed

MEGAN, Dent, and the other two men, whose names were Peel and Ward, were seated in a third-class smoker that rocked steadily towards the East Coast. Their tickets were taken to Culford, and as they were the only occupants of the compartment they had an opportunity to further discuss their plans.

"The only thing that worries me," remarked Dent, "is 'ow we're goin' to turn the stuff into money."

"You leave that to me," said Megan. "I can fix that up all right. The finding of it is the only thing you need worry about. Are you sure you got it right?"

"Yes," replied Dent, in a decided manner that left no room for doubt. "Adams told me it time and again, to make sure I didn't forget. Right at the end, it is. There's an 'cart with an arrer through it on the wall close by. 'Ere you"—he turned to Peel—"ave you got that trowel?"

"I've got it," said Megan, producing a small, wooden-handled tool from his pocket.

"Oh, good!"

"I suppose that boy'll be all right?" observed Ward nervously, after a little silence.

He was a thin-featured man, who spoke in a querulous voice, and perpetually wore a troubled air.

"Yes, o' course he will!" Megan growled, with a gesture of annoyance. "You're too soft-hearted. 'E'll be all right. Bit o' luck we saw 'im, else 'e'd a been straight off to that Ferrers Locke, and the fat would 'ave been in the fire!"

"I don't know 'ow 'e come to be there," said Dent plaintively.

"I suppose 'e must 'ave seen you."

"Well, 'e couldn't 'ave followed me. I saw to that," said Dent, with decision. "Besides, 'e doesn't know me."

The train in which these men were travelling had left London an hour before midnight, and was the last to Culford that night. It reached the country town about two o'clock in the morning.

The four men alighted and walked out of the station. The cab-rank was empty, save for one vehicle, an old open landau, with a horse dozing in the shafts and the driver half-asleep in the cab.

Megan approached the driver and asked:

"Will you drive me and my pals out to a village called Saxon?"

"'Ow many be there—fower?"

"Yes, four. 'Ere's a pound to take us out, an' I'll give you another to bring us back."

The driver got out and took the note that Megan offered.

"All right, jump in!" he said, gathering up the reins and climbing stiffly to his seat.

The slow old horse took over half an hour to reach Saxon Village. When they arrived, Megan insisted on the man driving for another half a mile, which brought them to Culford Heath.

"Shan't be more than three-quarters of an hour," the man remarked to the driver as they left the cab.

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"Straight on, it is," said Dent, as the four struck off across the heath, stumbling awkwardly over the rough ground. "See them trees?" And he pointed to where a clump showed distinctly against the night sky. "That's the top end o' the grave. The place is under there in the cliff."

All four cursed a good deal as they made their way over the uneven ground, and occasionally one or another of them measured his length in the heather as he tripped over some rut, or caught his foot in one of the holes with which the heath was pitted.

When they reached the clump of trees they discovered that they stood on the top end of a huge, elongated depression. On one side it gradually rose to the level of the heath again, and on the other fell sheer for some fifty feet.

They took the easiest method of descent, and soon all four were standing in the pitch darkness at the bottom of the hollow and close to the cliff.

"It'll want some finding in the dark," grumbled Megan.

"No, it won't. There's only one elder bush," said Dent excitedly. "Switch on that flashlamp, and we'll work along the cliff until we come to it."

One of the men produced the lamp, and soon its white rays were flashing along the cliff foot as they moved. Presently they showed the yellowish-white blossom of an ancient elder-bush.

"That's it!" exclaimed Dent. "Now, right behind it!"

All four scrambled excitedly up to the space between the bush and the cliff, beating down the nettles in their haste, and tripping over the debris that had fallen from the soft cliff-face.



For some time they searched, but could find nothing.

"You've been sold!" exclaimed Megan angrily.

"No, I ain't. Look there! See that 'ole?" cried Dent, pointing with a shaky hand to a small hole in the cliff-foot.

"A bloomin' rabbit could 'ardly get through that!" cried Peel, in disgust and disappointment.

"It's been choked up by stuff fallin' down," said Dent. "Gimme that trowel. I'll soon make it big enough to drive a coach through!"

He snatched the tool from Megan, and began to dig frantically about the sides of the hole. He fairly made the lumps of chalk fly, so eagerly did he work, and soon the hole was large enough to admit a man.

"Where's that lamp?" he demanded, handing the trowel to Megan; and, taking the light, he crawled through the hole.

"Come on!" he called, his voice sounding hollowly.

And one by one they followed him. They found themselves in a long, natural cave, with a vaulted roof that lowered in two places and divided the cave into three.

Dent flashed the lamp round, and it glistened on the damp wall. Apparently the place had been well known at some time, for there were names and inscriptions cut everywhere, and dates that went back over three hundred years.

Dent cautiously led the way into the cave. It was unnaturally silent and exceedingly cold. The sound echoed as their booted feet struck the rough floor, and all four cast glances over their shoulders at dark corners to which the light from the lamp did not reach, and sank their voices to hushed whispers.

The chill atmosphere of the cave damped their elation, acting markedly upon Ward.

"The place feels full of dead men!" he remarked, in an awed voice.

"Shut up!" said Peel shakily. "It's all right; there's nobody 'ere."



"There's the sign!" shouted the leading man as he pointed to the old markings on the wall of the cave. "That's where the treasure will be buried!"

"Blowed if I like it!" replied Ward. "I wish we was out of it!"

Dent was the only one who did not seem much affected, and they were obliged to follow him closely, or he would have left them behind in darkness as he pressed eagerly forward with the lamp.

The other two sections of the cave were much the same as the first, and the wall at the end was cut and scored with markings.

"Ere we are! We'll soon 'ave 'em now!" the ex-convict exclaimed.

And all four began to search the face of the wall for the heart and arrow. Their spirits rose again when Megan discovered it.

"That's it," said Dent. "Right under that!"

Megan immediately pulled the trowel from his pocket, and began to dig furiously, while the others watched him intently.

It was not long before the point of the tool struck something hard. Megan scraped the earth away to see what it was, and the light from the flashlamp showed bright streaks where the trowel had scratched.

"A tin box!" he exclaimed. "That's right. Adams said it was. Dig it up, Megan—dig it up!"

The big fellow dug rapidly, and, getting the tip of the tool under one edge of the box, heaved it up.

It was not very large, and the lid was quickly forced up. Megan threw the trowel aside and tipped the contents of the box out on to the damp floor of the cave.

The light shone on bracelets and rings, necklaces and brooches, pendants and chains. The gold was tarnished, but the bright light caught the facets of

diamonds and sapphires, rubies and emeralds, opals and garnets, that reflected the white light in a myriad of little points of coloured fire.

There was more wealth lying on the floor of the little cave than the men had ever before seen. They gasped with excitement, and each man grabbed something from the pile.

A necklace of beautiful pearls dangled from Dent's grimy hands, their soft sheen in strange contrast to his rough skin. Peel wound a fine gold chain of delicate workmanship round his rough fingers, and Ward held two slim bracelets so that the diamonds with which they were set flashed fire.

Megan found a thick gold band that just fitted over three of his fingers as he held it up for inspection. It was almost oval in shape, and one side was covered with a spidery inscription. On the other, rubies and sapphires mingled red and blue spears of light.

"What's this?" he asked. "Ladies' knuckle-duster," suggested Peel.

"It's worth a bit, anyway," commented Megan. "Well we can look at this lot later on."

He replaced the band on the pile, and, feeling in his pocket, drew out a cloth bag. Piece by piece he picked up the jewellery and dropped it in, then rose to his feet.

"Come on—we'd better get away!" He lifted the lamp from where it lay on the ground and handed it to the ex-convict. "You go first, Dent, and we'll follow."

Dent took the lamp in obedience to the big man's command and turned to lead the way. Megan motioned the others to stand clear, and they drew away. Ward licked his twitching lips,

and made as if to speak; but Peel nudged him warningly, and he remained silent.

"Comin'?" asked Dent, glancing over his shoulder.

"Yes, go on," said Megan, moving to follow him.

As he spoke he changed the bag containing the jewels from his right to his left hand; then, dragging a weighty life-preserver from his back pocket, he dealt the ex-convict a heavy blow on the back of the head.

Ward gave an exclamation of terror as Dent sank to the ground with a low groan. The flashlamp clattered from his nerveless hand and went out.

"Find the lamp," said Megan, in a tense voice. "I believe I've done 'im in!"

Peel found it, and all three bent about the prostrate man as Megan anxiously examined him. His

hands shook a little as he lifted Dent's head and inspected the wound from which the blood trickled in a thin stream. He thrust his hand under the man's coat and felt his heartbeats, then rose to his knees with a sigh of relief.

"Ee's all right! Phew! It gave me a turn!" "Goin' to leave 'im 'ere?" asked Ward.

"Course we are!" exclaimed Megan, turning on him fiercely. "What else do you think we're goin' to do?"

"But—but he might die!" "Won't be our fault, will it?" demanded the big man. "If you say much more about it I'll put you out 'n' all!"

