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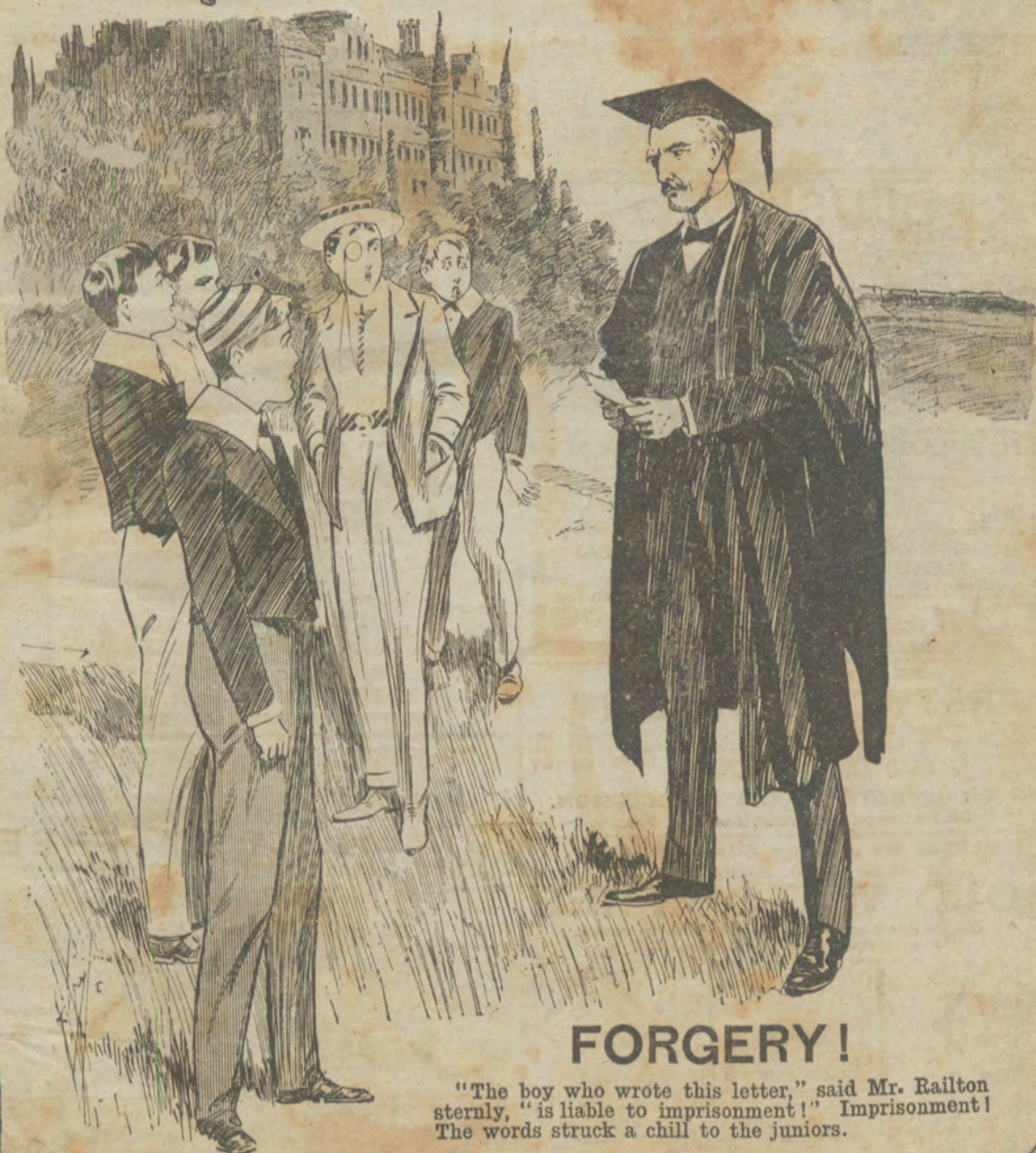
VOL. 3,
NO. 84.



"SACKED!" A Tale of Tom Merry
& Co. at St. Jim's.

Grand Long,
Complete Tale by

MARTIN
CLIFFORD.



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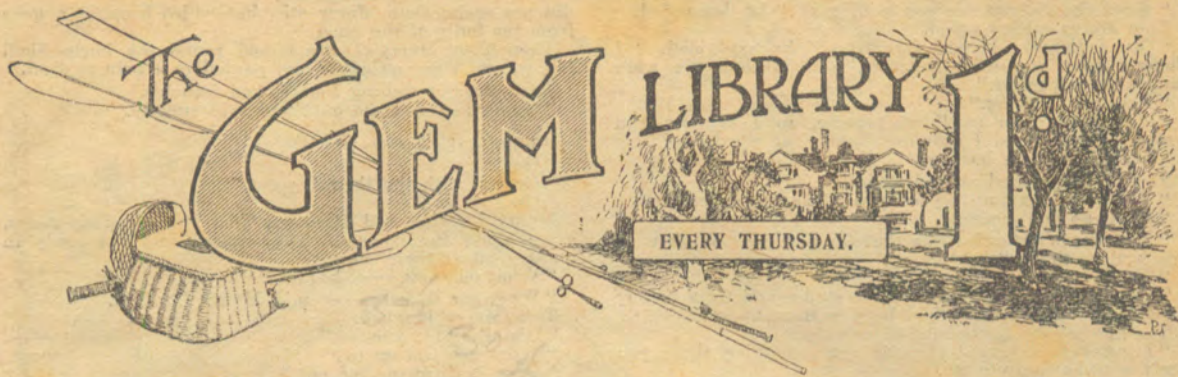
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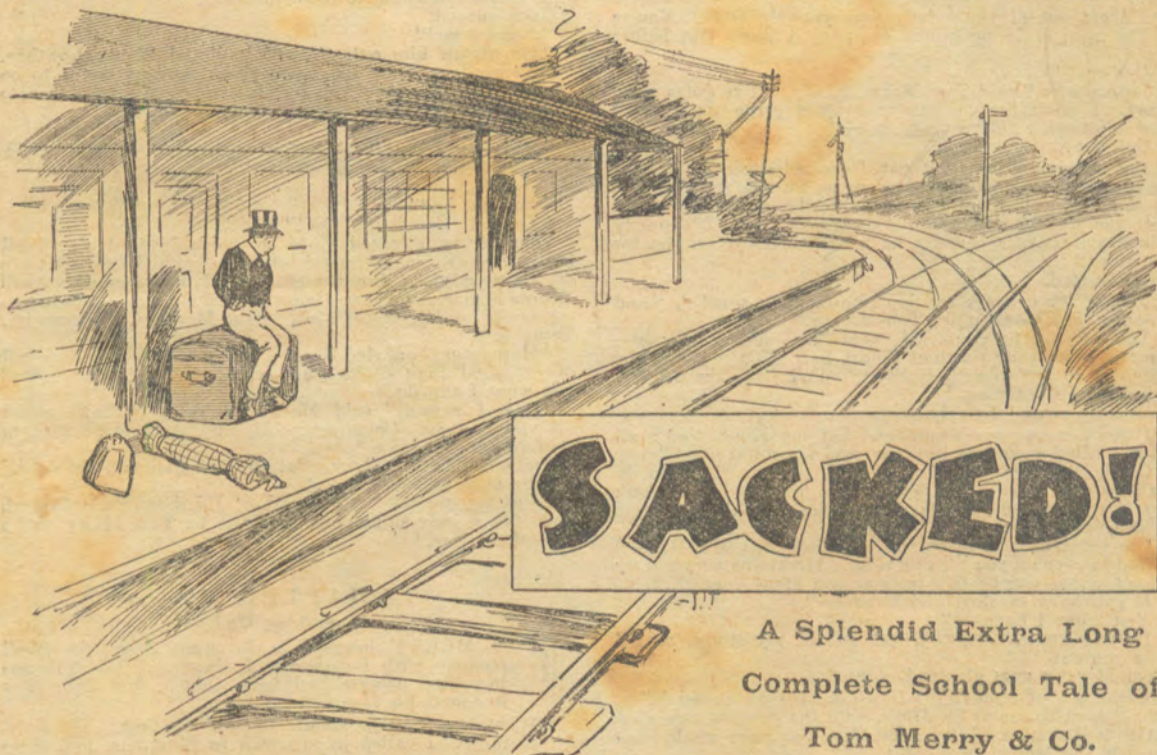
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WEEK:

"The Haunted Tower."

A Splendid Tale of
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SACKED!

A Splendid Extra Long
Complete School Tale of
Tom Merry & Co.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1. Not Thrown Out.

"H!" George Gore, of the Shell at St. Jim's, uttered that exclamation suddenly, and jumped to his feet.

Tom Merry looked in at the door, with an expression of amazement on his face as he caught Gore's startled look.

Gore had been seated at the table, pen in hand, when Tom Merry tapped; and he had been too deeply occupied to notice the tap.

But as the door opened, and the hero of the Shell looked in, he sprang up, his face going suddenly pale.

He stared blankly at Tom Merry, and Tom Merry stared at him.

"What's the matter, Gore?"

"Oh!"

"I'm not a ghost," said Tom. "What on earth's the matter? I tapped before I opened the door."

"I—I didn't hear you."

"Well, I tapped. What's the matter? I didn't mean to startle you."

Gore breathed hard. The colour came back slowly into his pasty face.

"You startled me," he repeated.

"Blessed if I know why you should be so startled at a fellow looking into your room," said Tom Merry. "I came to speak to Skimpole."

"He isn't here."

"I can see he isn't, now. What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing."

Gore was recovering his self-possession. He was on the worst of terms with Tom Merry, and he never troubled himself to be polite to persons he disliked.

"This is my study," he said; "I haven't asked you into it. There's the passage, Tom Merry."

Tom Merry sniffed.

Gore watched that proceeding in considerable surprise.

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No. 84 (New Series).

"What the dickens are you sniffing at?" he demanded.

Tom Merry sniffed again.

"Oh, I thought it was cigarettes!" he explained. "I thought that you were smoking, and fancied you were caught by a prefect."

"I wasn't smoking."

"No; there's no smell of tobacco, so I suppose you weren't. I'm afraid I shouldn't take your word, Gore."

"Mind your own business."

Tom Merry looked at him steadily.

"What little game are you up to?" he demanded.

"What do you mean?"

"You weren't startled like that for nothing. What were you writing there?"

"That's my business."

Tom Merry made a step into the study, and Gore hastily turned over the sheet he had been writing upon.

The hero of the Shell laughed scornfully.

"I guessed as much! You've got something there you don't want anybody to see."

Gore scowled fiercely.

"Suppose I have, what is that to do with you, Tom Merry?"

"Nothing, perhaps."

"Then mind your own business, and get out of my study."

"I'll get out of your study soon enough, Gore. You're not the kind of fellow whose company I like. But before I go—"

"Get out!"

"Before I go," said Tom Merry calmly, "I've got a word to say. I don't know what your little game is; I don't know what trick you're playing—"

"Get out!"

"But before you carry it out, Gore, whatever it is, bear this in mind. You're in bad odour at St. Jim's. You're a cad—and a cur! You're a bully to the small boys, and about the worst-hated fellow among the fags. It's pretty plain to me that the masters have had their eye on you for some time."

Gore started.

"I know the masters are down on me," he snarled, "and I know whom I owe it to, Tom Merry."

"You owe it to yourself," said Tom Merry calmly—"yourself, and your precious Smart Set. You're going the right way to get sacked, Gore—expelled from the school! I say that as a warning."

Gore's lip curled bitterly.

"I don't want your warnings. Let me alone, that's all I want. Mind your own business, and I'll mind mine."

"Good, As Head of the Shell, I thought I ought to speak to you, that's all. You are a worm; but I don't want to see any fellow sacked from the school."

"You can't scare me."

"I'm not trying to scare you. I know that Mr. Railton has had his eye on you all this term. He knows very nearly as much about you by this time as you know yourself."

"If you have sneaked about me—"

"You know I haven't."

"I don't know. Anyway, get out of my study, or I'll throw you out."

Tom Merry's eyes gleamed.

He was a good-tempered fellow—the best-tempered fellow in the School House at St. Jim's, with the possible exception of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy; but Gore's manner would have provoked the temper of a saint.

"You'll throw me out?" he said quietly. "Then you'd better do it, Gore."

"Get out!"

Tom Merry did not stir.

"Are you going?" yelled Gore.

"No; I'm waiting to be thrown out."

Gore gritted his teeth.

He had said he would throw Tom Merry out, and he was certainly big and burly enough to do it; but the hero of the Shell was a decidedly tough customer to tackle, and Gore knew that.

But he was in such a towering rage that he had lost some of his usual caution; which, as a rule, led him to bully small boys and let larger ones alone.

He stepped towards Tom Merry with his fists clenched and his eyes flaming.

"Get out!"

Tom Merry looked at him steadily.

"I'm waiting to be thrown."

Gore wasted no more time in words.

He dashed straight at Tom Merry, with a rush like that of a maddened bull. Tom Merry did not flinch for a moment.

He stood like a rock, and dashed Gore's lashing fists aside with ease, and they met chest to chest, with an impact that

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did not make Tom Merry stir, but which brought a gasp from the bully of the Shell.

Then Tom Merry's arms closed round the burly Shell fellow, and Gore wriggled and panted in a grip of steel.

Tom Merry's smiling face looked into his.

"Going to throw me out?" he said sweetly.

"Ow!"

"What's the matter?"

"Ow!"

"Get on with the throwing out."

"Ow! Wow!"

Monty Lowther and Manners, Tom Merry's study-mates, came along the passage. They stared into the study in amazement at their chum.

"What on earth—" began Manners.

"What the dickens—" said Monty Lowther.

Tom Merry laughed.

"It's all right, kids—"

"What are you up to?"

"Gore is throwing me out."

"Ha, ha, ha! Go it, Gore!"

"Ow!" gasped Gore. "Yow! Wow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Lemme go, you beast!" panted Gore, struggling in vain in the grip of the hero of the Shell. "Chuck it! Leggo!"

"Aren't you going to throw me out?"

Gore gasped.

"N-n-n-no!"

"Oh, throw him out, Gore!" implored Monty Lowther. "He's really got far too much cheek, and he ought to be thrown out. We should so like to see him thrown out. Do throw him out. There's a good chap."

"Ow!"

"We're waiting for the fun to begin," said Manners. "Go it, Gore! Make an effort!"

"Ow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Leggo! Chuck it! Ow!"

Tom Merry released Gore so suddenly that the Shell bully, unprepared, collapsed into a heap on the carpet. He sat there gasping for breath, and fixing upon the Shell fellows a glare that was almost demonic.

"Looks pretty, doesn't he?" said Manners. "Come on, Tommy!"

"Hang you!" snarled Gore. "I'll get even with you—all of you—and Jack Blake and his set, too! I'll show all of you what I can do!"

"Gas, I expect," said Monty Lowther. "That's about all you can do. Come on, kids, and we'll leave him to stew in his own juice."

And the Terrible Three went out and slammed the door.

Gore staggered to his feet.

"Just you wait!" he muttered. "I'll show you! Sacked, eh? It's a jolly sight more likely to be Tom Merry that's sacked, not me."

CHAPTER 2.

Something Up!

TOM MERRY laughed as he went down the Shell passage with Lowther and Manners. The "throwing-out" process had been funny; but in a few moments his face became grave.

"What was the row about?" asked Lowther.

"Nothing. I called in to speak to Skimpole, and Gore was as polite as usual. I gave him some home truths on the subject of his personal qualities, and his chances of being sacked from the school, and then—"

"Hence these tears," said Lowther.