Apparently Ward had nothing more to say, and soon they had left the cave and were striding over the heath.

Megan had charge of the jewels, and he stuffed them into a capacious pocket of his jacket.

"Now, look 'ere," he said, as they moved along, "we'll 'ave to settle with that cabby. It won't do for 'im to know exactly where we go, in case anybody gets on our track."

"You ain't goin' to lay 'im out, too?" asked Ward nervously.

"Shut up, for 'eaven's sake!" Megan explained angrily. "We only want to shove 'im in the ditch an' pinch 'is cab."

"Oh, all right!" said Ward, in a relieved tone.

"You two push 'im in the ditch and I'll 'op up in 'is seat. Then you jump in, and I'll drive you off."

Peel and Ward agreed to this, and presently they came up to the cab.

The driver took the nosebag off the horse and adjusted the bit as they drew near.

"Thought you were never comin'!" he said. "Only three of you? Where be t'other?"

"Oh," said Megan, getting between him and the cab, "he's over there. Can't you see 'im comin'?"

As he spoke he edged the driver towards the ditch.

"No, I can't. 'Ere, what be you a-doin'?" he exclaimed, as the big man gave him a sudden push that sent him staggering into the arms of Peel and Ward, who seized him on either side.

The old man had but little chance against them, but he resisted violently when they attempted to drag him towards the ditch. As they struggled Megan grabbed the reins and sprang for the driver's seat, giving the horse a sharp cut with the whip that sent the surprised animal forward with a jerk.

The old man almost broke away as he saw their intentions, but they overpowered him.

"Now, Ward!" cried Peel; and, with a united effort they swung the old cabman clear of the ground and flung him into the ditch.

Both turned, to see the landau already moving off and Megan standing on the box lashing the horse again and again until it thundered down the road in a clumsy gallop.

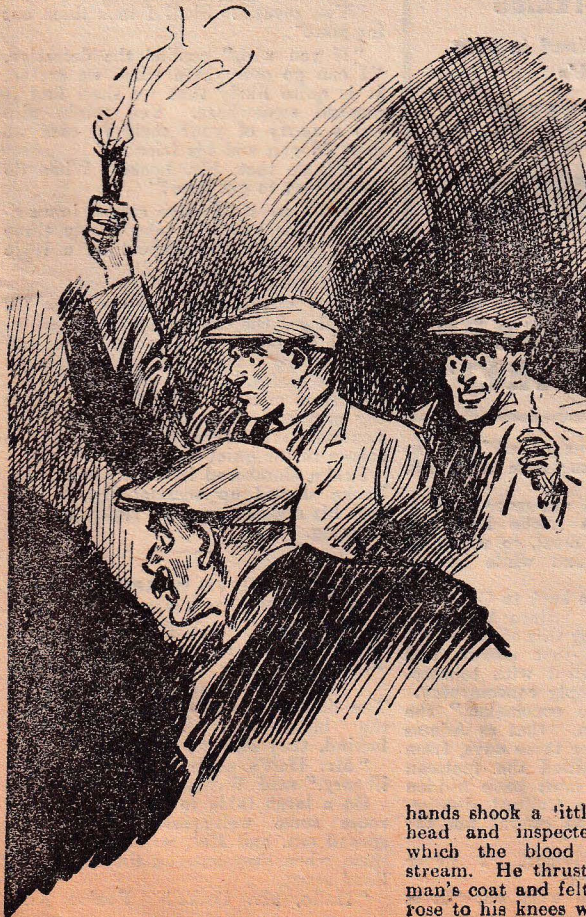
"Hi!" shouted Ward. "Hi! What's the game?"

Peel did not waste breath but sprang for the landau. He found a grip and half-pulled himself up. But Megan saw him and leaning back, lashed at his face. He caught him fairly, half-blinding the man so that he let go his hold and fell to the road.

Ward ran up and lifted the fallen man, who, pressing his hand to his streaming eyes, exclaimed:

"Ee's done us, Ward! 'Ee's got away with 'em!"

They watched the cab receding into the darkness then began impotently to run after it.



THE FOURTH CHAPTER. On The Trail!

DRAKE when he heard the men leave guessed that they were off to get the jewels, and he thought miserably of how he had failed his master.

There seemed to him no way of getting free or of attracting attention. It was hopeless to attempt to roll to the window because of the state of the flooring, and he wriggled in his bonds to try and find some part that would give.

The scoundrels had done their work only too well, and soon he gave up the attempt in despair. He could hear rats scuttling about, but no sound reached him from the coffee-shop at the front of the building.

Wriggling on the sacks, he discovered that something hard and knobly lay under them. He could not find out what it was, and finally decided that it was most probably lumps of wood or bricks.

He thought of Ferrers Locke in Baker Street, and wondered what he would say when he learned that he had failed in his mission. The lad felt certain that he had failed because the only clue he had gained were the words: "Saxon's Grave," which seemed to convey little; and, in any case, the thieves were gone, and had all but gained possession of the jewels. He did not attribute his plight to bad luck or over-eagerness, but called it carelessness, and condemned himself for it.

How long he lay there with that choking gag in his mouth he could only guess, but after what seemed an age he caught the sound of a cautiously struck match.

A light appeared in the room below the opening in the floor, and Drake saw the ladder reared up at the side. Someone seemed to be mounting it; and soon a boy clambered up, carrying a lighted candle in one hand.

Drake's heart leapt at the welcome sight; but from the boy's manner it was evident that he was unaware of the young detective's presence.

The boy gazed about him half fearfully and moved cautiously in the direction of the corner where Drake lay. But he kicked Drake's feet before he saw him, and almost dropped the light in his astonishment.

Drake mouthed at the gag, pushing it in and out with his tongue. The boy saw what he wanted, and bent down and untied the tape.

"That's better!" exclaimed Drake hoarsely, when he had ejected the filthy cloth. "Now untie some of these ropes, will you?"

"Who did it?" asked the boy, as he bent down and began to pick at the knot.

"Never mind that," replied Drake. "But I'll make him sorry for it before I'm done. Can't you undo them any faster than that? There's a jack-knife in my pocket on the right; try to get it out. You can keep it if you cut these ropes," he added slyly.

After a little manoeuvring the boy managed to get the knife and hacked at the ropes.

"Did you know I was here?" Drake asked.

"No," replied the boy. "You're lying on my milk."

"Lying on what?"

"On my milk. I pinched it from old Corbin," the boy added candidly, "and I came up to get it."

"Lucky thing for me you did," said Drake, as he sat up and moved his cramped limbs. "Here, do you want half-a-crown?" The boy's eyes rounded.

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in the candle-light as Drake handed him the coin. "Now I must get along."

Drake eased himself to his feet and worked arms and legs to get the blood circulating again. He found that his electric torch was still in his pocket, and by its light he picked his way to the window.

The boy who had released him seemed more interested in the welfare of his stolen milk than in Drake's departure; and as the young detective climbed over the window-sill he saw the boy turning over the sacks in the corner.

The rainwater-pipe being now broken, Drake had to drop some fifteen feet to the ground. It was a long drop, and a bad landing meant, at least, a twisted ankle. But Drake did not hesitate, he let himself go and, alighting on his toes, knees well apart, sprawled on the ground, shaken but unhurt.

Less than half an hour later he was in the consulting-room at Baker Street. "Hallo, young 'un!" greeted Locke, jumping up from his chair and laying aside his pipe. "You look as though you have been in the wars. Are you hurt?"

"A few bruises, but nothing much," replied his assistant. "I've spent the evening scrapping with Megan's gang."

And he gave a concise account of his experiences.

"H'm!" grunted Locke, when the lad had finished. "Saxon's Grave—eh?"

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DETECTIVE- THRILLER

entitled:

"The Strange Case of the VANISHED MILLIONAIRE!"

Well, you go and change while I see to some grub for you; then we'll talk it over."

By the time Drake was more respectably attired Ferrers Locke had prepared the lad a hot meal, to which he did ample justice, and while he ate Locke talked.

"Mr. Holt has gone back to Culford—went this morning. Since he's been gone I've been turning this affair over."

Drake knew what that meant, and visioned the room filled with tobacco-smoke and Locke deeply concentrated.

"I've come to the conclusion," the criminologist went on, "that as Adams was only at liberty for three days, from the time that he killed the footman until his arrest, he must have hidden the heirlooms in the Culford district, particularly as he was caught not far away."

"That's right, guv'nor. I never thought of that before."

"Therefore," Locke went on, "it is

a natural conclusion that Megan and his friends have gone to Culford. If I am not at fault, the last train leaves at eleven o'clock." He glanced at his watch and added: "We shall just miss that."

"There's always the car," Drake reminded him.

"Precisely, young 'un! And when you have finished eating we will drive up there—that is if you are not too tired."

"Not a bit, guv'nor. Anyway, you can drive, and I'll sleep in the back."