Tom Merry laughed.

"Yes. I don't like Gore, but I should be sorry to see him expelled. He doesn't understand that he's getting jolly near it. But it's no good talking to him; he never will believe that anybody wants to do him a good turn."

"Hallo! Here's the one and only!"

Monty Lowther by that expression could only refer to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of the School House.

The elegant junior was coming along with his usual airy and graceful walk when the chums of the Shell turned into the Fourth-Form passage.

The Terrible Three came to a halt, and gave three nods at precisely the same moment, as if moved by clockwork.

But Arthur Augustus D'Arcy did not smile, neither did he nod in return.

He jammed his eyeglass into his eye, took a long and careful survey of the chums of the Shell, and then walked into Study No. 6 and closed the door.

This proceeding on D'Arcy's part was so astounding that the Shell fellows could only stare at one another in blank amazement.

The swell of St. Jim's was usually the cheeriest and



Gore's eyes gleamed with malicious satisfaction as he looked down into the punt from the bridge and saw that Tom Merry and his friends were not there.

politest fellow there; in fact, he carried his personal courtesy to an extent that sometimes moved the merriment of the School House fellows.

This piece of unexampled rudeness was simply staggering, therefore.

The Terrible Three exchanged a blank stare.

Tom Merry rubbed his nose thoughtfully.

"Something wrong with Gussy," he said.

"Looks like it."

"Off his rocker, do you think?" said Lowther tentatively.

"I suppose so. Of course, it may be a new waistcoat that's weighing on his mind—"

"More likely a new hat!"

"Oh, don't be funny! There's something wrong, anyway. Blessed if I can make it out. Let's look for Blake. I saw him in the lower passage a few minutes ago."

And the Terrible Three went on their way towards the stairs.

If there was anything wrong with Gussy, if he was "on his dignity" about anything, it was useless to question him. But Blake was certain to know about it. Jack Blake, Digby, and Herries, as they shared Study No. 6 with Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, were bound to be in the secret.

"Here's Dig!" exclaimed Manners, as that individual came upstairs with a cricket bat under his arm.

"Hallo, Dig!"

"Been knocking up centuries?"

"What's the matter with Gussy?"

Digby, of the Fourth, looked at the Terrible Three. He did not put up an eyeglass, because he did not use one. But he fixed a freezing stare upon the chums of the Shell, and stalked past them like the ghost in "Hamlet."

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An Extra-long Complete Tale of
Tom Merry & Co.

NEXT
THURSDAY.

"THE HAUNTED TOWER."

CHAPTER 3.

Blake is Obstinate.

Again the three chums were taken by surprise. "It's a study rag," said Tom Merry, at last. "They've all got it. Blessed if I can make it out, though!"

The Terrible Three went downstairs considerably perplexed. They had been cut dead by two of the four members of Study No. 6. Why?

It could not be on account of the continual rows and scrimmages they had with Blake & Co. Those little affairs simply cleared the air, as it were. Why had D'Arcy and Digby cut them then?

They looked round for Blake. That junior was not to be seen; but Reilly volunteered the information that Herries had gone round to feed his bulldog. The chums of the Shell made their way thither at once, and found Herries and Towser together, with a bag of dog biscuits.

Herries looked up at the three, but he did not speak to them.

"Bite it, Towser," he said. "Bite it, old chap. You can't expect to have a cold mutton-bone every day, you greedy brute! Dog biscuits are good enough for you, I think; they make a jolly big hole in my pocket-money, any way. You're growing dainty."

"Gr-r-r!" said Towser.

"Now, come on, old dog, feed up!"

"Gr-r-r-r!"

"Herries, old man—"

"Eat your bikkie, you brute, can't you?"

"I say, Herries—"

"You'd better come for a run round the quad., and get an appetite," said Herries, in disgust; and he unloosed the end of the chain from the kennel.

"Herries—"

"Come on, Towser!"

And Herries started off with his dog. He had not taken the slightest notice of the presence of the Terrible Three, though of course he could not have failed to hear them addressing him.

The chums of the Shell looked wrathful. They weren't accustomed to being treated with contumely, especially by a Fourth-Form chap, and their tempers began to rise.

"Collar him!" said Tom Merry, as Herries moved off.

Lowther and Manners grasped the Fourth-Former, one by each shoulder. Herries tried to wrench himself away, but he failed.

Towser growled ominously.

"Look here, Herries," said Tom Merry, planting himself in front of the big Fourth-Former, "what does all this mean?"

"Get out of the way!"

"I want an explanation."

"You're in my way."

"Look here—"

"Clear out!"

"You're not going till you've explained," said Tom Merry determinedly. "If we have much more of your rot, we'll roll you into the gutter, too."

"What-ho!" said Lowther emphatically.

"Towser! Towser!"

Towser seemed to bristle all over. Herries grinned.

"You'd better buzz off," he said. "I've only got to say a word to Towser, and he'll take free samples out of your legs. Get away!"

Manners and Lowther glanced at the bulldog, and released Herries. Towser looked very business-like.

"What's the matter with you, Herries?" demanded Tom Merry angrily. "It's the same with Gus and Dig. What have you got up against us?"

"You know jolly well."

"We don't know."

"Think it over, then."

"You ass! You're barking up a wrong tree, somehow," exclaimed Tom Merry. "I don't understand you fellows at all. If you've got anything up against a chap, why can't you say it out plain?"

"I told Blake I wouldn't."

"Oh, it's Blake, then!"

"It's all of us," said Herries. "We don't want a row with you fellows. It's all right, only—"

"Only what?"

"Only we don't want to speak to you."

"Why not?"

"Find out!"

In spite of the threatening teeth of Towser, the Terrible Three came very near hurling themselves upon Herries at that moment.

But Tom Merry restrained his temper.

"We'll speak to Blake," he said. "Come on, you fellows."

"Towser, run, old boy!"

And Herries ran off with his bulldog. The Terrible Three, with frowning brows, set out to look for Jack Blake, of the Fourth. The interview was likely to be a stormy one when they found him.

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JACK BLAKE dropped from the horizontal bar in the gym., with the flush of exercise in his handsome boyish face. Half a dozen fellows who had been watching his feats there gave him a cheer.

"Jolly good!" said Harry Noble, of the Shell. "You Fourth-Form kids aren't all duffers. Now—"

"Can't say the same of you Shell-fish," said Blake cheerfully. "You are."

"Well, you cheeky fag—"

"Rats!"

"Here he is!"

It was an exclamation from the direction of the door. Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther came up, looking very warm and excited. They had been hunting high and low for Jack Blake.

"Here the bouncer is!"

"We've found him."

"Blake! Blake!"

Jack Blake deliberately turned his back upon them, and began speaking to Kerruish, of the Fourth.

"Let's see you on the bar, Kerruish, old boy."

"I say, Blake—"

"Up with you, Kerruish!"

"Tom Merry's talking to you," said Kerruish, in astonishment.

"Never mind. Get on the bar."

"But—"

"Here, hands off!" exclaimed Blake, as the Terrible Three, their patience quite exhausted, seized him in their grasp. "Stop that!"

"You ass—"

"Hands off!"

"Keep him tight!" growled Tom Merry, whose blue eyes were glinting now. "If you don't want the frog's-march round the gym., Blake, you'll tell us what you are playing the giddy ox for."

"Let me go!"

"I won't!"

Blake began to struggle fiercely. He was a powerful fellow for a junior, but he had no chance, of course, against three fellows.

They held him fast, and he was twisted over and laid on his back on the floor. Then Monty Lowther stood on his legs, to keep them from lashing out, and Manners held his wrists above his head. Tom Merry gently planted a foot upon his chest.

Spread out in this manner, Jack Blake was quite helpless, and at the mercy of his foes; but his spirit was undaunted. His eyes blazed as he looked up at the Terrible Three, and gasped for breath.

"I'll take you one at a time, if you like," he exclaimed; "with or without gloves, too. You rotters!"

"Never mind that now," said Tom Merry. "You've got to explain yourself, and we'll fight you afterwards, if you like."

Blake's mouth set obstinately.

"You won't get a word out of me."

"Look here—"

"Lemme get up."

"You'll jolly well get the frog's-march in a minute. I—"

"Rescue, Fourth!" shouted Blake.

There was a general movement among the Fourth-Formers who were standing round. The scene was attracting attention from all parts of the gym.

"Here, let him alone!" exclaimed Kerruish, the Manx lad, and he pushed forward, at the same time rolling back his cuffs.

"Stand back!"

"Bosh! Let Blake get up."

"That's the tune!" exclaimed Hancock, of the Fourth. "Let him alone!"

And there was a threatening murmur from the juniors.

The Shell fellows in the crowd looked perplexed. They naturally felt like backing their own Form against the Fourth, but Tom Merry's proceedings at the present moment certainly did seem a little bit high-handed.

Tom Merry looked round with his clear, flashing eyes.

"Hold on a minute, chaps!" he exclaimed. "You can all know how the matter stands. This dummy Blake has got something up against us, and he won't explain what it is. That's what we want—an explanation. He won't give it."

"Why the dickens don't you, Blake?" demanded Noble.

"Because I don't choose," said Blake.

"That's no answer. Tom Merry has a right to it."

Blake smiled scornfully.

"Tom Merry knows best whether he has a right to ask it," he said. "I dare say he could hit on it for himself if he thought the matter over."

"I have thought the matter over."

"Well, you'll get nothing out of me." And Blake closed his lips obstinately. Tom Merry stood looking down at him with blazing eyes. "Look here, Blake," he said, "I know you're a decent chap, or I'd let the matter drop now, and never speak to you again as long as I'm at St. Jim's. But I know there must be some mistake."

"Not much chance of a mistake in this matter."

"What is the matter?"

Blake did not answer.

"Did you ever see such an exasperating brute?" exclaimed Lowther. "Give him the frog's-march, and see if that will make him talk."

"Here, hold on!"

"Right-ho! We're holding on."

And the Terrible Three yanked Jack Blake from the floor. The Fourth-Former struggled in vain in their grasp.

"Rescue, Fourth!" he shouted.

"Oh, hang it," said Kerruish, "if you've got something up against Tom Merry, why can't you tell the chap what it is, in plain English?"

"I'm not going to tell him."

"Then you can bawl rescue till you're hoarse; I don't stir."

"Nor I," said several voices. "It's caddish, Blake. Tell him what you've got against him."

"Go and eat coke!"

"Come on!" said Tom Merry.

There was no chance of a rescue.

The juniors were puzzled and by no means pleased by Blake's obstinacy. If he had anything against the Terrible Three, it was only straightforward and British to tell them so. This idea of cutting a fellow dead, and at the same time refusing to explain what offence he had given, did not appeal at all to the St. Jim's fellows.

Fourth-Formers as well as Shell fellows looked on without interference while Jack Blake went through the delights of the frog's-march.

Blake struggled desperately in the grip of the Shell fellows, but his struggles only made his punishment worse.

Tom Merry, of course, did not hurt him. The frog's-march was of a very gentle variety; but it was sufficiently painful to Blake, to say nothing of the humiliation.

Right round the great gymnasium they marched him, wriggling spasmodically and vainly in their grip.

Then they came to a halt.

"Now will you explain?"

"No!" roared Blake.

"You'll go round again."

"I don't care."

"You'll get bumped next time."

"Go and eat coke."

"What are you playing the giddy ox for?"

"Find out!"

"Come on!" exclaimed Tom Merry, quite exasperated.

"What he wants is some more, and plenty of it! Come on!" Jack Blake made a tremendous effort to break loose.

He dragged his captors over, and for some minutes the four juniors were mixed up on the floor in a writhing, struggling mass. At the same time, Kildare, of the Sixth, the captain of St. Jim's, entered.

CHAPTER 4.

Skimpole Inquires.

KILDARE stared blankly at the scene on the floor. Rows between the Terrible Three and the chums of Study No. 6 were certainly not rare, but this looked like something more serious than a study row. Jack Blake was hitting out furiously, and Monty Lowther had rolled over on the floor with a crimson-nose. Tom Merry and Manners were grasping Blake now with no gentle hands.

The captain of St. Jim's strode towards them.

"Stop that!" he rapped out.

At Kildare's voice the struggle ceased.

Tom Merry and Manners let go Blake as if he had suddenly become red-hot, and Blake rolled away gasping on the floor. Tom Merry jumped up, and Monty Lowther sat up, his hand to his streaming nose.

Kildare looked at them sternly.

"What does this mean?" he exclaimed.

"N-n-nothing!" stammered Tom Merry.

"You were fighting."

"Oh, no!"

"What?"

"We weren't fighting," explained Tom Merry. "If we had been fighting we should have been one to one, you know. We were collaring Blake."

"And what were you collaring Blake for?"

"To—to give him the frog's march, you see."

"Indeed! And why?"

"Oh, he wants to be put through it, you know! It was a sort of lesson to him not to be cheeky to his elders."

Kildare could not help grinning. Tom Merry was a couple of months older than Blake, but he spoke in quite a grandfatherly manner.

"Well, I don't like to see you kids taking a row to this extent," said Kildare. "You were fighting, and in a way I don't like to see. A study row does no great harm, but you were punching one another like hoodlums."

"I'm sorry."

"Well, don't do it any more, that's all."

Kildare walked out, leaving the late antagonists looking at one another grimly enough. Blake caressed a darkened eye.

"Does that look very bad, Kerruish?" he asked, turning to the Manx junior, and ignoring the Terrible Three.

Kerruish grinned.

"It isn't a beauty spot," he said.

"My hat! And Cousin Ethel's coming to-morrow! I shall have to get a beefsteak for it from the House-dame."

And Blake turned to hurry away.

Tom Merry called to him.

"Blake!"

The Fourth-Former hurried on without looking round.

Tom Merry's face flushed, and he made a movement to follow, but Monty Lowther caught his sleeve.

"Hold on, Tommy! Remember Kildare!"

Tom Merry nodded.

"All right; but I'll make him speak, all the same, some time. It's a caddish thing to take up a line like that."

"I know it is, and I can't understand it about Blake."

"I suppose there's some mistake," said Manners, caressing his nose. "There's no mistake about this bump on my nose, though. It's there."

"Well, yes, it looks like it," assented Tom Merry, laughing. "My eye seems to be going to close up, too. I think I'll go and bathe it."

And the Terrible Three left the gym.

They attended to their damages, at the same time discussing the strange matter that had risen so suddenly to bother them.

That morning they had been on the best of terms with Study No. 6.

Even as late as afternoon school, when Herr Schneider had taken the Fourth Form and the Shell together in one class for German, there had been no friction.

But since classes had been dismissed this peculiar state of affairs had arisen.

What was the matter with Study No. 6.

Tom Merry was determined to have an explanation, as was only natural. The state of affairs could not be allowed to last. It would lead to endless comment in the School House, and Blake's attitude could not fail to make fellows think that the Terrible Three had failed to "play the game" somehow.

If fellows like Gore or Mellish had made a stand against them no notice would have been taken of them, but it was different with Blake & Co.

They were the top of the Fourth, and fellows of good standing, and they would not be supposed to get their backs up over nothing.

There was a general prospect of unpleasantness if the matter was not cleared up.

Another point, too, was in Tom Merry's mind.

D'Arcy's cousin Ethel was visiting the school on the following day, which was a half-holiday, and the Terrible Three were very friendly with Ethel.

They knew that some boating excursion was being planned, and they naturally wanted to take part in it.

But with this trouble between them and the Fourth-Formers that would be out of the question.

"Suppose we put it to them in a friendly way?" suggested Manners, as he tied his necktie in the study after the wash, and at the same time ruefully surveyed the reflection of his swollen nose in the glass. "Perhaps that would have more effect than punching their heads, when you come to think of it."

"Something in that," assented Lowther.

Tom Merry laughed.

"You're right; and if we see Cousin Ethel to-morrow we don't want to show her an assortment of black eyes, and swollen noses, and thick ears."

"Exactly."

"But if they refuse to explain—"

"We'll treat them with contempt, then, and find some way of bagging Cousin Ethel to-morrow, and leave 'em in the lurch."

"Jolly good."

There was a tap at the door of the study, and Skimpole looked in. Skimpole, the genius of the Shell, blinked at the Terrible Three through his big glasses.

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"Ah, I thought I should find you here!" he exclaimed, with much satisfaction.

"Nothing remarkable in that, as it's our study," grunted Lowther.

"I deduced it," said Skimpole, who, when he was not inventing airships or expounding Socialism, was much given to playing the amateur detective. "I heard that you had gone to the dorm, for a wash. I discovered traces of wet in the passage, and deduced from that that you were here."

Tom Merry laughed heartily.

"You deduced that we came back dripping from the wash, I suppose," he remarked. "As a matter of fact, there's been about a gallon of water spilt in the passage, through Gore upsetting a chap who was bringing a kettle along."

"Ahem! I suppose that is the fact, as you say so——"

"Of course it's a fact, fathead!"

"Ahem! However, as a careful detective, I must prefer my theories to your facts. I have found you here."

"Good! Now go and find somebody else somewhere else."

"Really, Merry——"

"Go and find a keeper!" said Monty Lowther.

"Really, Lowther, I have come here to do you a service——"

"Ow! We don't want to hear anything about Socialism. There's enough of that in the papers nowadays."

"I was not thinking of that——"

"We don't want the details of the latest thing in airships."

"I have given up airships."

"Well, aeroplanes are just as bad when you begin on 'em. Bunk!"

"I was not going——"

"Buzz off!"

"As you know," said Skimpole, unheeding, "I have in my leisure moments, and entirely as a brain rest after serious work, taken up amateur detective pursuits. I hear that there is a mystery in the School House——"

"Well, we haven't got it here! Look in the passage, or under the Head's desk."

"Pray do not be frivolous, Lowther. I hear that you have some dispute with Blake, and he refuses to explain what is the matter."

Tom Merry gave a groan.

"Oh, dear! It's all over the School House already, I suppose!"

"The fellows were talking about it in the common-room," said Skimpole. "I immediately determined to offer you my services. I will solve the mystery very shortly."

"Skimpy, old man——"

"Pray let me have the details," said Skimpole, in the best manner of a stage Sherlock Holmes, producing a bulky notebook and wetting the end of a pencil.

The Terrible Three looked at one another and grinned. Skimpole was usually funnier as an amateur detective than as an inventor of airships, which was saying a great deal.

"I'm sorry, Skimpy," said Tom Merry, laughing, "but I'm afraid I can't oblige you with any details. You see, it's all right."

"But there is a mystery?"

"Nothing to speak of."

"I understand that Blake and the rest have something up against you?"

"Ye-e-es."

"And decline to explain what it is?"

"Oh, yes."

"Is that all?"

"That's all."

"Good. Of course, it is plain that Blake suspects you of something. Perhaps he has missed money from his study——"

"What?"

"And suspects you of stealing it——"

"Eh?"

"In that case, the question to be first settled is whether you are guilty. If you are guilty, I should advise the immediate return of the stolen property."

The Terrible Three stared at him blankly. Skimpole was certainly going ahead.

"You unutterable ass!" said Tom Merry at last.

"Ah!" said Skimpole, jotting something down in his notebook. "Abuse of the detective engaged upon the case can only be construed into a sign of guilt."

"You frabjous idiot!"

"I must observe that all you say may be used in evidence against you," said Skimpole. "You see, I proceed in these matters by deduction. Blake suspects you of something. It is not murder. There has been no body discovered in the School House. Moreover, no one is missing."

"My only hat!"

"Therefore it is not murder. It must be robbery. Mind, I do not say you are guilty. Things certainly look rather black against you——"

"What!"

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"But I will do my best for you. At all events, I will clear up the mystery," said Skimpole, with a wave of the hand. "I regard that as my duty. You had better be frank with me, my man—I mean, Tom Merry!"

"You burbling duffer!"

"If you stole the money——"

"Idiot!"

"Or the watch, as the case may be——"

"Dummy!"

"You had better confess, and restore it——"

"Lunatic!"

"Abuse is not argument. As it appears to be impossible to get a clear statement from you, I will interview the fellows in No. 6."

And Skimpole left the study, leaving the Terrible Three half laughing and half angry.

CHAPTER 5.

D'Arcy Thinks It Rotten.

"I WEGARD it as wotten!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy made that pronouncement in Study No. 6.

The chums of the Fourth were at prep.—or were supposed to be at prep. They had their books upon the table, and were sitting round it.

But that was as far as they had advanced with prep.

They were looking worried, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had voiced the sentiments of all four of them when he made his emphatic observation to the effect that he regarded it as rotten.

"Absolutely wotten!" added D'Arcy.

Jack Blake nodded.

"Beastly!" he observed.

"What-ho!" said Dig.

Herries grunted assent.

The chums of the Fourth Form all felt the same about the matter. It might worry the Terrible Three; but it was a greater worry still to the chums of Study No. 6.

"I wegard it as absolutely, feahfully wotten," went on Arthur Augustus. "In the first place, it is wotten to have to lowah your opinion of a fellow you like."

"Quite so."

"Then it is wotten to see him cut up wusty about it, without bein' able to explain to him."

"Yes, rather."

"Moreovah," continued the swell of St. Jim's, "Cousin Ethel's comin' ovah to-morrow aftahnoon."

"I know it."

"She will see that there is somethin' w'ong."

"Of course she will."

"She'll think we've been quawwellin'."

"She'll know we have."

"She'll wegard it as shockin' bad form."

"Very likely."

"Well, deah boys, I wegard that as the wottenest part of all."

And Arthur Augustus gave a sigh.

Jack Blake grunted.

"It's rotten all round," he said. "Blessed if I should ever have expected anything of the sort from Merry. It's not like him—as we knew him."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"You never know a chap till you find him out," Digby remarked oracularly.

"I wegard that as a vewy just wemark, Dig."

"Can't be helped," said Herries. "Better say nothing more to them, that's all."

"If there were only woom for a doubt——"

"But there isn't."

"No; I'm afwaid not."

"When you see a chap's own handwriting——"

"I weally think there is no furthah doubt, then, deah boy. The wotten part of it is that, undah the cires, we can't speak about it. Not that speakin' about it would make any difference to the mattah. It wouldn't atlah the facts."

"Not at all. Better keep our heads shut over it."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Ah, you are here!" said a voice at the door, as Skimpole blinked in. "I am very glad to find you fellows at home."

"The gladness is all on your side, then," said Blake crossly. "Don't bother now, Skimpy! We've enough to bother over without any Determinism or airships!"

"I have come to investigate——"

"Clear!"

Skimpole did not clear. He came into the study, closed the door in a mysterious way, and produced his notebook.

"I am going to look into the case," he said.

"What case?"

"The case of Study No. 6."

Blake looked perplexed.
 "Do you mean the bookcase?" he asked.
 "Certainly not, Blake! Prevarication is useless!"
 "Bai Jove!"
 "What on earth are you driving at, Skimmy?"
 "I am here to investigate. You will find it better to be frank with me. You suspect Tom Merry. Good! What have you missed?"
 "Missed!"
 "Yes. What has been stolen?"
 "Stolen!" gasped Blake helplessly.
 "Certainly! What has Tom Merry taken from the study?"
 "T-t-taken from the study!"
 "Exactly! Come, you had better speak out!"
 "You frabjous ass, he hasn't taken anything! There's nothing been missed. What put such a silly-ass idea into your head?"
 "You will find it better to be frank!"
 "How can I be frank when I am Jack?" demanded Blake, with an air of seriousness as if he were asking a very important question.
 Skimpole looked puzzled. He never did catch on to the most obvious joke.
 "I mean you had better be candid," he said.
 "I'm sweet enough already without being candied!" said Blake.
 "I don't quite understand you, Blake. You appear to me to be quibbling—a certain sign of guilt! Ahem! I forgot. Tom Merry is the guilty party."
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 "There is no cause for laughter. I am willing to place my abilities at your disposal in discovering the stolen property, and bringing the crime home to Tom Merry. If he is innocent, I shall prove him—"
 "Guilty?"
 "Certainly not! I shall lay bare the facts, whatever they are. A detective can be no respecter of persons. I should be sorry to see Tom Merry expelled—"
 "What!"
 "But I must lay bare the truth. Now, kindly acquaint me with the nature of the missing property."
 Blake assumed a solemn expression.
 "There's nothing missing at present," he said. "But I have reason to believe that something will be missing from the School House shortly."
 "Ah, indeed! Go on! What is it?"
 "A frabjous ass named Herbert Skimpole! He is very likely to be found brained in some quiet corner!"
 "Really, Blake—"
 "That's all the information I can give."
 "Yaas, wathah! I am wathah inclined, howevah, to give Skimpole a feaful thwashin'!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy thoughtfully.
 "Really, D'Arcy—"
 Jack Blake rose and took the amateur detective by the collar.
 "There's nothing missing," he said. "There's no crime and no mystery—no dead bodies behind the wainscot, no missing wills hidden inside a bicycle tyre. I'm sorry, but that's how the matter stands. Now travel along!"
 "I refuse to go till I have the facts—"
 Blake opened the door.
 "That's your way, Skimmy!"
 A heavy boot clumped behind Skimpole, and he made a hasty exit into the passage. He ran right into three juniors, who were just arriving at the door.
 "Ow!" gasped Manners, as he reeled back against the opposite wall, with Skimpole clutching wildly at him.
 "You ass!"
 "Dear me!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Skimpole slid to the floor, and sat there looking dazed. Blake stood in the doorway, looking askance at the Terrible Three.

Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther marched into the study, and Blake had no choice but to give ground. Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy rose to their feet, looking very threatening. Tom Merry did not heed their looks.

He closed the door, and the Terrible Three stood with their back to it.

"Now," said Tom Merry grimly, "we've come to talk this matter over in a friendly manner."

CHAPTER 6.

In a Friendly Manner.

TOM MERRY'S look was grim, and his tone was businesslike. He had come to talk the matter over in a friendly manner, as he said; but there wasn't much friendliness in the looks of anybody in the study.

The Fourth-Formers glanced at one another in silence.

"Well?" said Tom Merry.

"Well?" said Manners.

"Well?" said Lowther.

Arthur Augustus looked at the ceiling. Digby looked at the floor. Herries looked at the pattern of his trousers. Jack Blake looked out of the window.

Silence followed the three "Wells."

The chums of the Shell breathed hard.

"Look here!" said Tom Merry.

Nobody looked.

"We've come to talk this matter over in a friendly spirit."

D'Arcy coughed, but no other sound broke the silence of the study. Wrath gathered on the brows of the Shell fellows.

"I don't quite know what to think of you chaps," said Tom Merry, his voice rising as his temper rose. "You are acting like a set of cads, and that's the truth!"

"I wefuse to be called a cad!"

"Shut up, Gussy!" said Blake warningly.

"I decline to shut up! I have been called by an opprobrious epithet!"

"Dry up!"

"Undah the cires, it is imposs. for me to dwy up! I—"

"Cad was the word," said Tom Merry. "You can put it in your pipe and smoke it! What do you mean by it?" he went on, his eyes flaming. "We were on good terms enough this morning. Without any cause at all, you suddenly take it into your heads to cut us. We don't want your blessed acquaintance, as far as that goes! You can keep it to yourself if you want to. But you've treated us like pigs in the sight of the whole House. The fellows are already jawing it over. We're entitled to an explanation."

"Yaas, wathah! There is somethin' in what Tom Mewwy says, Blake."

"Shut up!"

"I wefuse to shut up. There is somethin' in what the chap says. Ewewy gentleman who consideahs himself aggrieved has a wight to an explanation."

"Oh, ring off!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Do shut up!" growled Digby.

"Weally, Dig—"

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" demanded Tom Merry. "If there's any mistake, we're willing to hear what you have to say, and to explain it."

Blake shifted uncomfortably.

"We don't want to talk about it," he said.

"What you want isn't the point. It's what we want."

"Well, there's no mistake."

"Wathah not! I quite fail to see how there can be woom for a mistake in the mattah," said D'Arcy, with a shake of the head.

Tom Merry's eyes gleamed.

"Then tell us what it is, and we'll see."

Silence.

"You won't tell us."

"We can't," said Blake, after a pause.

"Why not?"

"Because—because we can't."

"And do you call that playing the game?" demanded Tom Merry hotly.

Blake sniffed.

"Oh, if you come to playing the game, you can't give us many points," he said. "You're not the chap to preach to anybody."

Tom Merry drew a deep breath.

"I'm jolly well keeping my temper in this matter," he said. "If it were any chap but you, Blake, I'd jolly well

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land out from the shoulder. But I can't help feeling that there's some ghastly mistake somewhere."

"There isn't."

"If what you say means anything at all, it means that you suspect me of treating you badly in some manner."

"I don't suspect," said Blake abruptly; "I know."

"You know—what?"

"Never mind."

"Are Manners and Lowther in it—or is it up against me only?"

"It stands to reason they're in it, as they chum up with you in everything," said Blake. "I don't say there's any proof. But anyway, we haven't anything to say against them."

"Then it's myself only?"

"Well, yes."

"What have I done?"

Blake was silent.

"What have I said?"

Still silence.

"You won't tell me! You're going around nursing it up among yourselves, and making fellows think that I've treated you meanly in some way, and you haven't the decency to speak out!" exclaimed Tom Merry fiercely.

Blake was still silent.

His face was very red, and his mouth was set obstinately. He was evidently determined not to speak.

"Then I've only got one thing to say," said Tom Merry. "You're a cad, Blake, and the rest of you are cads—and I stick to that, till you have the decency to say out what you've got in your minds."

"I refuse to be called a cad."

"I say the same as Tom Merry," said Lowther. "And I'm willing to lick any rotter in the Fourth Form who says otherwise."

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"And I say the same," said Manners; "and for two pins I'd wade in now and wipe up the floor of the study with you!"

Blake shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"Oh, it's no good talking!" he exclaimed. "The less said about the matter, the better. Get out, and don't speak to us; that's all we want."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Tom Merry's eyes flashed.

"It's not all we want!" he said. "But if you like to swallow what I've said, you are welcome to it."

"If it comes to that, I dare say I could chuck you out of this study," said Blake warmly.

"You'd better try!"

"If you put it like that, I jolly well will try."

"Come on, then!"

Jack Blake was losing his temper, too. He was not slow to accept the invitation of Tom Merry.

He ran straight at the hero of the Shell, and grasped him, and in a moment they were whirling round the study in conflict.

Both were excited, both had their tempers unusually roused. They reeled to and fro in the study, and crashed against the table.

"Here, keep off!" exclaimed Digby, giving the nearest of the two a push.

It happened to be Tom Merry.

"Hands off!" exclaimed Lowther angrily. "Two to one isn't fair play."

Digby's ire was quickly roused.

"Who's two to one?" he demanded.

"You, you worm!"