"Right! Well, having narrowed our field of inquiry to the Culford district, it seems to me that you have brought the missing link. In short, I have little doubt that the Holt jewels are hidden in some place called Saxon's Grave, and that this place is near Culford. Therefore, Drake, when we find where the Saxon's Grave is we shall find the jewels—if Megan hasn't got there before us."

"That looks most likely," remarked Drake.

"In which case, we shall have to find the man—and that will be easier than finding the hiding-place of the jewels. Well, are you within sight of the end of that huge meal?"

"Bout three minutes, guv'nor."

"All right, but don't hurry. I think I'll put a trunk call through to Mr. Holt and prepare him for our coming."

A few moments later Ferrers Locke was speaking to Evering Holt.

He explained what had happened to Drake, and something of his theory.

"You say you have never heard of this place, Saxon's Grave?"

"No," came the reply.

"Well, very possibly it is an obsolete name. Have you any old maps of your district, Mr. Holt?"

"Yes, several. Shall I look them out for you?"

"If you will," replied the detective. "I can go over them when we arrive. It is quite likely that we shall find it marked somewhere. You might also get a party of your men, in case we meet Megan and his friends."

"I'll do that, Mr. Locke. When do you expect to get here?"

"Well, we shall leave almost immediately. The run will take barely three hours, so you may expect us a little after two o'clock."

Then Locke rang off.

"That settles that, Drake. Now I'll go and get the car round. I have borrowed a bloodhound also, from the police. We'll take him with us, as he may be useful."

Fifteen minutes later the detective's big grey car was nosing its way out of London, and soon was waking the echoes in the quiet Essex lanes.

Drake slumbered in the tonneau, and Locke slowed up occasionally, to see that his assistant was all right and still sleeping.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Run to Earth!

EVERING HOLT'S valet, Webb, opened the massive door of Holt Grange as Ferrers Locke's big car rolled up the broad drive. The detective roused Drake, and with the bloodhound following docilely behind, they entered the house.

"Mr. Holt's waiting for you in the library," said Webb. "This way, sir."

On a large table in the centre of the room some well-creased maps were spread out, and Holt was bending over them when they entered the big, book-lined room.

"Hallo, Mr. Locke! You've some

news for me?" said the young aristocrat, striding forward to greet them.

"Yes," replied Locke; "I think I have. But it may be bad news. It is—"

"Guv'nor," Drake broke in, "I'm going to sheer off and get a wash to wake myself up, if Mr. Holt doesn't mind."

"Not at all," replied Holt, walking over to the mantelshelf and pressing the bell-push. "You'll meet Webb outside. If you go into the hall he will give you anything you require."

When Drake had gone the dog made himself comfortable on the big fur rug in front of the empty hearth, and the detective told more fully how Drake had fared during the day.

"Now, Mr. Holt, do you know of a place called Saxon's Grave?"

"Never heard of it," was the reply. "But there is a village across the heath called Saxon."

"Ah, that gives some indication that we are on the right track!" explained Locke. "My idea in asking you to look out these maps is, as I told you over the phone, that I consider Saxon's Grave may be an obsolete name for some place hereabout. Remember, it was thirty years ago when Adams stole the jewels, and names alter, or are forgotten. If Adams hid successfully for three days while the countryside was being scoured for him, he must have had a good retreat. I suggest one that was little known, and more or less inaccessible."

"These maps that I have are many years old," remarked Holt. "It is possible that the place is marked on one of them."

"We'll go over them," said Locke, moving to the table.

Drake entered at that moment, all the sleepiness washed from his eyes, and his alert young face as fresh and bright as ever; a scratch across his left cheek and a purpling bruise on his forehead were the only apparent signs of his strenuous day.

"That's better, young 'un!" observed the detective. "Feel all right now?"

"A treat, guv'nor! Anything I can do?"

"Yes. We are going to look over these maps for the name that you brought—'Saxon's Grave.' You might help."

The maps were of various sections of the district, and the one that Drake took showed the north end of Culford Heath.

"There's a place here called Saxon," he said, after a few moments' search.

"Yes, we know all about that," replied Locke, coming over to him and looking at the collection of dots that represented the village. "But what's this oblong here? The Hollow? That looks uncommonly like a huge grave, doesn't it? Near the village, too," the detective mused. "Is there any date on the map?"

"Yes—nineteen hundred," observed the lad.

"Have you any older map of this part, Mr. Holt?"

The young man rummaged among the papers on the table, and produced a sheet that was yellowed with age. Locke took it and spread it out; it was a map that had been drawn by hand, and not too carefully; but it was very detailed.

"Hallo! I see this oblong is called 'Saxon's Hollow' on this map. That must be an old name. Ah, there we are!" And Locke pointed to a pair of brackets in which was written



Half-way to the village, the detective and his companions sighted their quarry. "After them!" cried Locke, and he led the party after the running men.

"Saxon's Grave," and then to an elongated blob near which were the words, "The Cave of Grave." "Ever heard of a cave in the Hollow, near Saxon Village, Mr. Holt?" asked Locke.

"No, I never have," replied Holt, moving round the table.

"H'm! Well, there is one marked on this map." Locke straightened up and rubbed his chin. "It's clear enough. The place now called the Hollow was once known as Saxon's Grave, and the cave in it was called the Grave. A little-known cave is a very likely place for a hunted man to hide in, I should say."

"By Jove, you've hit it!" exclaimed Holt.

"Dent spoke of an entrance by a big elder-bush," put in Drake.

"Yes," said Locke, nodding. "I don't think there is much doubt about it. Well, we have no time to lose; we had better get off there at once." The detective glanced at his watch. "Half-past three! If they caught that train which Drake and I missed they have had time to get there and away again."

"They may have been delayed!" exclaimed Holt, moving to the door. "Let's get along at once."

"Wait a moment." And Locke held up a restraining hand. "Did you get the assistance that I suggested?"

"Yes; I have Webb, the gardeners, and two chauffeurs waiting with a car now," replied Holt. "That's seven, and we make it up to ten. I'll rouse them up." And he almost ran from the room.

Barely five minutes later Ferrers Locke's big car flashed up the drive and turned towards the heath. It was closely followed by one of Holt's cars, which was packed with men of his household and the bloodhound.

At the edge of the heath the cars stopped and all alighted. Locke and Holt took the lead, and Drake followed immediately behind, leading the bloodhound on the leash; Locke, realising

that this was one of the occasions on which he might be useful, had insisted on the bloodhound accompanying them.

The party struck across the heath straight for the village of Saxon, taking a course that would bring them to the Hollow. The torches that Locke and Drake used enabled them to make good headway, so that they were soon well ahead of the rest of the men.

Reaching the hollow on the side that gradually led to its depth, they plunged down, and soon the electric torches were picking out the rubble along the cliff walk.

"The north end, I think," murmured Locke. "I'll get a little in front if you don't mind." And Holt fell back alongside Drake.

The detective's keen eyes soon found places where boots had scraped across the small boulders of chalk, showing long white scratches; the progress of the people before him was clearly to be seen. He soon reached the big elder-bush that Drake had heard mentioned, and very quickly discovered the enlarged entrance.

"Someone has been here," he called to the two behind him. "I am afraid we are too late. Drake. Go back and tell the men not to come any closer—not within fifty yards. I'll hold the bloodhound." And he took the leash from the lad's hand.

Drake ran back, and as he moved he understood the reason for the order. Locke expected that, if the men had forestalled him the dog might be able to get on their track, and he did not want the men from the Grange to confuse the scent. He stopped the men a good distance away, and then returned to the cave mouth.

Withdrawing his automatic and holding it gripped in his hand, Locke crawled in, and waited for them to join him inside. The dog went rather unwillingly, as if he did not like subterranean places.

They walked carefully along the cave, THE POPULAR.—No. 571.

and in the third chamber found Dent prostrate beside the freshly-dug hole.

"The scoundrels!" exclaimed Locke, restoring his pistol to his pocket and lifting the wounded man's head. "Got his secret from him, and then robbed him of his share of the jewels!"

Holt was prospecting about the hole at the bottom of the wall.

"There has been a box of some kind in here," he remarked, and then added bitterly, "containing the jewels, I suppose!"

"Don't despair, Mr. Holt," said Locke, rising from beside Dent. "We know who has them, at all events. I don't think we shall have much difficulty in catching them up. Now, it's no use crying over spilt milk; we must get to work. I half expected this, that is why I brought the bloodhound. With his assistance there is still a chance of overtaking them. I want to find something that will give him a scent."

Drake's foot kicked against the trowel that Megan had discarded.

"How about this?" he asked, picking it up.

"No," replied Locke, shaking his head; "that is no use. There is nothing in that to guide the dog." And he bent down by the hole.

At the side, firm and clear in the soft earth, were two clean footprints, made by the big man as he dug up the jewels.

"Here, boy!" he called.

And the great dog came up willingly. Locke caught him by the collar, taking the leash from Drake, and pressed the animal's nose down to the footprints.

"Smell 'em, lad! Good boy, smell 'em out!"

He removed his hand, and the dog began to cast about, then moved towards the entrance of the cave.

"Come on!" called Locke to the others. "He's got the scent! Leave Dent where he is, Holt. You can send your valet and a couple of men for him."

The dog walked quickly over the rough floor, and almost dragged Locke along the short tunnel to the open air. Outside, the big hound bayed twice—an awe-inspiring sound—then, straining against the leash, led the way up the slope.

Holt gave some of the men instructions to get Dent out of the cave, then he and the remainder ran to catch up the detective and the bloodhound.

"Scent's fresh, guv'nor," remarked Drake, as he panted along beside his master.

"It certainly is. They can't be far away."

The hound was not at fault until they struck the road again. There he nosed vainly, and Locke saw the marks of the landau.

"Confound it! They had a carriage of some sort waiting for them. Here are some oats where the horse had a feed while the vehicle was waiting." He flashed his torch down to where the oats and chaff strewed the ground. "They must have fallen from his nose-bag. Down, dog—down! Give it up, boy! Here you are, Drake! Take him, will you?"

Locke gave Drake the leash, and began walking about the road, shining his torch on the white, dusty surface.

"Yes, they came up here and went back again," he said, drawing his conclusions from the wheelmarks. "This way! Come along! We'll have to run if we are going to do any good."

He led the way at a quick pace along the road in the direction of Saxon Village and Culford Junction. In a few minutes they caught up with a man,

who seemed too outraged to speak clearly.

"Seen three men in a cab go this way?" asked Locke, stopping.

"Seen 'em! Seen 'em! Stole my landau an' pushed me in a ditch, they did! Look at these nettle stings!" And he held up his hands for inspection.

They were covered with little white blotches, made by the nettles in the ditch.

"Did you drive them from the station?" queried the detective.

"That I did! Waited 'arf an hour, an' then they pushed me in a ditch. They be taken—"

"Come on!" called Locke, moving past the man and breaking into a run again. "Evidently they didn't want him to know where they went," he jerked to Drake, who was running steadily by his side with the bloodhound lopping contentedly at the end of the leash. "Probably feared someone would be after them."

Half-way to Culford, when the chase had thinned to a line of panting figures, with the tireless form of Locke leading, the detective saw two men trotting along in front of him.

He quickly overhauled them, and as they turned at the sound of his running footsteps, he saw, in spite of the darkness, that they were Megan's two companions.

"Ferrers Locke!" exclaimed one. And they increased their speed.

But they were no match for the detective. In a hundred yards he had flashed past them and turned in their path.

"Bow him over!" exclaimed Peel.

But a stinging blow, that showed him stars other than those in the sky, sent him reeling back, and then he received a right-hander that almost lifted him off his feet.

Locke was on him in a moment, and had seized one of his arms in a lock that the man found excruciatingly painful. With his free hand the detective gripped Ward's collar, and held him, struggling, at arm's length, until Drake and Holt came up, quickly followed by the gardeners.

"Now, where's Megan?" demanded Locke of the craven Ward, who was shrinking in his grasp.

"In the kerridge," replied the man at once.

"You threw the cabby in a ditch, didn't you?"

The man nodded, and added:

"An' Megan's twisted us! Bunked off in the kerridge with the jools!"

"I thought as much!"

Locke ran his hand swiftly over the man's clothing, then through the pockets of the still struggling Peel, but he found that Ward was telling the truth about the jewels.

"Megan has probably made for the junction," he said to Holt. "I'll try to catch him up. You take these two men to the lock-up somewhere. Drake, cut across the heath and get the car. Bring it to the station, in case I need it. If I'm not there I'll leave word."

The detective turned and ran off down the road.

Locke did the two miles to the junction in record time. Always in training, he moved at a pace that would have broken the heart of anyone but an athlete at the top of his form.

He found the landau, with the horse steaming in the shafts, at the station gates, and surrounded by a little group of station officials.

"Where's the man who drove this here?" demanded Locke, bursting into the group.

"E just caught the four-seven to Sedgewick," said one of the men slowly.

"Got in as she was moving."

"Is there another train?" asked the detective, panting to regain his breath.

"Whv, there ain't nothin' else until six o'clock!"

Locke glanced at his watch; it was just twenty minutes past four.

"What's the first stop of the train that has just gone?"

"Sedgewick of course! Gets there about four-fifteen."

"That's a junction, isn't it?"

"It be. The four-seven meets the London train."

"The London train? Good! Where's the station telephone? I want to use it!"

Ten minutes later Locke was speaking to Scotland Yard. They promised to advise the station police and have them arrest Megan if he were on the train.

Locke replaced the receiver, and as he left the station his great car purred up.

"Did you get him, guv'nor?" asked Drake, as he pulled up alongside the detective.

"No, lad; he got away. I believe he has made a connection at Sedgewick with the London train. I have phoned the Yard, and they will watch for him. He is sure to go right through; of course, he doesn't know we are after him."

Ferrers Locke's supposition was correct. Megan went right through to Liverpool Street Station, where he stepped out of the train into the arms of two burly gentlemen from Scotland Yard.

The plunder was recovered intact, and within the week the famous Saracen's Ring—the heirloom of the Holts—had played its time-honoured part at the wedding of yet another member of the Holt family.

THE END.

(Another extra-long DETECTIVE THRILLER next week, chums, entitled: "THE STRANGE CASE OF THE VANISHED MILLIONAIRE!" In this story Ferrers Locke is faced with the most baffling mystery of his career. The police are bewildered, and so is Locke, until he comes across the smallest of clues. Then the trail starts, and the famous Baker Street detective and his boy assistant quickly find themselves involved in a chain of dangerous adventures!)

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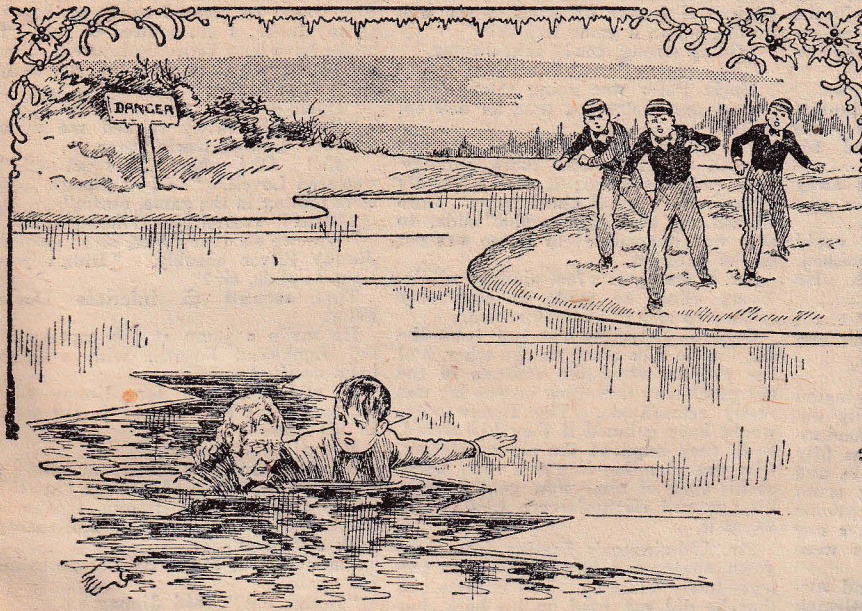
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YOU'LL ENJOY EVERY WORD OF THIS TOPPING TALE OF THE ROOKWOOD CHUMS.

BY LUCK AND PLUCK!

By
Owen Conquest.

Obstinate, pigheaded, and a bit of a duffer, Arthur Edward Lovell may be, but he's never been found wanting where pluck and grit are concerned!



THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Slippery!

"POOR old Lovell!" Jimmy Silver spoke with deep commiseration. Raby and Newcome nodded sympathetically.

It was a bright, frosty January day, and, apart from this sympathetic commiseration for their chum Lovell, the three Rookwood juniors were feeling quite merry and bright.

The keen air of the Somersetshire uplands was invigorating. There were still some days of the vacation to run, and the holiday at Lovell Lodge was quite pleasant and agreeable, in spite of the drawback of the presence of Lovell's Uncle Peter.

The weather was freezing, and the flooded meadow at the back of the Lodge was a sheet of ice. Across that glistening sheet the chums of Rookwood had made a slide. With ruddy faces glowing and scarfs flying in the wind, they simply could not help enjoying life as they whizzed and whizzed again across the ice.

The three were waiting for Lovell, and sliding while they waited. They stopped at the sight of Arthur Edward Lovell coming down from the house and stood in a group, waiting for him to join them.

If ever a fellow looked as if he deserved sympathy and commiseration, Arthur Edward Lovell did just then.

His face was downcast, his head drooped. He almost limped as he came towards the ruddy-faced trio on the edge of the frozen meadow.

"Poor old Lovell!" murmured Jimmy. Lovell joined his chums.

He did not speak; he only looked at them with a dismal countenance.

"Been through it?" asked Raby.