That was enough for Digby.

The next moment he was waltzing with Monty Lowther; at all events, that was what he appeared to be doing.

"Pway keep off me!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Hang it all, deah boys, don't twead on my feet!"

"Blow your feet!" gasped Lowther.

"I refuse to do anythin' of the sort. I—I mean—I wegard you as a wottah. I weally think we cannot allow these disreputable scones in our studay, Hewwies."

"Right-ho!" said Herries.

"Shall we chuck the wottahs out?"

"You'd better not try," said Manners.

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"Oh, ring off, ass!"

"I wefuse to wing off, and I uttahly decline to be called an ass. Hewwies, pway back me up, and we will put an end to this unseemly disturbance."

"What-ho!"

"Here, one at a time!" exclaimed Manners, as the two Fourth-Formers advanced upon him.

D'Arcy shook his head.

"This is not a fight, Mannahs; it's a throw-out."

"Rats!"

"Collah him, Hewwies!"

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"Come on, then!"

They collared Manners. Manners went out of the study with a rush, and bumped in the passage.

"Bai Jove! That's a beginnin'."

"Collar the other rotters!" gasped Herries.

"Wight-ho!"

Tom Merry and Blake had come down with a bump on the hearthrug. Tom Merry was busily engaged in rubbing Blake's features in the rug, and Blake was pommelling away at Tom Merry's ribs for all he was worth.

D'Arcy and Herries laid hold of the hero of the Shell, one at his neck and one at his heels, and dragged him off Blake.

Tom Merry struggled furiously.

"Leggo! Fair play!"

"Wats! You're goin' out."

"Leggo!"

The Fourth-Formers yanked him to the door, and then they obeyed his order to "leggo." Tom Merry rolled out on Manners, knocking him down again as he was getting up.

"Now for the othah wottah!"

Digby and Lowther had bumped against the armchair and fallen into it. The juniors dragged them out, detached them from one another, and hurled Lowther forth.

Three Shell fellows were sprawling in the corridor.

The door of Study No. 6 was packed with the Fourth-Formers, glaring and gasping at their ejected enemies.

"Pway go away quietly, deah boys," said D'Arcy, with a wave of the hand. "We have no desire to hurt you in any way. But if you wowwy us again we shall have no wesource but to give you a feahful thwashin'."

Tom Merry & Co. did not look like going away quietly, as they struggled up with red wrath in their faces.

But just as they were about to hurl themselves upon the Fourth-Formers, there came a note of warning from Harry Noble, who was coming upstairs.

"Cave!"

Tom Merry glanced quickly towards him.

"Coo-ey!" sang out the Australian. "Cave! Railton!"

The chums of Study No. 6 bolted back into the study and closed the door. The Terrible Three did a foot-race along the passage.

Twenty seconds later, Mr. Railton came along, and found nothing to account for the noise he had heard.

The House-master of the School House looked about him with a puzzled expression. But there was nothing amiss, apparently, and so he shook his head and went his way.

CHAPTER 7.

The Peacemakers.

THE outbreak of ill-feeling between the Terrible Three and the chums of Study No. 6 caused much comment in the School House, especially among the juniors.

Which was chief of the School House juniors, Tom Merry or Jack Blake, was a point that had never been satisfactorily settled.

But both were looked up to by the juniors, and a row between them was certain to cause excitement in the House.

Even Figgins & Co., of the New House, were interested in it. Figgins & Co. were "up against" the School House all the time, but endless rows and rags did not diminish the esteem they felt for Tom Merry & C.

When the news of the rupture spread to the New House, Figgins was greatly concerned. He was having tea in his study in the New House, with his chums Kerr and Fatty Wynn, when Pratt looked in and told him.

Pratt, of the Fourth, was full of it. He gave Figgins ample details of terrific combats alleged to have taken place between the Terrible Three and Study No. 6, and left the New House chums in a state of wonder.

"Blessed if I can make it out," Figgins remarked, when Pratt was gone. "Pratty has piled it on a bit, I suppose; but I suppose it's true in the main."

"Some row about a feed, perhaps," hazarded Fatty Wynn. "I have always thought that it's carrying a joke too far to interfere with a fellow's grub."

"You would!" grunted Figgins.

"Look here, Figgy—"

"I can't make it out, either," said Kerr, screwing up his forehead to think. Kerr was a canny Scot, and it was freely admitted in Figgins's study that when there was any hard thinking to be done, Kerr was the chap to do it. "It looks to me as if somebody has been making mischief."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, you remember the time when Mellish set us all by the ears by telling us tales about one another?" said Kerr. "It might be something of the kind again."

"By George, I shouldn't wonder!"

"I don't see why we shouldn't look into it," said Kerr thoughtfully. "Of course, they're only School House worms,

but as cock house at St. Jim's we really ought to look after them a little."

This was a view of the case that fully appealed to Figgins. "Right you are!" he exclaimed. "Blessed are the peacemakers, you know. We're the head of the juniors of St. Jim's, and these quarrelling bounders ought to be made to listen to the voice of authority."

"We'll go over and see them about it."

"Here, we haven't finished tea!" said Fatty Wynn in alarm.

"Blow tea!"

"You must be off your rocker, Figgins!"

"Never mind tea," said Figgins, taking his fat chum by the collar and jerking him out of his chair. "That's all right. You can miss the rest."

"But—"

"Come on!"

"I'm hungry."

"You'll enjoy your supper all the more."

"I've hardly tasted a mouthful—"

"Well, I don't know the exact size of your mouth, Fatty, but if you could get six sausages, nine potatoes, and half a loaf and a quarter-pound of butter into it at once, it must be a tidy size."

"There were only eight potatoes—"

"Well, that's enough to go on with. Give your internal regions a five-bar rest, and come on."

Fatty Wynn cast a lingering glance at the table as he followed Figgins and Kerr from the study. He had eaten only enough for two, and he naturally felt a little empty.

Dusk was falling in the quiet September evening as the New House chums crossed the quadrangle towards the School House.

A burly junior loomed up through the dusk, walking along quickly, with his hands thrust deep into his trousers' pockets, and a gloomy look on his face.

It was George Gore.

Figgins called to him, and Gore stopped.

"Hold on!" said Figgins. "I hear you've got alarms and excursions going on in the School House."

Gore grinned.

"Yes. Tom Merry and Blake have been going for one another," he said.

"What's it all about?"

"Study No. 6 have something up against Tom Merry, that's all. They make out that he's been playing them a mean trick of some sort."

"Rot!" said Figgins.

"You can call it rot if you like. Some of the chaps say that Tom Merry has stolen something from Study No. 6."

Figgins looked at him keenly.

"I think I can guess who started that," he remarked.

"Who?" asked Gore, very innocently.

"You—or Mellish."

Gore shrugged his shoulders.

"You're welcome to your opinion," he said.

He walked away. Figgins & Co., looking considerably puzzled, went on to the School House. They met Reilly in the hall, and the Belfast boy looked inclined to attempt the ejection of the New House intruders all by himself, but Figgins made the sign of peace.

"Pax!" he exclaimed. "Where's Blake?"

"Faith, and he's in his study!"

"Good! It's all right, Paddy; we're on a friendly visit."

"Sure and Tom Merry's just paid him a friendly visit, and left the study on his neck," grinned Reilly.

That did not sound very promising for Figgins & Co. However, strong in the knowledge of the natural superiority of New House over School House—in their own opinion—they ascended the stairs and knocked at the door of Study No. 6.

It was opened from within so suddenly that they jumped.

"Look here," roared the voice of Blake, "we've had enough of you! We're not going to have any more! If you don't keep out—Hallo, Figg!"

Figgins grinned.

"That a new dodge for greeting visitors?" he asked.

Blake turned pink.

"I didn't know it was you, Figgins. But what do you want, anyway? This is a respectable house, and New House bounders are not allowed in it off their chains."

"Oh, cheese it! We've come to see what the row's about."

"What row?"

"Between you and Tom Merry."

"Ask Tom Merry."

"But—"

"Yaas, wathah, deah boys! We wefer you to Tom Merry as the pwopah source of information."

"Yes, but—"

"Good-bye!" said Blake. And he shut the study door, leaving the peacemakers looking rather blankly at one another.

CHAPTER 8.

No Clue.

F IGGINS was the first to break the silence.

"Well," he said, with a deep breath, "if this is the latest thing in School House manners, I can only say that they've a lot to learn."

"What-ho!" said Kerr emphatically.

"Worth leaving our tea unfinished for, this is!" Fatty Wynn remarked sarcastically.

"Oh, blow your tea!"

"Well, what I say about it is—"

"Never mind what you say; listen to what I say," said Figgins. "I suppose Blake is worried. He has a beautiful art shade round his eye, and I suppose he's thinking of Miss Cleveland coming to-morrow. Just like those asses to begin fighting at such a time! Let's go and see Tom Merry."

"Dear me! Is that Figgins?"

Skimpole came along the dusky passage, and he blinked at the New House juniors. His glance ran over them with suspicion.

"Ah! Are you mixed up in it, too?" he exclaimed.

"Mixed up in what?"

"The case of Study No. 6. I presume you know that there has been a glaring case of barefaced robbery—"

"Barefaced idiocy, you mean!"

"Really, Figgins—"

"Oh, go and eat coke!"

"I am taking up the case," said Skimpole. "Tom Merry refuses to admit his guilt. He may be innocent, but things certainly look very black against him. Blake refuses to make a definite charge. It is possible that he is acting in collusion with Merry. Things look very black against Blake. I find you three New House fellows paying a surreptitious visit to Blake's study, and hanging about outside the door in an extremely suspicious manner. I must say that things look very black against you."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"This affectation of ribald merriment only makes matters look worse. You cannot impose on me as easily as that. You had better be frank."

Figgins stared.

"Frank!"

"Certainly. I may be able to let you off lightly if you treat me with perfect frankness. That is the line Sherlock Holmes takes. Now, have you received any of the stolen property from Merry?"

"S-s-s-stolen property?"

"Exactly. Are you acting the part of a fence—a receiver of stolen goods?"

"If I didn't know you were off your rocker, Skimmy, I should wipe up the floor with you!" said Figgins.

"This is mere prevarication."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You cannot deceive me so easily. As you have now practically admitted your guilt, I give you an opportunity of restoring the goods."

"Anybody got a strait-jacket?" asked Figgins, addressing space.

"Really, Figgins—"

"Oh, bump him, and let's get on!" said Kerr.

"Good wheeze!"

Skimpole was collared before he could make a movement to escape, and promptly bumped on the floor. He was left in a sitting posture, with his breath coming in jerks and his spectacles sliding down his nose, and the New House juniors went on to Tom Merry's study.

"Dear me!" gasped Skimpole. "This—this is quite unnerving. However, it establishes the truth of my theory."

He jerked out his note-book, set his glasses straight, and began to jot with a pencil.

"Figgins caught lurking outside Blake's study in a suspicious manner—proceeded to violence on being questioned—very black against Figgins."

And Skimpole picked himself up and walked away, quite satisfied that his investigations were panning out very well indeed.

Figgins knocked at the door of Tom Merry's study and looked in. The room was empty. Figgins grunted.

"I expect he's in the common-room."

Figgins & Co. proceeded downstairs. Sure enough the Terrible Three, who had finished their prep., were in the common-room. Manners and Lowther were playing chess, and Tom Merry stood leaning on the wall watching the game. His eyes were on the board, but his thoughts were far away. Tom Merry was more worried than he cared to say about the peculiar line taken up by Study No. 6.

"Hallo!" said Figgins. "We're looking for you chaps."

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"Look a little further, please!" growled Lowther. "Check!"

"We want to speak to you——"

"Speak to one another, then, if you must speak!"

"Look here, Lowther——"

"Rats!"

Tom Merry laughed.

"It's all right, Figgy," he said. "It's no good speaking to Lowther when he's playing chess, or Manners either, for that matter. What is it?"

"We're looking into this trouble of yours with Study No. 6."

Tom Merry's face darkened.

"Oh, never mind that!"

"We thought we'd try to sift it out for you," said Figgins.

"I hear that Study No. 6 have gone for you bald-headed, and won't explain their reasons."

"Well, something like that."

"And you can't make it out?"

"No."

"Well," said Figgins, with an air of great wisdom, "suppose it's something like that trouble we had once before? You remember the time when Mellish set us all by the ears with his yarns?"

Tom Merry started. Figgins propounded that theory with an impressive air, apparently quite forgetful that it was Kerr who had thought of it. But Kerr only smiled.

"My hat!" said Tom. "There might be something in that."

"You see, Blake seems to be thinking badly of you, and won't explain; and that's a great deal like what happened before over Mellish."

"You're right, Figgy."

"Worth looking into—eh?"

"Yes; but"—Tom Merry's face hardened—"Blake ought not to take in any yarn Mellish might have told him, after what happened that time."

"It might be some other cad—Gore, for instance."

"That's no excuse for Blake believing the yarn without giving me a chance to explain," said Tom Merry, knitting his brows.

"You don't know how it was worked. You might look into it."

"I will. I'll give Blake a chance to speak—the last chance, too. If he wants to remain on these terms, I shan't try to bridge it over again."

"We'll come with you," said Figgins, more and more satisfied with his new role of peacemaker. "Come on!"

Tom Merry assented, and they proceeded to Study No. 6. Blake & Co. simply stared at them when they entered.

"So you're back again!" exclaimed Blake.

"Yes," said Figgins. "We think we've hit on the mystery."

"What do you mean?"

"Yaas, pway explain yourself, deah boy."

"Go it, Merry," said Kerr encouragingly.

Tom Merry looked steadily at the angry Fourth-Formers. "Figgins has made a suggestion," he said. "He thinks it possible that Mellish has been causing trouble again with his tale-bearing. I want you to tell me whether that is it."

Blake's lip curled.

"Well, it isn't," he said.

"Mellish isn't mixed up in the matter?"

"No."

"Nor Gore?"

"No, nor Gore either."

"And you won't tell me what the matter is?"

"No."

"Very well," said Tom Merry, between his teeth. "That's the finish. You won't speak, and you won't give me a chance to explain. Let it go at that. I shan't trouble you again."

And the hero of the Shell, with his head held very high, walked out of the study.

Figgins & Co. looked blank.

"Blessed if I can make it out," said Figgins. "Can't you chaps tell us what's the matter, and perhaps we can help to set it right?"

Jack Blake shook his head, with a worried expression.

"It can't be done," he said. "It's—it's a sort of secret. Don't bother your head about it, old chap; you can't do any good."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Blessed if I don't think you're off your giddy rockers," said Figgins. And he left the study with the Co.

"Worth missing our tea for, this was!" Fatty Wynn remarked, for the second time, as they crossed the quad. to their own quarters.

Figgins grunted.

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CHAPTER 9.

Awkward for D'Arcy.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY stood before the glass in Study No. 6, with an anxious expression upon his aristocratic features.

Morning lessons were over, and the chums of Study No. 6 were thinking of the promised visit of Cousin Ethel, and the boating excursion that had been arranged for the afternoon. The afternoon was turning out sunny and fine, and there was every prospect of a pleasant time on the river.

But there was anxiety in the heart of Gussy.

In the scrimmage of the previous day, when Tom Merry & Co. had come to No. 6 to talk matters over in a friendly spirit, D'Arcy had caught somebody's elbow with his nose. Whether it was Tom Merry's elbow, or Blake's elbow, or his own elbow, he did not know; but it was somebody's elbow. And though the ownership of the elbow was uncertain, there was no doubt about the damage it had done.