"Only jaw," said Lovell glumly. "I'd rather have had a licking, I think. A head's licking at Rookwood is nothing to a jaw from the pater at home."

"Poor old chap!"

"And the mater, too," groaned Lovell. "It's too thick! Look here, you chaps. Haven't I done my level best to get on good terms with my Uncle Peter?"

The three juniors coughed.

Undoubtedly Lovell had done his best to placate his somewhat formidable

uncle, Mr. Peter Wilmington. He had striven hard to do so. His comrades freely acknowledged that. But it could not be denied that Lovell had been a little wanting in tact. He meant well, but his methods left much to be desired. Instead of placating Uncle Peter he had exasperated that gentleman so intensely that Mr. Wilmington had declared his intention of shaking the dust of Lovell Lodge from his feet forthwith.

Hence a family difficulty—not to call it a row—from which Jimmy Silver & Co. had tactfully withdrawn, elaborately affecting not to know that anything was going on.

Their position was not wholly pleasant as Lovell's guests for the vacation, on ill terms with Lovell's uncle, who was also a guest. They gave him as wide a berth as they could; but whenever contact was established, so to speak, matters were irksome.

"Is he going?" asked Newcome. "He says so," answered Lovell. "Makes out that I've insulted him. The pater and mater know I haven't. They think I've acted the goat. Me, you know."

"Hem?" "Not that I believe he's really going," went on Lovell. "That's too jolly good to be true. It would improve the last week of the vac if he did, wouldn't it?"

"Hear, hear!" "But it's all gas, I think," said Lovell. "The mater's persuaded him to stop, and the pater thinks it's up to him to say the same. And—and I had to put in a word. Of course, the mater would be worried if her pet brother cleared off in a huff. I don't want that. I don't mind standing him for the mater's sake. So I told him I was sorry, and said I hoped he would stay. So I do, you know, for the mater's sake, not for my own, of course."

"You didn't mention that, I hope?"

"Nunno! I'm afraid he'll come round and stay on," said Lovell. "Oh dear! Anyhow, I know I'm jolly well not going to try to make him good-tempered any more. I'm going to give him a wide berth. Must see him at meals, but at other times I'm going to dodge round a corner whenever I see him."

"Good egg!" said Jimmy Silver.

"Come on the slide, old man," said

Raby. "It will buck you up after going through it with your people."

"It's a tip-top slide," said Newcome. Lovell brightened a little. In the open air, in the cheery company of his chums, he could forget—or almost forget—the obnoxious existence of Uncle Peter.

"Come on," he said. "Hallo, there's your giddy uncle!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver. Lovell looked round.

From the direction of the house Mr. Wilmington was striding towards the juniors, a bulky and imposing figure in his big fur-lined overcoat.

His purple face wore a frown, but whether that indicated any special attack of bad temper or not the juniors did not know. His face perpetually wore a frown.

Mr. Wilmington was a gentleman whose manners were against him. From what they had heard, the Rookwood juniors knew that he had done many kind and generous things in his time. But nobody would have guessed it to look at him. His best friend could not have denied that his temper was tart and irritable and unreasonable. The torrid climate of India had affected him during a residence of twenty years in that country. From his tropical abode he had brought home a tropical temper. Probably his bark was worse than his bite; but his bark was really unnerving. "Scowling, as usual!" grunted Lovell. "Let's keep clear of him, for goodness' sake!"

"Arthur!" Mr. Wilmington was calling. Arthur Edward Lovell turned a deaf ear. He had been "jawed," as he called it, for a solid hour that morning. Any fellow who had been jawed for a solid hour might have been excused for feeling fed-up.

Lovell had had enough, and he did not want any more. He affected not to hear the rusty, rasping voice of Mr. Wilmington.

"Come on, you chaps, let's slide." "I say, he wants to speak to you," whispered Jimmy uneasily.

"Only some more jaw. Let's get on."

"Oh, all right!" The juniors turned to the slide. Mr. THE POPULAR.—No. 571.

Wilmington increased his pace and came on very rapidly. More rapidly still the Fistical Four of Rookwood started on the slide and went whizzing across the slippery ice, one after another.

"Arthur!" shouted Mr. Wilmington. He stopped at the slide. The juniors were already more than a dozen yards away. Mr. Wilmington waved his hand and shouted:

"Arthur! How dare you run away when I'm calling you! I order you to come here at once!"

Lovell, going at full speed, could scarcely have obeyed if he had wished. And indubitably he did not wish. He whizzed on regardless.

"Arthur!" bawled Uncle Peter.

He made an angry stride after the juniors.

It was unfortunate.

That stride landed Mr. Wilmington on the slide, and he was totally unacquainted with slides and unaccustomed to slides. Probably it was fifty years since he had been on a slide, and half a century is quite a long time. He had long ago forgotten the pursuits of boyhood—if ever he had been a boy at all, which the Rookwooders were inclined to doubt.

Slides, therefore, were new and surprising things to the old gentleman from India.

What happened to him he scarcely knew.

One of his legs flew away, as if it had suddenly become endowed with the volition of a bird.

The other leg raced after it.

In a dazed and dizzy state, Uncle Peter flew along the slide after the Rookwood juniors, his hat spinning away through the air, his hands wildly waving, his mouth wide open, his gold-rimmed glasses slanting down his purple nose—a remarkable sight, a sight for gods and men and little fishes!

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Going Strong!

"GREAT Scott!"
"What a jolly old sport!"
exclaimed Raby.
"Go it, sir!"

"Bravo!"

Jimmy Silver & Co had reached the end of the slide, and jumped off into muddy, trampled snow. It was not till then that they became aware that Uncle Peter was bound on the same voyage.

They looked back and saw him coming along, and their admiration was great.

It did not occur to them for the moment that Uncle Peter's voyage across the ice was involuntary. They did not know that he had stepped on the slide by accident.

They supposed that he was joining in the game, as they saw him coming along the slide; indeed, it was scarcely possible for them to suppose anything else. And they were pleased.

This looked as if Uncle Peter was getting better-tempered, as if he was remembering, at long last, that he had been a boy himself in the dear, dead days beyond recall.

Undoubtedly, it was sporting of an elderly gentleman, of his years, to venture on a schoolboys' slide—if he had done it intentionally. And they supposed that he had done it intentionally.

"Go it, sir!" shouted Raby encouragingly.

"Bravo!"

"Good man!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver.

"Good old uncle!" said Lovell.

"Why, this is ripping! He seems to

have come round all of a jolly sudden! Blessed if I ever expected to see him joining up in a game like this."

"Going strong, too!" said Jimmy.

"Yes, rather."

Uncle Peter was going strong—very strong; much stronger than he desired, in fact.

The slide was well-worn; it was smooth as glass, and more slippery than polished glass; it was a deadly trap to the feet of the unwary. Once started on that catastrophic slide, to stop was impossible; to pause was out of the question.

Mr. Wilmington's feet plunged wildly. Every effort he made to stop only seemed to add to his momentum.

Once he detached one foot from the ice, but he flew along on the other, and the peculiar stork-like attitude of the old gentleman travelling on one leg was really remarkable. The Rookwooders would have grinned if they had dared. Still, they admired the old sportsman, who was plunging into this risky game at his time of life. Few gentlemen of his age and circumference would have dared it.

Mr. Wilmington's floating foot came down again, and he proceeded on two legs—fairly whizzing. The miracle was that he did not land on his back, but Fortune stood his friend. Had he crashed down, certainly he would have gone through the ice into a foot or more of water which would have been extremely uncomfortable for him.

He whizzed on.

His hat was gone, his hands waved wildly, his eyes, wide open and staring, gleamed over his slanting glasses.

He was bewildered, dizzy, dazed. He hardly knew what was happening; only he knew that the happening was awful.

In his efforts to stop, he stooped and whizzed on in a crouching attitude; and then suddenly he sat down.

But he did not stop.

His momentum was too great for that. Sitting on the smooth ice, he shot onward with terrific velocity, and reached the end of the slide.

There he plunged headlong into trampled snow.

"Bad landing!" said Jimmy Silver. "But what a jolly old sport to take it on at all! Help him out."

"Yes, rather!"

The juniors rushed to Mr Wilmington's aid.

He was rolling and plunging in the snow, hardly knowing whether he was on his head or his heels, breathless and dizzy and bewildered.

The Fistical Four grasped him, and righted him, and he sat up, wheezing and spluttering.

"Grooogh! Ooooooh! Oh, great gad! Mmmm!"

"Well done, sir!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver.

"Grooogh! What? Grooogh!"

"It was fine, uncle!" exclaimed Lovell, with genuine admiration. "It was jolly of you to come out and join us."

"It was indeed, sir!" said Raby.

"Awfully pleased to see you on the ice, sir," said Newcome.

"Grooogh! You young rascals! Ooooh."

"Eh?"

"What?"

Mr. Wilmington staggered to his feet. His face was crimson with fury, and he shook an enraged fist in his startled nephew's face.

"You young rascal!" he roared.

Lovell jumped back.

"What—what—" he stuttered.

"I might have broken a limb!" roared Mr. Wilmington. "No doubt

you desired to see me break a limb. You would be pleased to see me break all my limbs, I am assured of that. I might have been seriously injured. You would be glad to see me seriously injured, of course."

"Uncle—"

"You deliberately tricked me upon the ice!" bawled Uncle Peter.

"Eh! Oh! No! Not at all!" stuttered Lovell. "I—I—I thought you were joining in the game, uncle."

"What!" roared Mr. Wilmington.

"We—we all thought so, sir!" gasped Jimmy Silver blankly. "Didn't you want to slide, sir?"

That seemed to infuriate Uncle Peter.

He made a jump at the captain of the Rookwood Fourth, with a large hand uplifted to smite.

It was fortunate for Jimmy that Uncle Peter's foot slipped in the snow in his haste.

Bump!

Mr. Wilmington understudied a catherine wheel, and landed in the snow, in which his purple face was buried. He struggled there and roared with a muffled roar.

Jimmy Silver & Co. did not go to his aid again.

"Better cut!" said Jimmy.

All the Rookwooders realised that they had better. And they accordingly "cut" with great speed leaving Uncle Peter to sort himself out entirely on his own.

"Jever see such an unreasonable old hunk?" demanded Lovell hotly, when the four had placed a field between themselves and Uncle Peter. "If he didn't want to slide, why did he get on the slide at all?"

Jimmy Silver chuckled.

"He seems to have got on it by accident," he said.

"Was that our fault?" hooted Lovell.

"Not at all! The dear man seems to think that it was, but it wasn't! I say, he looked no end of a card when he was coming along on one leg!" chuckled Raby.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"More jaw for me when we get in!" said Lovell, with a sigh.

"Hard cheese, old chap!"

"Let's make a day of it," said Lovell desperately. "I'll telephone home, and we'll get some lunch at an inn, and not get back till supper. We'll keep clear of old Peter all day."

"Hear, hear!"

And the Fistical Four sauntered on with cheery faces, quite bucked at the idea of making a day of it, and seeing nothing more of Uncle Peter for a whole day.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Trail of Vengeance!

"RATS!"
"Dear old bean—"

"Rot!"

"For goodness' sake, Lovell,

do be reasonable and—"

"Bosh!"

Arthur Edward Lovell was adamant.

His three chums were worried. Really, Arthur Edward Lovell was, at times, enough to worry a saint, and to put too heavy a strain on the patience of Job.

Jimmy Silver & Co. had come out in the bright, frosty January morning, while Uncle Peter was still having his breakfast in bed. It was very pleasant to miss seeing Uncle Peter. That alone made the morning merry and bright.

Uncle Peter was going skating that morning on the frozen Froode, on his majestic own. After the unfortunate occurrence on the slide, the juniors did

not dream of accompanying Mr. Wilmington on his skating excursion. If Mr. Wilmington was going to the stream at Froode, the Rookwooders were going in the opposite direction—at least, three of them were. But to their dismay, Jimmy and Raby and Newcome discovered that Lovell was on the warpath that frosty morning.

He was fed-up!
Right up to the chin, he told his chums darkly and impressively. Uncle Peter was, so to speak, the "Thing-too-much."

A fellow wasn't going to stand it. A fellow was going to get his own back! A fellow had a right to give tit for tat, and a Roland for an Oliver. Thus Arthur Edward Lovell eloquently.

Lovell's idea was that he was going to lie in ambush among the trees by the frozen Froode, with a thick stack of snowballs ready to hand. When Uncle Peter started skating, Lovell was going to start snowballing. He was going to let the Anglo-Indian gentleman have it right and left. The worm will turn!

Lovell was by no means a worm; but he had turned. He was fed-up with the manners and customs of Uncle Peter, and he was going to get his own back somehow.

His three chums argued in vain. They were quite dismayed. All three of them realised very clearly that, natural as Lovell's feelings were, it would not do.

Three eloquent voices argued and urged and the Fistical Four walked along the lane to Froode. But Lovell was adamant. His mind was made up.

"Rats!" was his reply to all arguments. "Rats! Rot! Bosh! Chuck it!"

Really, it was difficult to argue with a fellow whose counter-arguments took this form!

"But your father will be wild if you

actually mop up old Peter with snowballs!" urged Jimmy Silver. "And your mother—"

"They won't know," explained Lovell. "I'm not going to let old Peter see me. I shall be in ambush. He will think that some of the village lads have been snowballing him. Mind, I'd rather let him see me; I'd rather stand just under his cheeky nose and heave the snowballs at his chivvy! But a chap is bound to consider his parents. It would worry them. So I'm not going to let old Peter see who's mopping him up. I shall just enjoy the satisfaction of bowling him over with snowballs without letting on. See?"

"Now, look here, Lovell!" said the three together, as they reached the bank of the frozen Froode.

Lovell halted.
"Nuff said!" he exclaimed. "I'm not asking you fellows to join up. If you like, of course, you can ambush along with me and give the old beggar jip."

"No fear!" said Newcome promptly. "It's too thick!" said Jimmy Silver. "The old chap is enough to exasperate a stone image, I know, but there's a limit."

"Snowballing your uncle is the limit, Lovell!" urged Raby. "Don't do it, old chap! Keep clear!"

Lovell's face set obstinately. The sun had gone down on his wrath, and risen upon it, also. There was a strain of dogged obstinacy in Lovell that was rather reminiscent of his Uncle Peter, in fact. On his mother's side, Lovell was a Wilmington, and some of the Wilmington traits were in his character.

"No good talking!" he said. "I'm fed-up! I've tried my hardest to get on the right side of Uncle Peter! I've stood him and his jaw and his bad

temper and his grunting and growling—like having a dashed grizzly bear about the house! But he's piled it on too thick, and now he's going to have a little bit of what he's been asking for! See?"

"But, old fellow—"
"Chuck it!" said Lovell.
"You chuck it, old bean, and come for a tramp," said Jimmy Silver. "When a fellow feels ratty there's nothing like a long walk to pull him round and make him smile again."

"Who's ratty?"
"Eh? You are, aren't you?"
"No!" snorted Lovell. "Nothing of the kind! I'm simply fed up with old Peter, and I'm going to give him the kybosh! That's all! Now, you fellows, cut—you don't want old Peter to see you about here, or he may suspect you of snowballing him, and then all the fat would be in the fire!"

Jimmy Silver & Co. exchanged dismayed glances. Evidently Arthur Edward was beyond argument.
"Hook it, old chaps!" said Lovell. "I'll see you later. Hook it before old Peter comes hiking along!"

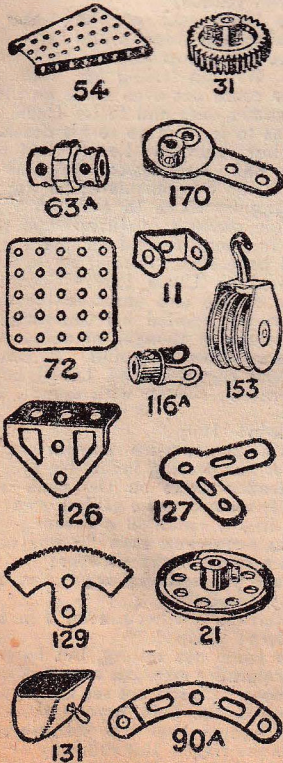
"I think you're an ass, Lovell!"
"I know you are, Jimmy! Ta-ta!"
The three juniors left Lovell to his own devices at last. In a rather worried frame of mind they tramped away, hoping—though doubting—that Lovell's new stunt would not lead to a new peck of troubles for Arthur Edward.

Lovell had no doubts. He seldom had. Quite confidently and cheerfully he proceeded to lay his ambush on the bank of the glimmering, frozen Froode.

There was plenty of snow banked up close at hand, and in a screened spot under frosty trees and bushes, close by the river, Lovell stacked up snowballs ready for use.

(Continued on next page.)

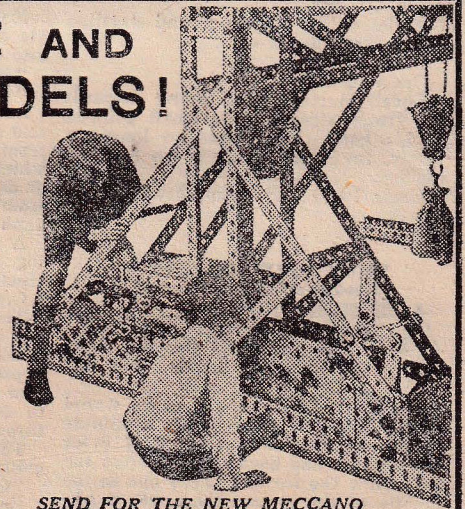
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He had plenty of time, and he soon had quite a large supply of ammunition ready for Uncle Peter.