There was a decidedly red swelling on the nose of the swell of St. Jim's, which gave that organ a peculiar slanting appearance, which did not add to its beauty.

D'Arcy looked at it in the glass with dismay.

He wouldn't have minded so much if Cousin Ethel hadn't been coming that afternoon, but it was too bad that upon that important occasion his nose should be out of "geah," as he expressed it.

"It's wotten!" said D'Arcy, aloud. "Weally wotten!"

"You're right, old son," said Blake, as he came into the study with Dig and Herries. "Mind it doesn't crack the glass."

"Mind what doesn't cwack the glass, deah boy?"

"Your face."

"Weally, Blake——"

"Weren't you alluding to that?"

"I was alludin' to this swellin' on my nose," said D'Arcy stiffly.

"Oh, I see!"

"It looks wotten."

"Oh, it doesn't show much," said Blake. "Look at my eye."

"Your eye is a mattah of minah importance, Blake. I weally think it's too beastly wotten to let a gal see me in this state."

"Hide behind the screen when Ethel comes, then, and don't go in the boat."

"I am hardly likely to allow my cousin to wisk bein' dwowned."

"Ha, ha! She's more likely to be in danger if you're in the boat than if you're out of it."

"Weally, Blake——"

"Where's my shoes?"

"Blow your shoes! I suppose this swellin' won't look so wed if I put a little powdah ovah it."

"Why not put some whitewash over it?" asked Digby.

"Taggles has a pail of whitewash in the shed."

"I wegard that suggestion as uttally fwivolous."

"Where's my shoes?"

"Wats! I have been thinkin——"

"Anybody seen my straw?"

"I have been thinkin' that pewwaps it is not too late to send a wiah to Cousin Ethel."

"A what?"

"A wiah."

"Why a wire?" asked Digby humorously.

"Do you think she would be much disappointed, Blake, deah boy?"

"I don't know. I know I should, and that's sufficient. And if you start sending any wires, I'll give you the biggest licking of your life."

"I should uttally wefuse to allow you to do anythin' of the sort. How can I allow Ethel to come and see me in this state?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I see no cause for wibald laughtah."

"My dear ass——"

"I wefuse to be called an ass."

"My dear lunatic, you look beautiful. Your nose is a little sideways, but then you know your mouth is a little sideways on the other side, so that makes it even."

Arthur Augustus rushed to the glass again.

"My mouth is not sideways on one side, Blake. I wefuse to admit anythin' of the sort. I wegard the wemark as simply wotten."

"Well, as far as that goes, I could soon make it so," said Blake, doubling his fist. "Put your head over here."

"I wefuse."

"There's no satisfying some people. Get into your things, and let's get out, and we shall meet Cousin Ethel at the gate."

"But——"

"'Nuff said! Buck up!"



Gore was sitting in hopeless misery by the banks of the Ryll, when he felt a touch on his shoulder. It was Tom Merry, the boy he had so deeply wronged!

"But do you think it's all wight for me to meet a lady in this state?"

"The lady isn't in that state."

"I mean——"

"Never mind what you mean. Get a move on."

"Weally, Blake——"

"Buck up!"

And Arthur Augustus, still in doubt whether he could possibly meet a lady in that state, was hustled from the study. He carefully rubbed the patch of powder he had put on his nose. After all, that concealed the redness, and there was only the swelling to be seen. And perhaps Cousin Ethel might imagine that he had knocked it against a door in the dark, or something of that sort.

The Fourth-Formers were in high spirits, and looking very fit and handsome in their boating clothes. As they went downstairs, Skimpole joined them. Skimpole blinked at them in a most friendly way through his big spectacles.

"I say, it's very decent of you!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, isn't it?" said Blake cheerfully. "I don't know what you are talking about, but I'm quite prepared to admit that it was very decent of us. Good-bye!"

"Hold on!"

"In a hurry."

"Yes, but I am coming with you."

"Bai Jove!"

"Your mistake," said Blake blandly; "you're not."

"But you invited me."

"Which?"

"You sent me a most kind and pressing invitation to join your party on the river this afternoon."

"Oh, don't be funny, Skimmy."

"But you did, and——"

"Then I must have been asleep, and having the nightmare," said Blake. "I'm awake now. Good-bye!"

"Really, Blake——"

"You are undah a slight misappwehension, Skimmay, deah boy," said D'Arcy. "Blake weally couldn't have done anythin' of the sort, you know."

"Really, D'Arcy, the message was very explicit, and Gore said——"

"Gore!"

"Yes. He said Blake had impressed it upon him that I simply must come, or Miss Cleveland would be greatly disappointed, as she wanted me to explain the difference between Socialism and Sociology."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Blake made a grimace. He understood at once that it was the cad of the Shell who had been at work again; and though he didn't want to be bothered by the genius of the School House that pleasant afternoon, at the same time, he didn't like to hurt Skimpole's feelings.

"Well, come on!" he said.

"If you really want me, Blake, I shall be happy to come. As a sincere Socialist, I recognise my right to go anywhere I choose. But unless you want me, I am willing to waive my rights."

Blake chuckled.

"Can you imagine anybody not wanting you?" he demanded.

"Well, no, if you put it like that. My improving conversation will naturally open and broaden your narrow and uninformed minds, and I am always pleased to place my stores of knowledge at the service of the ignorant."

"Bai Jove!"

"You have such a nice way of putting things, that we

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couldn't possibly leave you out," said Blake. "Come along. If you talk you will probably get brained with a boat-hook. You might bear that in mind."

"Really, Blake—"

"Shut up, and come on," said Blake, in his charming direct way.

The Fourth-Formers, with the latest addition to the party, passed out of the School House. Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther were standing in a group outside, and they glanced at the Fourth-Formers.

Had matters been other than as they were, the Terrible Three would have been in the party to take Cousin Ethel on the river; and all—to use a poetic expression—would have been calm and bright.

As it was, Blake & Co. passed them with averted looks.

"Better get down to the boat-house and have the punt all ready," said Blake abruptly. "Cousin Ethel is sure to be here by that time, and we'll call at the Head's house for her."

"Yaas, wathah! But I say, Blake—"

"Well, what?"

"Do you think she will notice my nose?"

"I don't suppose she will notice you at all, old chap."

"Weally, Blake—"

CHAPTER 10.

On the River.

TOM MERRY looked after the Fourth-Formers with a frown on his brow. Manners and Lowther were looking dark, too.

"They're keeping it up," Monty Lowther remarked.

"They can keep it up for good," said Tom Merry. "I sha'n't speak to them again, for one. That's settled, as far as I am concerned."

"Same here!"

"I wish I could understand it, though," said Manners thoughtfully. "They're acting in a rather caddish way, I know, but it's no good saying they are cads. We know jolly well they're not. They've got hold of some idiotic mistake, somehow."

"That's their business."

"Yes, I suppose so. We're not going to follow them any more, anyway," agreed Manners. "They can go and eat coke."

Gore came out of the School House, and he grinned as he passed the Terrible Three. Tom Merry met his eye.

"Well, what's the joke?" he asked sharply.

Gore chuckled.

"You're not going on the river?" he asked.

"No."

"Study No. 6 left you out?"

"Mind your own business."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And if you don't want a prize thick ear, you can go and cackle somewhere else!" said Tom Merry, with rising wrath.

Gore retreated a step or two, still cackling.

"Ha, ha, ha! There's a rift in the lute, it seems. What will Cousin Ethel say? Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry made a step towards him, and he walked quickly away.

"Cad!" said Lowther.

Tom Merry looked perplexed.

"I wonder if that worm can have had anything to do with it?" said Manners.

"He's quite capable of it," said Tom Merry. "But I asked Blake if Gore had been doing or saying anything, and he said that he hadn't."

"That settles it, I suppose."

"Hallo! There's Cousin Ethel!"

A trap stopped at the Head's house, and the Terrible Three ran forward just in time for Tom Merry to assist Cousin Ethel to alight.

Miss Cleveland shook hands with the chums of the Shell, with a bright smile for each.

The girl looked very charming, with her sweet face shaded under a big summer hat.

"Quite an age since you've been here," said Tom Merry, a little reproachfully. "We were beginning to think you had forgotten St. Jim's."

"I shall never do that," said Ethel brightly; "and I am always glad to come. I have a message for you from Miss Fawcett."

Tom Merry coloured a little.

His old governess, Miss Priscilla Fawcett, sent him messages at every opportunity, and they generally related to his health, and the anxiety she felt about his delicate constitution—the said constitution being in reality about as delicate as that of a rhinoceros.

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"Yes," he said. "What's the message?"

"If you go on the river this afternoon you are to be very careful not to get your feet wet," said Ethel demurely.

"Oh, thank you!"

Lowther grinned at the ivied wall. Manners chuckled silently. Tom Merry turned a little pinker.

"Is that all?" asked Lowther.

"Yes."

"Her exact words?"

"Well, perhaps not exact."

"Oh, come, let's have the lot!" said Tom Merry resignedly.

"Well, Miss Fawcett really said 'his dear little feet.'"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Lowther. "His dear little feet!"

"Oh, shut up, Lowther!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Cousin Ethel's face remained perfectly grave.

"But there's no danger," said Tom Merry. "We're not coming on the river this afternoon, Cousin Ethel."

The girl looked at him quickly.

"You are not coming?"

"No; we should like to come with you, of course, but—but it's turned out that we can't come," said Tom Merry, turning very red.

Miss Cleveland looked at them, and noted a swollen nose, a darkened eye, and a cut lip distributed among the chums of the Shell.

Then she understood.

But if the juniors of St. Jim's chose to fight among themselves, that was no business of hers, and she passed no remark upon it.

"I am sorry you are not coming," she said simply.

"So are we; jolly sorry," said Tom Merry.

And the girl went into the Head's house. The Terrible Three walked away with gloomy faces.

"It's rotten!" said Tom Merry, breaking a long silence.

"She thinks we've been quarrelling and fighting like a parcel of kids—"

"Ahem!" said Lowther.

"Well, we haven't. We went to Blake's study in a friendly spirit, and if they hadn't been such a set of idiots—"

"Exactly!"

"It wasn't our fault they cut up rough—but it makes you feel such a rotten hooligan if a girl sees you with a bashed chivvy!" said Tom Merry.

"Here come the Fourth-Form worms!"

Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy were seen coming in at the gate. Digby and Skimpole had been left in the punt.

The Fourth-Formers did not glance at the Shell fellows. They went directly towards the Head's house.

Ten minutes later they passed again, and this time Cousin Ethel was with them.

Ethel was looking very thoughtful. Once or twice she had glanced at D'Arcy's face, and the swell of St. Jim's was in an unhappy frame of mind, feeling that she had noticed that his nose was a trifle out of gear.

"I say, Blake—" he whispered, as they came down to the landing-stage opposite the boat-house.

Blake looked at him.

"Anything wrong?"

"Is my nose vewy noticeable?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Let me give it a rub," said Blake; "the powder has come off."

"If you think you could impvove it—"

"I'm sure I could."

"Pway go ahead, then, deah boy."

Blake had dipped the end of his finger in the mud, and he now dabbed the side of his chum's nose with it.

Arthur Augustus's nasal organ was now ornamented with a dab of black mud, which gave his face a most peculiar appearance. But he was happily ignorant of the change.

"Do you think that looks diffewent, Blake?"

"Immensely!"

"Thank you vewy much!"

"Not at all. It's a pleasure to me."

"Ha, ha, ha!" suddenly roared Herries.

D'Arcy put up his eyeglass and stared at him frigidly.

"Weally, Howwies—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What is the mattah?"

"Nothing!"

"Then pway cease that absurd cacklin'. Weally, Dig, now you are beginnin'. What is the beastly joke, deah boy?"

"Ha, ha! Nothing!"

"Dear me!" said Skimpole, blinking at D'Arcy's nose.

"Dear me! This is most extraordinary!"

"Oh, pway wing off, Skimmay!"

Cousin Ethel was smiling, too, as she sank into her comfortable seat amid the cushions in the punt. Blake took the pole, and shoved off.

D'Arcy rubbed his nose. The effect was to distribute the patch of mud over his nose, and increase the curious effect of it.

Skimpole blinked at him with great interest.

"I regard this as extraordinary," he said, looking round. "The whole of D'Arcy's nose has turned a black colour——"

"Bai Jove!"

"This discolouration is evidently due to a conglomeration of the minute animalculæ——"

D'Arcy jerked out his handkerchief and rubbed his nose hard.

The mud came off on the handkerchief, and the junior's nose was left in its natural state, save for the slight swelling.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Skimpole, who was nothing if not scientific. "This is indeed a most extraordinary case. The friction applied to the nose has evidently dispersed the conglomeration of animalculæ——"

"You utfah ass——"

"Really, D'Arcy——"

"Some ass put some mud on my nose! It was you, Blake!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I wegard the action as lackin' in pwopah respect."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I am weally in doubt as to whethah I ought to dwop your acquaintance," said Arthur Augustus. "But for the pwesence of Miss Cleveland, I should give you a feahful thwashin'."

"I sha'n't lose sight of Miss Cleveland in a hurry, then," grinned Blake. "But don't you make me feel nervous, Gussy, or I might splash you."

"Oh! On second thoughts, I will ovahlook your absurd joke."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The punt went gliding on, down the river towards the bridge over the Ryll. There was a figure crossing the bridge—it was that of George Gore. He stopped, and looked down as the punt with its happy load came gliding by.

There was a scowl on Gore's face. He never made himself agreeable to anybody, yet he felt a sense of injury when he was left alone on a half-holiday. But his eyes gleamed with malicious satisfaction as he looked down into the punt, and saw that Tom Merry and his friends were not there.

He chuckled aloud as he noted it.

"I've put a spoke in their wheel, at all events," he murmured; "and there's another coming along jolly soon, too—as soon as there's a chance."

The punt glided on towards the bridge. Skimpole extracted a big volume from under his jacket, and opened it at page 444.

"It is a pleasant and peaceful afternoon," Skimpole remarked. "Just the time for the improvement of the mind. I have a volume here—Professor Loosetop's great book on Determinism, or the theory that every being is the creature of his heredity and his environment—in other words, that all existing things are governed by the conditions under which they exist. It is a wonderful theory."

"Blessed if I can see anything wonderful in it," said Blake. "I should say that that much was taken for granted before anybody started arguing. It seems to me that Determinism is only a longer word for saying that whatever is, is. And we knew that already."

"You do not understand, Blake. The true Determinist cannot blame anybody for anything. Man being governed by the conditions under which he exists, cannot be blamed for what he does. The blame, if any, falls on his conditions of life—his heredity and environment. If you, for instance, were to knock this book out of my hand into the water, you would not be to blame, for you would act upon an impulse, and the impulse would be caused by the state you are in through the combined influences of heredity and environment——"

Clump!

The pole clumped on the book, and the valuable volume of the precious lucubrations of Professor Loosetop splashed into the river and disappeared.

Skimpole clutched after it in vain.

The volume was gone.

He blinked at Blake indignantly.

"Really, Blake, that was a beastly thing to do!"

"Rot! You said yourself that I shouldn't be to blame for doing it."

"It was rotten!"

"Not at all. It was my heredity——"

"Really——"

"Or my environment. You can take your choice, as a Determinist."

Skimpole rubbed his nose thoughtfully. It occurred to

him at that moment that there was something "rocky" with his favourite theory—a theory much beloved of cranks.

"But it was really kindness to animals that was my motive," said Jack Blake blandly. "A chap who brings a volume of scientific bosh out with him on the river ought to have it chucked into the water, and himself chucked in after it. I'm leaving you in the boat, Skimmy."