He had a good time to wait. Uncle Peter was not an early riser. But at last the portly figure in the big, fur-lined, fur-collared overcoat was seen rolling down the lane towards the frozen stream. Uncle Peter was wrapped up against the cold as if he were going on a Polar exploring expedition instead of skating on a Somersetshire river.

The portly gentleman passed within a few yards of Lovell, fortunately without seeing him.

He stopped a little farther on, and sat down to put on his skates.

Lovell peered out again, grinning. For once luck seemed to be befriending Lovell in his dealings with his formidable uncle. The frozen stream was lonely—absolutely deserted save for the portly figure seated on the bank. Only the smoke from the chimneys of Froode village was to be seen in the distance. Not a soul was in sight. Lovell was absolutely secure; there was no one to see him. He had only to guard against the observation of Uncle Peter, and that was easy enough. Uncle Peter would never know who had hurled the snowballs; there would be no painful result in "jaw" at the Lodge. It was all plain sailing.

Uncle Peter's grunts reached Lovell's ears as the old gentleman fastened on his skates. He grinned. In a few minutes more Uncle Peter would have something to grunt about.

Mr. Wilmington rose at last. He seemed quite at home on skates, though certainly he did not look an active gentleman. He stepped out cautiously on the ice testing it as he went, and then slid away.

Lovell grinned, and turned to his stack of snowballs. He gathered them up in his arm.

As he did so a strange and startling sound reached his ears.

Crack!
Cra-a-a-ack!
Lovell started, spun round towards the frozen stream a snowball gripped in his hand. There was no longer a portly, fur-coated figure to be seen on the ice.

Uncle Peter had disappeared!

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Rookwood to the Rescue!

ARTHUR EDWARD LOVELL stood rooted to the bank. The snowballs dropped from his nerveless hands into the frozen reeds.

His face was like chalk as he stared at the deserted river. Only a minute before, the elephantine figure of Peter Wilmington had been rolling across the ice. Now the ice was bare; but in the middle of the stream there was a gap in it—a wide gap where broken ice floated and dark water welled up. But of Uncle Peter nothing was to be seen. "Good—good heavens!" panted Lovell.

He knew what had happened at once. The ice on the Froode easily supported the Rookwood juniors—they had skated on it many times without danger—but a Fourth Form fellow was a very different proposition from an Anglo-Indian gentleman who tipped the scale at about fourteen stone. Uncle Peter had gone through suddenly, resistlessly, almost silently, and the dark waters welling over the ice told the way he had gone.

Lovell's teeth chattered.
THE POPULAR.—No. 571.

He stood rooted to the bank, frozen with horror. Peter Wilmington was gone. The uncle he disliked, the old man he had intended to snowball, he was gone. How small and trivial in that terrible moment seemed the offences which Lovell had so passionately resented!

It seemed like an age—an eternity—but it was only a few seconds before a large, thickly-gloved hand shot up from the water and clutched at the broken edge of the ice.

Lovell panted with relief as he saw it, and as he saw the head of Mr. Wilmington follow it.

There was a loud snort from Mr. Wilmington. His sudden plunge had taken him deep down; but he had come up again, snorting like a grampus. He grasped angrily at the crumbling ice-edge, and snorted again with annoyance as the edge crumbled in his hands.

He was not, for the moment, alarmed; doubtless he had supposed that he could drag himself out.

But Lovell saw alarm flash into his face—terror into his eyes. The ice broke as fast as the stout gentleman grabbed at it, and his enormous overcoat, soaked with water, was dragging him down with its heavy weight. His chin went under and he spluttered. Frantically now he grabbed at the crumbling ice, and it dawned upon Lovell that his uncle could not swim.

Lovell was there on the trail of vengeance, but vengeance was quite forgotten now. Had Lovell thought of it, he would have thought of it only with shame.

But he was thinking now only of his uncle's danger. He cast a wild glance up and down and across the stream. But there was no human being in sight; the solitude which had seemed so fortunate a short time ago was now terrifying and dismaying.

"Uncle!" shouted Lovell.
Mr. Wilmington's eyes turned on him. He saw his nephew for the first time, and hope flushed in his face.

"Help!" he panted.
"Uncle! Hold on! I'm coming!"
Lovell stared round him desperately, and ran to a fence a little distance back from the bank. With a strength of which he would not have been capable at any other time, he tore the top rail from the fence and rushed back to the bank with it.

A moment more, and he was speeding across the ice to the gap where Uncle Peter struggled.

Crack—cra-a-a-ack!
The ice, weakened by the extending gap and Uncle Peter's frantic clutching, cracked and split under Lovell as he approached the gap. It caved in under him as he was extending the fence-rail to Mr. Wilmington, and Lovell went through feet first.

The water surged up round his neck, chilly and bitter.

"Oooocch!" gasped Lovell.
But his head did not go under. The fence-rail fell across the gap from side to side, and Lovell's hold was on it.

"Uncle! Catch hold!" he spluttered. But the waterlogged overcoat was dragging the old gentleman down, and his half-frozen fingers no longer gripped at the breaking ice. He was plunging under helplessly, when Lovell caught at the fur collar and dragged him up again to the rail, amid a surge of water and broken ice fragments.

"Catch hold!" he gasped.
Mr. Wilmington got his hands to the rail and then his arms over it. He hung on to it helplessly.

His face was white now.
"Shout for help, Arthur!" he muttered in a husky whisper. "I—I cannot—my strength is gone!"

"Help!" yelled Lovell.
His despairing shout rang far across the frozen stream. But there were no ears to hear.

"We've got to get out of this, uncle," muttered Lovell. "Hold to the rail. You can do that?"

Mr. Wilmington nodded; he was almost past speech now.

Lovell gripped the rail and dragged himself out with its help. The ice creaked and groaned, but he got out of the water.

Getting his uncle out, however, was quite another matter. The ice-edge, which scarcely held Lovell's weight, was certain to break away if he dragged the heavy gentleman upon it.

But there was nothing to do but to try it; and Lovell, leaning over the rail from the ice, gripped Mr. Wilmington by the collar.

"Try to climb out, uncle! Hold on to the rail and try to get on to the ice, while I pull!"

The old gentleman nodded again and made an attempt to clamber on to the ice. There was a terrific crash, and the ice went—and Lovell went with it. Head first he plunged into the icy water.

He came up spluttering.
His grasp was still on his uncle's fur collar, and Mr. Wilmington's head was dragged from the water. Lovell caught desperately at the rail with his free hand.

He held on, keeping his uncle afloat with one hand, holding on desperately with the other.

"Help!" he shouted wildly. "Help! Help!"

Only the echo answered him.
"Hold on to the rail, uncle!" he gasped. "Can't you hold on?"

But there was no answer from Mr. Wilmington. He was utterly helpless now, overcome by the cold. He could not even grasp at the rail jammed across the gap; only the Rookwood junior's hold saved him from slipping away under the ice.

Lovell panted.
The bitter cold of the water was searching him through and through; his fingers were numbed, his face turning blue. Without letting Mr. Wilmington go, he could not even make an attempt to clamber out; and to let Uncle Peter go was to let him go to his death.

Arthur Edward Lovell had many faults and weaknesses; he was hot-headed, he was obstinate; he was exasperating at times to his best friends. But his sterling qualities came to the fore in these fearful moments. He could have saved himself by letting go his hold on Uncle Peter—Uncle Peter whose dislike and unreasonable temper had almost spoiled his Christmas holidays—but the thought of doing so did not even cross his mind. It was sink or swim together, and Lovell held on desperately, though with despair in his heart.

"Help! Help!"
His desperate voice rang far and wide. A mist was floating before his eyes now; the leafless trees on the bank—so far away!—seemed to be gliding away from him, like a vision in a dream. From the half-conscious man he was holding came a faint, husky whisper:

"Save yourself, my boy! I'm done—save yourself!"
Lovell did not heed, even if he heard. "Help! Help!"

His voice was failing, but he put all his remaining strength into that desperate shout. He did not see three running figures in the field beyond the trees—three figures that ran desperately towards the river. But suddenly he heard a shout that was music to his ears:

"Hold on, Lovell!"

It was Jimmy Silver's voice.

"Help!"

"Hold on, old chap! We're coming!"

Lovell's brain was swimming. It was like a dream to him now—like some tormenting vision of troubled sleep. Three figures that seemed dim and uncertain to his dizzy sight loomed on the ice. A hurdle was pushed across the gap. Suddenly the weight of his burden was taken from him—other hands had grasped Mr. Wilmington. And then a helping grasp was on Lovell, and he was drawn from the water.

What happened next he did not know. Everything, river and frozen ice, leafless trees and steely sky, were swimming round him. He came to himself with a jerk. He was in the frozen weeds on the river bank. His wild eyes turned on his chums.

"Jimmy—"

"Can you walk, old fellow? Let me help you up! You must get going or you'll freeze."

Lovell staggered up with the help of Jimmy Silver's strong arm.

"My uncle—"

"We've got him safe! Get that coat off and put mine on—quick! Now get going, old man. Raby, you help Lovell home while we look after Mr. Wilmington."