"Really, Blake——"

"But if you begin to talk Determinism, I expect my heredity or my environment will make me shove you into the water, too!"

And Skimpole took the hint, and the wonderful theory of Determinism was heard no more in the punt.

CHAPTER 11.

Cousin Ethel Thinks It Out.

COUSIN ETHEL had been very silent for some time. The girl was usually cheery and chatty, and her silence did not pass unnoticed. She was evidently thinking something out.

To Arthur Augustus D'Arcy it was only too clear that she was thinking of that swelling upon his aristocratic nose.

After considerable reflection, he resolved to grasp the nettle, as it were, and broach the painful subject.

"I say, Ethel——" he ventured.

The girl looked up.

"I wathah think I know what you're turnin' ovah in your mind, Ethel."

"Really?"

"Yaas, wathah! I want to explain that it wasn't my fault."

"I didn't think it was, Arthur."

"You see——"

"I suppose it's a misunderstanding?"

D'Arcy looked a little puzzled. He didn't see how his swollen nose could be classed as a misunderstanding.

"You see, it was an elbow——"

"What?"

"It was vewy likely Blake's elbow; he is a wathah, clumsy ass!"

"I don't understand."

"I am weferrin' to the swollen state of my nose. It was an elbow. I should not like you to think that——"

"Oh, I see! I was speaking of something else."

"Eh?"

Cousin Ethel laughed.

"You had not guessed my thoughts, after all, Arthur."

"I thought you were noticin' the fact that my beastly nose is a little bit out of geah, Ethel."

"Not at all."

"Oh!"

"I have been thinking, though. I hope you boys won't think me impertinent," said Cousin Ethel, with a deepening of colour in her fair cheeks.

"Oh, Ethel!"

It was a general chorus of remonstrance at the idea.

Cousin Ethel laughed.

"Very well; but I am going to speak about your personal affairs, that really are no concern of mine at all."

"Go ahead!" said Jack Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"It's about your dispute with Tom Merry."

The chums of the Fourth looked uncomfortable at once. Miss Cleveland observed it, but she did not appear to do so.

"I am very sorry to see you on bad terms," she said.

"We're—we're not exactly on bad terms," stammered Blake. "We—we've had a row, and we don't speak to one another, but we're not exactly on what you'd call bad terms."

The girl smiled.

"Now, if you don't want to tell me anything about it, I'll say no more," she said—"I'll ring off, as I think you would put it!"

"Pway don't wing off, Ethel. Bai Jove, I shouldn't wondah if Ethel could give us some advice on the subject, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, struck by a sudden idea. "Ethel's an awfully intelligent gal, you know, and I shouldn't weally object to her havin' a vote and goin' into Parliament, if it wasn't for the awful boundahs a lady membah of Parliament would have to mix with there. Suppose we tell Ethel all about it, and see what she says."

"Good egg!" said Herries.

Blake hesitated.

"It's like giving Tom Merry away," he said.

"Of course, Ethel will keep it dark."

"I should not repeat anything you told me, without your permission, of course," said Cousin Ethel. "Now, understand me, I don't want to ask for any of your secrets, but I am certain that this quarrel is due to some misunderstanding."

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and I should like to see you good friends again before I leave St. Jim's. I am convinced of it, or I should not speak on the subject. It can't be anything serious."

Blake looked gloomy.

"But it is," he said; "it's jolly serious, Ethel."

"We'll tell Ethel all about it, deah boys."

"Right; I've no objection."

"You see, Tom Mewwy has acted in this mattah in what we can only possibly chawactewise as an extwemely caddish mannah—"

Cousin Ethel held up her finger.

"Stop!"

"Yaas, but—"

"I am certain Tom Merry has done nothing of the sort! He is not that kind of boy. There is some dreadful mistake!"

"Weally, Ethel—"

"And I am surprised at you, Arthur."

"Surprised at me, deah gal!"

"Certainly! You are not usually suspicious."

"Bai Jove, I have neyah been called suspicious befoah!"

"You think Tom Merry has treated you badly?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Has he refused to explain?"

"We haven't given him the chance."

"You've told him what you have against him, surely?"

"We couldn't, you see."

Cousin Ethel shook her head.

"That is not playing the game, Arthur."

"Bai Jove!"

"You don't know the circumstances yet," said Blake.

"I'll give you the whole story—"

"Pewwaps I had better explain to Ethel, Blake."

"Perhaps you had better dry up! You see, Ethel—"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Gag him, somebody! You see—"

"I wufuse to be gagged!"

"You see, Ethel, when you see a chap's own handwriting, it's proof enough, isn't it?" said Blake.

"Yes, I should say so."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Well, we've got it in Tom Merry's handwriting."

"You've got what?"

"I'll show you the letter."

Blake felt in his pockets, and brought out an envelope. He handed it to the girl, who drew out the letter that was folded and enclosed in it.

"Am I to read this?" she asked.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Certainly!" said Blake. "You see, we picked up that letter in our study. It wasn't in an envelope then. It was just scribbled to slip under a prefect's door, but Tom Merry must have dropped it in our room. He came in to speak to us after morning lessons yesterday, when I was gone up to the study for my cricket-bat, and he was showing Dig some jujitsu tricks. It was then that he dropped it, I imagine. Anyway, we found it lying on the carpet where he had been standing, when we went up after afternoon school."

"Yaas, wathah! He had droppped it without noticin' it, of course."

Cousin Ethel nodded without speaking.

She unfolded the single sheet of paper, which was written on in Tom Merry's well-known hand.

Her face changed in colour as she read.

"I have reason to believe that some juniors intend to break bounds to-night. I advise you to keep an eye on Study No. 6.—A FRIEND."

"Good gracious!" murmured Cousin Ethel.

Blake looked very glum.

"Nice sort of thing for Tom Merry to write, wasn't it?" he said. "I had told him only that morning that we were going to get in some grub for a dormitory feed that night, and he wrote this to give us away to a prefect."

"But—"

"Of course, he was going to slip it under a prefect's door—there was a chap used to play those tricks here before," said Blake. "Tom Merry was down on him fast enough. We put off that little excursion last night, but to make sure we looked out a bit, and we found that a prefect was watching the Fourth-Form dormitory. He had given us away, all the same. If we hadn't happened to find that note where he lost it, we should have run right into the trap."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"The letter is not signed," Cousin Ethel remarked.

"Of course, he wouldn't sign it. He wouldn't give himself quite away, even to the prefect he was sneaking to."

"Are you sure Tom Merry wrote this note?"

"Of course! It's in his hand."

"It looks like it."

"I knew it at a glance."

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"But—"

Blake shook his head.

"I'm afraid there's no getting out of it, Miss Cleveland. It's simply awful to think that a chap we always believed to be decent could play such a cad's trick. But how can we doubt his own handwriting?"

"Bai Jove, I don't see how we can! But I've had a lingewin' feelin' all the time that pewwaps there might possibly be some explanation."

"This is the first you've said about it, then."

"Weally, Dig—"

"There can't be any explanation," said Herries despondently. "You never know what a fellow's like till you find him out. That's all there is about it."

"That's it," agreed Blake.

"You haven't shown this to Tom Merry?" asked Ethel.

"No."

"Nor mentioned the matter to him?"

"Oh, no! We couldn't," said Blake. "There's no doubt about it—he couldn't deny his own hand, could he?"

"I suppose not."

"And we didn't want him telling us a host of lies—as he could only have done if he had tried to squirm out of it. We thought we'd better let the matter drop at once. I was going to burn the letter."

"You see, deah gal, the mattah was weally too disgustin' to be argued about. You can't argue with a sneak."

"All the same, I think you should have given Tom a chance to defend himself," said Cousin Ethel firmly.

"But—"

"You see—"

"It was no good arguing on the subject when there was clear proof—"

"The proof may not be clear."

"How do you make that out?"

"If you know a boy to be honest and decent any amount of evidence ought not to be allowed to tell against him," said Cousin Ethel. "I am quite certain that Tom Merry is incapable of acting in a mean or caddish way."

"But—"

"There's the letter—"

"In his own hand!"

"Tom Merry never wrote this letter!" said Cousin Ethel quietly.

CHAPTER 12.

Ethel Gives Advice.

COUSIN ETHEL'S words were followed by a prolonged silence in the punt.

The juniors looked at her, and then at one another, with blank faces.

"Bai Jove!" said D'Arcy at last.

Cousin Ethel nodded her head.

"Tom Merry never wrote that!" she repeated, and she tossed the letter down with a scornful gesture.

"Weally, Ethel!"

"It is impossible!"

Jack Blake looked deeply wounded.

"Well, if you don't believe us, there's nothing more to be said," he replied. "But I thought—"

The girl laid her hand gently on his arm.

"Blake, you don't think I would doubt your word? It isn't that. But you have been deceived."

"The letter is in the chap's own hand."

"It appears so."

Blake jumped.

"You don't think—"

"I do! I think somebody else wrote that letter."

"But—but—but it's in Tom Merry's hand," said Blake feebly.

"It has been imitated."

"My hat!"

"Bai Jove, I nevah thought of that, you know!"

"But—but it's impossible!" said Digby. "A chap couldn't imitate Tom Merry's hand as near as that."

And Herries shook his head.

"Wathah not! I weally think you are wide of the mark this time, Ethel."

Cousin Ethel set her pretty lips firmly.

"I am quite sure I am right," she said. "Tom Merry never wrote that letter. If he did not write it, somebody else must have copied his hand."

"But why?"

"To make trouble between you, of course!"

"Bai Jove! But if Tom Merry did not write the lettah, how did he come to drop it in our study?"

"He did not."

"But we found it—"

"Where the writer had dropped it."

"Oh!"



Gore sat in his study, his head bent forward, his brow sullen. It had come to this at last, then. He was sacked!

"But Tom Merry knew about our intention of breaking bounds, and this letter gives it away," said Blake.

"Did no one else know?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"Could no one else have known?"

Jack Blake hesitated a moment.

"Well, I suppose anybody could have learned by listening at our door," he said.

"The boy who would imitate another's hand in a letter would listen at a door," said Cousin Ethel.

"I—I suppose so."

"Taking it as admitted, then, that another boy could have learned of your plans, and that he wanted to cause trouble between you and Tom Merry, he might have written that letter, and then, of course, he would leave it somewhere where you would be certain to find it, or it would be no use having written it."

"M-m-m-my hat!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Blessed if I don't think there's something in it," said Herries.

Cousin Ethel smiled.

"At all events, I am certain Tom Merry never wrote this," she said.

"But—but who——" said Blake.

She shook her head.

"That is for you to find out."

"But, I say, that's a jolly serious thing," said Blake. "It isn't a mere trick, it's a forgery."

"I don't suppose the boy who wrote this stopped to think of that. I should say he was as silly as he was wicked."

"Then it wasn't Mellish," said Dig.

Blake shook his head decidedly.

"Not much! He'd never do a thing he might be sacked from the school for."

"Then who?"

"Blessed if I know."

"What do you think we'd better do about it, Cousin Ethel?" asked Jack Blake, quite humbly. It was borne in upon his mind that Cousin Ethel was far more capable of giving good advice than any masculine person there.

"What you should really have done at first, Jack——"

"And that is?"

"Go straight to Tom Merry and show him the letter."

Blake drew a deep breath.

"I'll do it!"

"Then let us get back to the school," said Cousin Ethel.

"But we haven't gone as far as we were going."

"This is a more important matter than boating. Think what Tom must be feeling like, if he doesn't know what you have against him, and I am sure he doesn't."

"H'm! I suppose so."

"Yaas, wathah! It appears vewy pwob. to me that Tom

Mewwy is in a decidedly wotten fwame of mind about it. I have tweeked him with gweat contempt."

"We'd better be getting back," said Cousin Ethel.

"Well, right you are."

"Dear me!" said Skimpole, waking up from a reverie, during which he had not heard a single word that was said in the punt. "Are you returning?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Very good. Upon second thoughts, I had better not waste the afternoon on the river. You see, there is the case of Study No. 6 in hand."

"Ass!"

"Really, Blake, I must solve that mystery! Perhaps it would interest Miss Cleveland to hear about it. You must know, Miss Cleveland, that a considerable sum of money has been stolen from Study No. 6——"

"Ass!" said Blake. "It hasn't."

"Well, a valuable watch, then——"

"Nothing has been stolen, duffer!"

"And Tom Merry is suspected——"

"He isn't."

"This prevarication will do you no good, Blake. It is becoming pretty clear to me that you are acting in collusion with Tom Merry in the matter."

"My hat!"

"You had better speak out."

"Don't mind him, Cousin Ethel," said Digby. "When Skimmy takes up the amateur detective business he's always taken like that."

"Really, Digby——"

"Things look very black against Skimpole," said Blake seriously. "He implies that there was some money in Study No. 6, and I'm jolly certain there isn't any now. Skimpole lately visited the study under suspicious circumstances. The natural inference is that Skimpole is the guilty party. We had better report this to the Head."

"Really——"

"You must admit that things look very black against you, Skimmy."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Really, you chaps——"

"Oh, ring off, Skimmy! Get back to the Determinism, if you must talk rot."

And Blake punted home.

CHAPTER 13.

Bitter Blood.

TOM MERRY was standing under the big elm outside the School House, talking to Manners and Lowther, when the chums of the Fourth came in. Tom Merry had been knocking about the school with his chums. He was more worried than he cared to admit by the strange attitude taken up by Study No. 6, and he could not give his mind to cricket, or swimming, or boating, or any of the usual occupations of a half-holiday.

The Terrible Three saw Blake & Co. escort Cousin Ethel to the Head's house, and then come back towards the School House. Blake was looking round him, as if in search of someone, and suddenly he spotted the Shell fellows under the elm. His face brightened, and he spoke to his companions and hurried towards them.

Tom Merry's face hardened.

"They're coming here?" said Manners, in surprise.

"Yes. Perhaps they've found out their mistake," said Tom. "It's too late, as far as I'm concerned. I'm done with them."

"Same here!" said Lowther.

Blake and his friends came up. The Terrible Three stared straight past them, taking no notice of their presence at all. There was a long and awkward pause.

Tom Merry and his chums, leaning against the big trunk of the elm, did not care to move, and they contented themselves with appearing to be quite ignorant of the arrival of the Fourth-Formers.

"I say——" began Blake.

There was no answer.

"Weally, you chaps——" said D'Arcy.

Blank stares greeted his attempt to open a conversation. The Terrible Three were getting a little of their own back, and the Fourth-Formers found it a little disconcerting.

"Oh, come off!" said Digby. "Have you lost your ears?"

"Manners hasn't," said Herries. "They're as big as ever."

This "drew" Manners at last.

"You let my ears alone," he snapped.

"Certainly. When I want a pair of fans, or anything of that sort, I'll get something smaller," said Herries.

Manners turned red, and was about to make a warm retort, but Tom Merry broke in.

"Look here, you chaps," he said, "cut off! You've been

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playing the giddy goat a long time to please yourselves, now you can play it a little longer to please us. We've had enough of your jaw. Is that plain enough?"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"Shut up!"

"I wefuse to shut up. I——"

Jack Blake drew the crumpled letter from his pocket.

"Look at that, Tom Merry," he said.

"I don't want to."

"I want you to."

"I don't care what you want."

"It's important."

"Rats!"

"Look here——"

"Go and eat coke."

Blake grew very red. Tom Merry refused to take the letter. His temper, usually so quiet and kind, had been exasperated too much, and he was firm.