"Come on, old man."

Lovell found himself running, with Raby's hold on his arm. Jimmy Silver and Newcome attended to Uncle Peter. The huge fur coat was discarded—it was already freezing into a hard mass in the rushes. The skates had been taken off the old gentleman's feet. But Uncle Peter, though almost in the last stage of exhaustion, was still Uncle Peter.

"I can walk!" he snorted. "You need not hold me—I can walk! I am

not a baby to be carried! I am not a child to be led by the hand! I tell you that I can walk perfectly well."

"Better let us help you, sir—"

"Huh!"

Uncle Peter started to walk, and reeled over helplessly. After that he allowed Jimmy Silver and Newcome to take an arm each and help him along. He staggered as he plodded between them.

Arthur Edward halted and looked back.

"Come on, old chap!" said Raby. "Better keep going. You're soaked through, you know, and the weather's freezing."

"I'm all right," said Lovell.

Rapid motion had restored the circulation, and Lovell was himself again now. He was tired and a little dizzy, but that was all. He looked back along the lane at Uncle Peter, who was coming on unsteadily, with Jimmy Silver and Newcome helping him on either side.

"You cut on, Raby, and tell them to get hot-water bottles ready," said Lovell.

And he ran back to his uncle.

His help was welcome, for Mr. Wilmington, with all his obstinate determination, could scarcely keep going, and the two juniors had their hands full with him.

Three helpful pairs of hands now propelled Uncle Peter along, half carrying him; and they were wholly carrying him by the time they reached the door of Lovell Lodge.

The door stood wide open. Raby was already there. Mrs. Lovell ran out to meet her brother.

"Peter!"

Mr. Wilmington grunted.

"I'm all right, Mabel—quite all

right. Pray do not make a fuss. There is no occasion whatever for a fuss. Huh!"

Although there was no occasion for a fuss, getting Mr. Wilmington up to his room was a hefty task for the Rookwood juniors, and several servants, who manfully lent a hand. Afterwards Lovell declared that it would have made a decent thirteenth job for Hercules, on a par with any of the other twelve. But Mr. Wilmington was landed at last and rolled into bed, with hot-water bottles and blankets, and left to steam.

Arthur Edward Lovell, who was, fortunately, as fit as a fiddle, very soon recovered from his effects of his ducking. But it was different with Uncle Peter. That hapless gentleman was confined to his room for a whole week; and anyone passing near his room during that period could not fail to hear the coughing, snorting, grunting, and growling, by means of which Uncle Peter expressed his feelings. His temper, never very reliable, seemed to have suffered from his ducking and the cold that followed it. And Uncle Peter in his room was a good deal like a Bengai tiger in a cage.

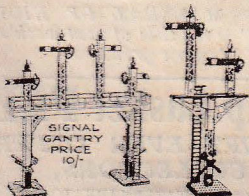
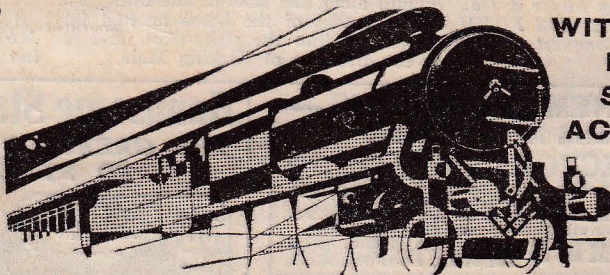
The Rookwooders were sympathetic. They were glad that it was no worse, and hoped that Uncle Peter would soon be better. But it was not to be denied that the house was much more comfortable and cheery with Uncle Peter confined to his room, though even the doctor entered that room in fear and trembling.

Jimmy Silver & Co. wished him a happy recovery. But possibly they did not yearn to see him downstairs again

(Continued on next page.)

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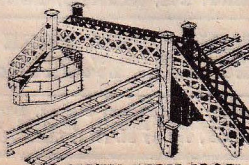
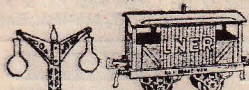
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before the vacation ended. They felt that they could quite like Uncle Peter—so long as he was at a safe distance.

But coming in one day from a ramble they found Uncle Peter down, propped in innumerable cushions, before a terrific fire. He was speaking to his sister, and brother-in-law when the juniors looked rather timidly in.

"A fine lad—a fine lad, Mabel! Lovell, you ought to be proud of that boy of yours. Cheeky—well, I like a lad to be able to speak up for himself. Why, here is the boy! Arthur, you young rascal, come here!"

Arthur Edward came rather gingerly. His father gave him a smile, his mother beamed on him. Uncle Peter glared at him.

"Do you know that you saved my life?" he boomed.

"Did I?" gasped Lovell. "Sorry! I—I mean, I'm jolly glad! I—I hope you're better, Uncle Peter."

"Never better in my life!" snorted Uncle Peter. "That ass of a doctor says I'm not to smoke cigars for a week at least. P'll show him! Give me a light. No, on second thoughts you needn't give me a light. Give me your fist, my boy. You're a cheeky young rascal, but you're the right stuff—the right stuff, and your uncle's proud of you!"

And Mr. Wilmington demonstrated his changed feelings by giving Lovell a grip that made him wriggle.

The last few days of the vacation were calm and bright at Lovell Lodge. When the time came to return to Rookwood Arthur Lovell was quite sorry to part with his Uncle Peter, a state of affairs that he certainly could never have foreseen. By luck and pluck he had succeeded, at long last, in placating Uncle Peter!

THE END.

(You'll find thrills, laughs, and surprises in next Tuesday's roving long complete story of Jimmy Silver & Co., entitled: "UP AGAINST HIS FORM MASTER!" by Owen Conquest. Don't miss it!)

BLACK GEORGE!

(Continued from page 6.)

ruthless slayer. Black George was not in a position to waste a lot of time, the Kid figured. Still, he was watchful and wary as a lynx as he rode on the outlaw's trail.

To the Kid's surprise the trail led, after a short distance, not farther up the hill, but slantwise across the hillside, and then downward.

"Sho!" ejaculated the Kid.

It looked as if the outlaw was aiming to ride back to the stage-trail, and that puzzled the Kid.

He had figured that Black George was heading for some retreat, some hiding-place in the depths of the hills.

But that evidently was not the case.

From the direction the trail was taking, it looked as if it would strike the stage-trail about a mile from the spot where the hold-up had taken place.

The Kid, puzzled, followed on.

The trail of the black horse led him past the end of the barranca, and onward down the hill. It stopped, at last, on the bank of a creek that flowed down from the uplands.

The black rider had ridden into the creek; the Kid rode through it with the water up to his stirrups, and found no trace on the other side of the road-agent having landed.

Up the creek there was no riding; the watercourse was too steep. The Kid rode down in the water, and his keen eyes scanned the banks as he rode. The road-agent had followed the stream, he knew that, perhaps with the intention of throwing a pursuer off his track. A simple device like that was not likely to stop the Rio Kid. He followed the shallow stream downward, and a few minutes later picked up sign where a rider had left the water and ridden on towards the stage-trail.

The Kid followed the sign. A quarter of an hour later he emerged into the open stage-trail that wound along the base of the hill.

The tracks of the horse he had followed led into the stage-trail, and on in the direction of Kicking Mule.

The Kid's eyes grew wide.

The stage-trail was well travelled; ruts of wheels and hoof-marks of horses and cattle were thick. But among them the Kid's eyes picked out beyond doubt the trail of Black George's horse.

And that trail led on towards Kicking Mule.

The Kid followed, sorely perplexed.

"Dog-gone my cats!" ejaculated the puzzled Kid. "It sure looks as if that darned galoot rode right into Kicking Mule! If I ain't going blind, and I reckon I ain't, this here is the trail of his cayuse, and it's leading right into town. Dog-gone my boots!"

Close to the cow-town, where the earth was trampled by innumerable hoofs, the track was lost at last; it was impossible for even the Kid's searching eye to pick out the particular trail of Black George's cayuse among so many.

He halted, his brow deeply wrinkled in perplexed thought.

He had figured on tracking the black outlaw to some retreat in the hills, or some hidden den in the chaparral. But the trail had led him to the cow-town of Kicking Mule; and unless the Kid's eyes had deceived him it was into the cow-town that Black George had ridden, after that long and winding circuit among the woods on the hillside. Yet that surely was impossible; for a glimpse of the black outlaw would have caused every gun in Kicking Mule to leap from its holster. Yet the Kid had not been deceived by his eyes—and the trail of the outlaw's horse had not lied.

"Jumpin' Jehosaphat!" ejaculated the Kid at last. "It beats me—it sure beats me to one frazzle! I don't get it—I surely don't! That guy's got me gussing!"

And, in sheer perplexity, the Kid gave up the problem for the moment, and rode on into Kicking Mule.

THE END.

("THE MARSHAL OF KICKING MULE!" is the title of next week's roving long Western yarn.)

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