"Looks to me as if he knows all about it, after all," said Digby. "I dare say that's only bluff."

Tom Merry looked at him quickly.

"What do you mean? What should I know about that letter?"

"You should know whether you wrote it or not."

"I?"

"Yes, you. Did you write it?"

"How should I know, when I haven't seen it?"

"Look at it, then," said Blake.

He held the letter out again, and this time the hero of the Shell took it. He opened it and read it, and uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

"What does this mean?"

"That's what we want to know," said Blake grimly.

"What does it mean? That's for you to explain."

Tom Merry looked at him fiercely.

"Do you think I wrote this letter?"

"It's in your hand."

"It looks like my hand."

"Did you write it?"

"No."

Tom Merry passed the letter to his chums, who read it. Then he tossed it back to Jack Blake.

"So that's what you've got up against us?" he said scornfully.

Blake felt uncomfortable. In the flashing indignation in Tom Merry's eyes he read that his suspicions had been unworthy of him.

Tom Merry was innocent. But who, then, was guilty?

"Yes," said Blake slowly.

"You thought I wrote that?"

"Ye-es."

"How did you get hold of it?"

"I found it in my study, where you had been showing us that jiu-jitsu. I—I thought you had dropped it there."

"You thought I wrote that—I?" Tom Merry's eyes blazed. "For what purpose? To give you away to a prefect?"

"Well, you see——"

"You didn't know me better than that, you—you worm!"

"Here, draw it mild!" said Blake. "How was I to know you didn't write a letter that was written in your own handwriting?"

"And why have you shown it to me now, when you refused to tell me yesterday what was the matter?"

"Cousin Ethel advised us to come to you."

"And you were going to keep it dark?"

"Well, it isn't a pleasant matter to jaw about."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Tom Merry clenched his hand.

"I'll keep that letter," he said. "I'll find out who wrote it—who's been imitating my handwriting. Whoever did it, left it in your study to make trouble between us; and you fell into the trap like a set of silly gulls, instead of coming to me about it in a straightforward way."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"You ought to have known I couldn't do such a tring. You've known me long enough to know that I'm not a sneak."

"Well, you see——"

"Oh, don't try to excuse yourself. I'll never speak to you again. Give me that letter, and I'll find out who wrote it."

"I know it's rough on you, if you didn't write it," began Blake uncomfortably.

"If!" broke out Tom. "So you still have doubts on the subject?"

"Well, not exactly; but—but the writing——"

"You see, it's your own hand, deah boy."

"It's a forgery!"

Tom Merry was too excited to moderate his voice, nor did he see that Mr. Railton had just come out of the School House, and was passing by the big elm.

His words rang out loudly, and the House-master could not fail to hear them. He stopped short.

"Cave!" whispered Blake. "For goodness' sake, don't get the masters into this, or the rotter will be sacked, whoever he is."

"Bai Jove, I wathah think it's too late!" muttered D'Arcy.

The swell of St. Jim's was right. The House-master of the School House came directly towards them, and the juniors touched their caps and faced him in grim silence.

CHAPTER 14.

Mr. Railton Takes the Matter Up.

MR. RAILTON looked directly at Tom Merry. Tom's eyes were on the ground.

The unbroken rule of the juniors—to keep their disputes and troubles among themselves, without letting masters or prefects into them—bound him to silence; and but for the passing of Mr. Railton at that moment, the question of the forged letter would have been thrashed out without interference from above.

But it was clear that the matter could not be kept secret now.

"Merry!"

"Ye-es, sir?"

"I could not help hearing what you said. As a rule, as you know, I should take no notice of words heard by chance. But what you said was too serious. You said that something was a forgery."

Tom Merry was silent.

"You are not the kind of boy to say such a thing recklessly," said Mr. Railton, in his quiet, kind manner. "What did you mean, Merry?"

The junior did not speak.

"Were you referring to this letter?" asked the House-master, with a nod towards the fatal letter, which Blake, in his dismay, was holding conspicuously in his hand, as if with the idea of making it as prominent as possible.

Blake started, and tried to slip the letter into his pocket. The House-master smiled slightly.

"Give me that letter, Blake."

There was no help for it. Blake handed over the letter.

"Once more, Merry, is this what you were referring to?"

"Ye-es, sir."

"Then I must read it. Have you any objection?"

"N-n-no, sir."

Mr. Railton read the letter. An expression of astonishment came over his face.

"This is a letter warning some master or prefect of an intended infraction of the rules," he said. "It is in your hand, Merry."

"Yes, sir."

"Did you write it?"

"No, sir."

"Then you declare it to be a forgery?"

"I—I suppose so, sir."

Mr. Railton's lips set tightly.

"That is a serious matter. Tell me how the letter came into your possession, Blake."

Jack Blake reluctantly related the circumstances. It was plain that the matter was out of the hands of the juniors now. Mr. Railton had taken it up, and he would be backed by the authority of the Head.

The way of the transgressor was likely to be hard.

The House-master listened to Blake's halting explanation with the closest attention. He nodded when the boy had finished.

"I will say at once," he said, "that I believe Merry. I am sure he would not tell an untruth; and I am sure he would not write a letter like this."

"Thank you, sir," said Tom Merry.

"You have been with me long enough for me to know your character, Merry. I am glad to be able to say that you have never been guilty of untruthfulness or deceit of any kind. I hope you did not think that Merry wrote this letter, Blake."

Blake turned crimson.

"Well, sir, you—you see, it was in his hand, and—and—"

"Then you did think so?"

"Ye-es, sir."

"I am sorry for it."

"But—but we never dreamed there could be a chap at St. Jim's who could forge a letter, sir," stammered Blake.

"No, I suppose not. Perhaps you are not so much to blame. This is a dreadfully serious matter. The boy who wrote this letter must have intended a wicked and cowardly

deception, but doubtless he never thought of the fact that forgery is a crime punished by imprisonment."

Imprisonment! The words struck ~~like~~ ^{like} a ball to the juniors. True enough, that was what it meant, if the matter were taken seriously. Imitation of handwriting was a little too serious a matter for a "jape."

"The writer of this letter must be found," said Mr. Railton. "If you have any suspicion, it is your duty to state it to me."

Tom Merry shook his head.

"I shouldn't like to suspect any chap of such a thing, sir," he said. "It seems to me impossible that any St. Jim's chap could do it."

"Yet someone must have done it."

"I suppose so, sir."

"I will keep this letter," said Mr. Railton. "The matter will be laid before the Head, and fully investigated."

"If you please, sir—"

"What is it, Merry?"

"I—I would rather it were left alone, sir, if you don't mind. I—I am the injured party, sir, and—and I don't mind—"

"I understand what you mean, but it is impossible for the matter to be passed over. The boy who wrote this letter is not fit for anyone to associate with. He will have to leave the school."

And the House-master walked away towards the Head's house.

The juniors exchanged looks of dismay.

"Bai Jove, we're in for it now!" said D'Arcy. "When Wailton looks like that, he means bizney. He'll have the whole twuth out."

"It will serve the fellow right to be sacked," said Lowther.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"But whom could it be?" said Manners, puzzled. "Mellish is worm enough, but he's too jolly cautious."

Tom Merry gave a start.

Back to his mind, as Manners spoke, came that scene in Gore's study of the previous day; when the bully of the Shell had been so deeply engrossed in something he was writing, and had been so startled by Tom Merry opening the door.

He had covered up what he had been writing, with a guilty look—half guilty, half scared—that Tom Merry remembered only too clearly.

Was it Gore?

Gore's enjoyment of the situation, too; the keen interest he took in the progress of the trouble caused by the forged letter; the triumph he had shown. All pointed to one conclusion.

"My hat!" ejaculated Tom Merry.

They all looked at him.

"Have you thought of the wottah, Tom Mewwy?"

"I think so."

"Who?" asked three or four voices.

"Gore!"

"Phew! Well, he's rotter enough, and fool enough, too," said Jack Blake. "But what have you got to go upon?"

Tom Merry explained the scene of the previous day.

"Bai Jove! It looks like it!" said D'Arcy. "I have always regarded Goah as a wottah. He deliberately sat on a silk bag of mine once, and completely ruined it; and a chap who would do that would do anything."

"Hold on," said Blake. "What time was it you saw Gore?"

"It was just before you asses started playing the giddy goat. We met Gussy as we came down the passage."

"Then it was a good couple of hours after we found the letter in the study," said Blake. "Gore couldn't have been writing it after we found it."

"Bai Jove, no!"

"H'm! Perhaps he was writing another, though," said Tom Merry. "If the first was successful, he'd naturally go on. He may have been writing another one, to work off on somebody else. Anyway, he was writing something he didn't want seen; he was frightened out of his wits when I looked in."

"Well, it was more likely to be Gore than anybody else," said Lowther. "But what can we do in the matter? We can't give him away."

Tom Merry shook his head.

"Certainly not."

"It won't be needed," said Blake grimly. "Railton won't let the matter rest now till he's got at the truth, you can lay your socks on that. Gore's number is up."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"The best thing he can do is to own up," remarked Tom Merry. "It would be only a decent thing to give him a hint. Anybody know where he is?"

"He was on the bridge over the Ryll a time back."

"I think I'll go and look for him."

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And Tom Merry strolled away.

Jack Blake shook his head.

"Not much good," saying to do Gore a good turn," he remarked. "He's a chap you can't be decent to. If it's Gore—and I think it is—he's booked for the sack. I'm sorry for the rotter, but there's no getting out of the fact that St. Jim's will be better off without him."

To which Arthur Augustus D'Arcy rejoined emphatically:

"Yaas, wathah!"

CHAPTER 15.

Gore is Defiant!

TOM MERRY, what do you want?"

Gore uttered the words in a startled tone. He was sitting on a grassy bank near the Ryll, keenly examining a paper he held in his hand—a sheet of note-paper covered with writing.

Tom Merry had come along the river, and he caught sight of Gore and hurried towards him; but Gore was too pre-occupied to see his approach till Tom's shadow fell across him.

Then he started, and hastily thrust the letter into his pocket.

Tom Merry looked at him steadily.

It was the scene of the study over again—the same furtive hiding of the paper, the same half-guilty, half-furious look upon Gore's face.

If Tom Merry had had any doubts, they would have been dispelled then. Gore was guilty! It was another letter of the same kind that he was conning over now.

Tom looked steadily at the bully of the Shell. Gore met his glance angrily and defiantly.

"What do you want?" he snapped.

"I want to speak to you."

"The want's all on your side, then. Leave me alone."

"It's for your own sake, Gore."

Gore sneered.

"I've been comparing notes with Blake," said Tom Merry abruptly. "I know all about the letter he found in his study."

Gore looked blank.

"Blessed if I know what you're talking about," he said.

"You know very well, I think. Blake found a letter in his study—just where I might have dropped it—a letter in my hand—but not written by me, all the same."

Gore yawned.

"I really don't know anything about the matter. What are you confiding all this to me for?"

"Because I think you wrote the letter."

Gore turned pale.

"I! I wrote the letter!"

"I think so."

"Liar!"

Tom Merry's eyes blazed for a moment. But he kept his temper. He had not come there to quarrel with Gore.

"I want to speak to you quietly about it, Gore," he said. "I'm not your friend, and you're not mine. But you're in danger."

"I don't see it."

"Mr. Railton has taken up the matter."

"What?"

"He accidentally found out that there had been a forgery."

"A—a what?"

"You don't like that word," said Tom Merry bitterly. "I don't know what else you would call it. Anyway, Mr. Railton heard me use the word, and then he insisted upon knowing all about it."

Gore sprang to his feet.

"You—you cad! You've told him; you've sneaked about me!"

"I haven't said a word about you."

"Then—then what do you mean?"

"If you didn't write the letter, you've nothing to fear. Mr. Railton is taking the matter before the Head, and it will be sifted out now. It's no good trying to stop it. Nobody has anything to fear except the chap who wrote that letter. That fellow will be found out."

"How?"

Tom Merry shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know how. But when there's a general inquiry, things do come out; and I haven't the slightest doubt that Railton will get to the bottom of the matter. If he once suspects you, he will turn you inside out before you know it. Now that he's on the track, the guilty party is done for. There's only one chance for him."

"And what's that?" asked Gore, with white lips.

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"To own up."

"Own up!"

"Yes. Go straight to Mr. Railton and own up, and throw yourself on his mercy. Say you're sorry; goodness knows you ought to be. Then there may be a chance for you."

"You've taken it for granted that I wrote the letter."

"Yes. If you didn't, you're all right. If you did, take my advice—the advice of a friend, though I don't feel very friendly towards you about it."

"Why are you interfering in the matter at all?"

"Because I don't want to see you sacked from the school."

"Why not?"

"Oh, I suppose you don't understand!" said Tom Merry scornfully.

Gore sneered savagely.

"No, I don't! You say I've injured you, by imitating your hand; got you into a row with your friends. Then you come to me with friendly advice, how to avoid being punished for it. It's a little too thick, Tom Merry."

Tom was silent.

He had hardly expected Gore to understand his motives; but he had hoped that the cad of the Shell would be sensible enough to see where his true interests lay.

"It won't wash," said Gore sneeringly. "You can't pull the wool over my eyes, Tom Merry. I don't know what little game you're playing; I suppose your idea is to bounce me into admitting that I wrote the letter. It won't wash."

"I'm pretty sure about that already."

"Well, you can keep your advice till I ask for it," said Gore. "I'm not going to Mr. Railton. I'm not going to own up."

"It would be better for you."

"And for you, perhaps."

"How—for me?"

"It would get you off. You say a letter has been found in your handwriting. If so, I imagine you wrote it. I dare say you'd like to frighten another fellow into owning up that he did it."

Tom Merry compressed his lips hard. It was not easy to be patient with Gore. Tom Merry's hand was itching to strike him full upon the evil, sneering face. But he knew that there was black trouble ahead for Gore, and he refrained.

"You can't work that with me," said Gore, shrugging his shoulders. "As far the letter, I suppose you wrote it. I dare say you'd be as likely to sneak about the kids as anybody else."

"How do you know that the letter was 'sneaking' about the kids, if you never wrote it?" asked Tom Merry, quick as a flash.

Gore started.

"You—you said something of the sort!" he stammered.

"I said nothing of the sort!"

"Well, I—I—"

"You've given yourself away," said Tom scornfully. "If you never wrote the letter, you couldn't have heard of its existence till this moment, and yet you show that you know what was in it."

Gore bit his lip.

"Never mind what I know," he snarled; "I'm not going to Railton! You can't bounce me into getting you out of a difficulty with your lies! I think it's very likely that Railton doesn't know anything about the matter at all."

Tom Merry's hand clenched hard.

"Very well," he said quietly. "We'll say no more about it. I've tried to do my best for you, though goodness knows you deserved precious little at my hands. Let the matter drop."

"Certainly!" sneered Gore. "Try the same game on somebody who's likely to be taken in!"

And he swung away, and strolled towards the school.

The bully of the Shell was in a triumphant mood. He felt that he had scored off Tom Merry, and he grinned as he entered the quadrangle.

"I'll make them sit up more than that!" he murmured, as he ascended the steps of the School House. "I'll make them—"

"Gore!"

The cad of the Shell started and looked round.

"Yes, sir?"

It was Mr. Railton. The House-master's face was grave and cold, with an expression on it that struck a sudden terror to Gore's heart.

"Follow me, Gore!"

"Yes, sir. I—I—"

"That is enough! Follow me!"

And Gore, trembling, followed the House-master—to the Head's study, and into the presence of Dr. Holmes!



"Oh!" exclaimed George Gore, starting to his feet and turning pale, as the door opened and Tom Merry looked into the study. "What's the matter, Gore?" asked Tom. "I'm not a ghost!"

CHAPTER 16.

Sacked.

GORE stood before the Head like a culprit—like a culprit already, although he had not yet been accused.

The doctor was looking severe, and Mr. Railton's face was like iron. What did it mean—what could they know? A score of fears and unquiet thoughts whirled through the mind of the wretched boy, as he stood in the presence of his judges.

"Gore!"

Dr. Holmes spoke slowly, quietly, in ominous tones.

Gore's breath almost failed him. In that tone he read his doom. Yet what could they know—what proof could they have?

"Ye-es, sir?" he gasped.

"Gore, look at that letter."

The Head held out the letter that Blake had found in his study. Gore looked at it. Well he knew every line on it, though when he had written it, he had been far from expecting to have it produced against him in the Head's study.

"Read it, Gore."

"I have read it, sir."

"Have you ever seen it before?"

"No, sir."

"You did not write it?"

"Certainly not, sir."

"I hope you will be able to prove that," said Dr. Holmes grimly.

"I—I—I—"

"Listen to me! That letter was found by Blake in his study. It is in a handwriting strongly resembling that of Merry, of the Shell. Blake naturally concluded that Merry had written the letter."

"I suppose he did, sir. It's Tom Merry's hand."

"Ah, you suppose he did!"

"Certainly, sir."

"It does not occur to you that Merry's hand might have been imitated by anyone who wished to do him an injury?"

"Oh, no, sir! I think that very unlikely."

"Very good! Now, listen to me, Gore. You stand in a very precarious position, and it will be well for you to tell the truth."

"I am telling the truth, sir!"

"Listen! When Mr. Railton placed that letter in my hands, measures were at once taken to detect the culprit. Neither he nor I can credit for a moment that Merry wrote

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that letter. He denies it, and his word is quite good enough. It is perfectly clear that his hand has been imitated. It occurred to me that the imitator would not be able to reproduce another boy's hand so faithfully unless he had done a considerable amount of practice. Of this practice traces were likely to be found in the culprit's study. That was my first thought, Gore."

Gore turned deadly pale.

"Therefore, I immediately had a search made. Inquiry was made of the School House prefects as to which boys were on the worst terms with Merry, and might be supposed to be more likely than the others to make this attempt to injure him. Among other names, yours was given in. Your study was the second one searched. This was the result."

The Head opened an envelope, and turned out several fragments of paper upon his writing-table.

Some of them were half-burnt, but still retained clear traces of handwriting, while others were crumpled, and had evidently simply been screwed up, and thrown into the wastepaper-basket.

On most of them the wording of the letter was partially repeated, and on several the handwriting was more like Gore's than Tom Merry's.

The cad of the Shell stared at them with starting eyes.

Like most dabblers in rascality, he was as great a fool as rogue, and he had never foreseen—never dreamed—of anything of this sort. The chance that the matter might come before the masters had never even occurred to him.

"What have you to say, Gore?"

The cad of the Shell was dumb.

"I am waiting, Gore!"

"Oh, sir! I—I— This is a plot to ruin me!" burst out Gore desperately. "Tom Merry must have written those papers, and put them in my study!"

"I am quite aware that Merry is incapable of doing anything of the sort," said Dr. Holmes; "nor had he any motive for doing so. A wild accusation like that cannot have any weight. I think, however, that there may be further proof. Turn out your pockets!"

"W-w-w-what!"

"Turn out your pockets immediately!"

"W-w-w-why, sir?"

"Some of these fragments have a different wording," said Dr. Holmes. "That looks to me as if you have been practising for another letter. I think, too, that the success of your first attempt would probably encourage you to further evil-doing. I think it quite possible that you may have something of this sort about you."

Gore was dumb.

"Turn out your pockets!"

"I—I—I—"

"Will you obey me, or shall I call in Binks to search you?"

"Oh, sir! I—I—"

"Please call in Binks, Mr. Railton!"

The House-master stepped to the door.

"I—I'll turn out my pockets, sir," said Gore huskily.

"Very well. Wait a moment, Mr. Railton."

Gore turned his pockets out. Mr. Railton watched him closely, and caught him by the wrist as he tried to slip a paper up his sleeve.

"We will see that, please, Gore!"

Gore made a choking sound in his throat. He despaired now. Mr. Railton unfolded the letter, and laid it before the Head.

Dr. Holmes adjusted his glasses, and read it.

It ran as follows:

"You had better keep an eye on Figgins & Co. this evening.—A FRIEND TO ORDER."

The Head's brow grew very stern.

The note was in Tom Merry's hand, or, rather, a close and clever imitation of it, and was evidently written by the same hand as the note picked up in Study No. 6 in the School House.

"What did you intend to do with this note, Gore?" said the Head quietly.

The wretched boy stared at him dumbly.

"I think I can guess," went on Dr. Holmes. "You meant to drop it somewhere in the New House, where it would be found by Figgins. Figgins would naturally imagine that Tom Merry had sent it to a New House prefect, and bitter blood would be the result. Was not that your plan, Gore?"

Still Gore could not speak.

"I think we may take your guilt as established now," said Dr. Holmes. "So astounding an instance of wickedness in a boy of your age I have never encountered before. It is, of course, impossible for you to remain at the school."

"Oh, sir!"

"You will be expelled! For the sake of your parents, and also because of the disgrace it would cause to the school, I will spare you a public expulsion. You will go

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now and pack up your things. I shall write to your father and acquaint him with the cause of your leaving. You will leave St. Jim's to-morrow morning by the first train. You may go!"

"Oh, sir!"

"Go!"

And Gore went.

It had come at last—the Fate he had so often tempted, and had more than once narrowly escaped.

He was sacked!

CHAPTER 17.

Alone.

GORE sat in his study.

He had finished his packing, and now, tired and despondent, he sat down to think. His thoughts were not pleasant.

He threw himself into the chair, his legs stretched out, his hands thrust deep into his trousers-pockets, his head bent forward, his brow sullen.

It had come to this!

Sacked!

On the morrow morning he was to leave the school for ever.

Gore had never had any great affection for the school. It had never come into his mind that he liked the place.

But now that he was to leave it he realised that even his hard heart was not proof against associations.

The old quad, the green old elms, the cricket-field, and the bathing-pool on the Ryll—he knew how he would miss them all.

But that was not all. He was leaving the school in disgrace.

He had always done badly there. At Clavering, his previous school, where he had first met Tom Merry, he had done badly. He had kept up the same course at St. Jim's. Laziness and slacking kept him in the Shell when he was more than old enough for the Fifth.

He had not cared for that. The fact that he was bigger and older than most of the Shell fellows had only made him into a bully.

More than once he had tempted Fate—more than one serious infraction of the college rules, more than one act of meanness or brutality had been brought home to him, and still the last and heaviest of punishments had passed him by.

Now the blow had fallen. He was expelled! And as he realised it, realised that it was all over with him—that St. Jim's was to be left behind, and that all he had to face now was an angry father, a home where he was not welcome, he groaned aloud.

Sacked!

The word seemed to be dinning into his ears. There was a tap at the door. Gore looked up.

The door opened, and Mellish, of the Fourth, looked in. Gore's face brightened a little. The cad of the Fourth was not a pleasant fellow. Nobody got on with him well except Gore. And Gore bullied him and patronised him more than he chummed with him. But just now it was pleasant to Gore to feel that he had a friend left. Mellish had heard, of course, and he had come to tell him he was sorry. And Gore felt his heart warm a little.

"Hallo, old chap!" he said. "Come in!"

Mellish came in. His little eyes were twinkling strangely.

"I say, Gore, I hear you're sacked."

Gore nodded.

"Expelled?" said Mellish

Another nod.

"My hat, that's news!"

"Yes."

"When are you going?"

"To-morrow morning."

"I see you've been packing," said Mellish, with a glance round the study.

"Yes, I've finished."

"Will you be taking your white rabbits?"

Gore started.

"I had forgotten them," he said.

"Can I have them?"

"Eh?"

"Can I have them?" said Mellish. "I don't want to keep them, you know—I hate animals—but I can trade them off at a bargain with a chap I know of. If you're not taking them, you might let me have them. I'll stand half-a-crown for them, too."

Gore's heart sank. This was the sympathy and friendship he had to expect from the kind of chum he had chosen for himself.

"You can have the rabbits," he said.

"Right-ho! Here's the half-crown."

"I don't want it."

"Serenio! Sure?"

"Yes; you can have them for nothing."

"Thanks, awfully! About that ten bob I owe you. I'll send you a postal-order later on—next term, perhaps."

"All right."

"Feeling pretty down in the mouth, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Well, it's natural. You must have been a giddy ass!" giggled Mellish. "I've sailed pretty near the wind myself, but I've never been found out. Blessed if I know how you could be duffer enough to come such a cropper."

Gore was silent.

"Well, I'm sorry," said Mellish, with a yawn. "Thanks for the white rabbits. Good-bye!"

"Are you coming to see me off in the morning?"

Mellish hesitated.

"What train are you going by?"

"The eight o'clock up?"

Mellish shook his head.

"I should have to get up so jolly early," he said. "You'll excuse me, won't you? I'll say good-bye now."

Gore started to his feet.

"Get out of my study, you miserable little worm!" he growled. "The sight of you makes me sick."

Mellish stared, and then chuckled.

"Same old Gore still," he remarked. "Same nice temper. I envy your people when you get home—I don't think."

And Mellish scuttled out of the study, just in time to escape a book hurled at his head.

Gore jammed his straw hat on his head, and left the study. His face was black and downcast. The talk with Mellish had depressed him more than the fact that he was expelled from the school. A wretched sense of loneliness, of being an Ishmael, weighed upon him and oppressed him. If he had only had a friend to speak to at that moment—someone who would speak without a selfish motive to serve! But he had cut himself off from fellows who would have helped him willingly.

Many glances followed the fallen bully of the Shell as he went down to the gates. No one spoke to him. All knew that he was expelled; all knew what it was for. Few pitied him. His act had been so base and mean, that no one could possibly find any extenuating circumstances.

Gore reached the bank of the Ryll, and threw himself down on the grassy slope, staring at the shining water. He tried to think, but he could not; he was only conscious of a sense of dull misery.

Sacked! That was the only word that was clear to his brain.

The wretched junior let his face fall into his hands, and a sob shook him from head to foot. The tears—strange enough to the eyes of George Gore—came through his fingers.

He felt a touch on his shoulder, and started.

It was Tom Merry!

CHAPTER 18.

Good-bye to Gore!

TOM MERRY looked down at the cad of the Shell. Gore looked up, his face still wet. There was silence for some moments. Gore broke it.

"I hope you're satisfied now," he said.

Tom was silent.

"I'm sacked," said Gore. "It's knocked me right over—you can see that. I'm done for. You've got your triumph. I hope you'll enjoy it."

"I—"

"You've come here to triumph over me. Well, make the most of it. I hate you—I hate the place, and everybody in it."

"I haven't come to triumph over you, Gore," said Tom Merry. "I'm sorry for this. You know I warned you."

"I know you did."

"If you had owned up you might have got off. As it is, I suppose Railton has found out somehow."

"Yes."

"And you're expelled?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry."

Tom Merry's look and tone were so sincere that even Gore could not but believe him. The bully's face softened a little. It was curious that the sympathy his own friend had never dreamed of showing him should come from the boy he had injured.

"Well, I believe you," said Gore slowly. "Blessed if I know why you should care about it. I wrote that letter, and they found it out."

"Why did you write it?"

"Because I was a silly ass, I suppose. Because you and Blake and your friends have always been against me, and I wanted to pay you out."

"It was a rotten mean trick; but I won't say anything about that now. I'm sorry for you, and sorry for your people. It's rough on them, anyway. Look here, can't anything be done?"

Gore looked at him quickly.

"What can be done? I'm sacked."

"Yes, but an appeal to the Head—"

Gore gave a groan.

"You wouldn't think of appealing to him if you had seen his face when he told me I was expelled. It was like iron. I believe he's glad to be rid of me. I believe they've both had their eye on me for some time, and want to get me out of the school."

Tom Merry thought it very probable. Gore was not the kind of boy to do any school good.

"But I say," went on Gore eagerly, "there's a chance—it's just possible—if you went to the Head. You're the injured party, and you might be able to get me off."

It was curious that the sympathy his own friend had never helped of the boy he had done his best to damage and discredit, to ask Tom Merry to save him from the punishment of an act committed against Tom Merry himself. Gore would have clutched at a straw then to save himself.

Tom Merry looked thoughtful.

"Will you try, Merry?"

"I don't know that it would do any good," said Tom slowly, "but I'll try. If you get a public flogging—"

Gore shivered.

"That's bad enough, but anything's better than getting expelled."

"Yes, that's so."

"If you can get me off that I'll always be your friend. You shall see that I can be grateful."

Tom Merry knew Gore well enough to be aware that his gratitude would last as long as his danger. But he did not think about that then.

"I'll try," he said.

And the hero of the Shell walked towards the school. He met Arthur Augustus D'Arcy in the gateway. D'Arcy was looking very serious.

"Tom Mewwy, I've been lookin' for you!"

"Well, here I am, kid."

"I twust that all misundahstandin' is now ovah, and that the formah welatons are now westored, deah boy!"

Tom Merry did not reply.

"We were uttally taken in, you know!" said Arthur Augustus. "How were we to dream that there was a chap at the coll. wotten enough to imitate a fellah's hand? We couldn't be supposed to guess it, you know!"

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"You might have thought better of me."

"It was weally a vewy painful shock to think badly of you, deah boy!"

"Well, I suppose I ought to overlook it," said Tom Merry. "But I shouldn't have suspected you of acting like a low cad, if I had seen a dozen forged letters."

"Pway don't pile it on, deah boy! We feel bad enough about it already!" said Arthur Augustus, with a look of genuine distress that Tom Merry could not resist.

He held out his hand impulsively.

"It's all right, Gussy! Give us your fin, old son, and forget all about it!"

"I wegard that as the weally wight and pwopah thing to do!" said D'Arcy, shaking hands with Tom Merry. "It's all wight now! I apologise most sincerely in the name of Studay No. 6 for our unjust asupish!"

"That's all right."

"And now there's anothah mattah," said D'Arcy seriously. "I have just seen Cousin Ethel off, you know, and she had heard that Goah was sacked. She was vewy sowwy for the wottah."

"I'm sorry myself."

"Yaas, wathah! The chap is an absolute blightah, but weally one can't help feelin' sowwy for a fellah who's down," said Arthur Augustus. "Ethel suggested that an appeal to the Head might get him off."

"I'm just going to the Head to make one."

"Bai Jove! I'll come with you as a wewpewesentative of Studay No. 6 in the mattah, deah boy!"

"Right you are—come on."

"Pewwaps you had bettah leave the talkin' to me, as the more sensible chap of the two," D'Arcy remarked, as they entered the School House. "What is wequired in this case is a fellow of tact and judgment."

"Rats!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

Tom Merry knocked at the Head's d'sor. The deep voice of Dr. Holmes bade him enter. The Head looked surprised when he saw the two juniors.

"What can I do for you?" he said.

"If you please, sir—"

"Weally, sir—"

"Shut up, Gussy!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"It's about Gore, sir," said Tom Merry respectfully. "I hear that he's been expelled from the school, sir—"

Dr. Holmes nodded.

"That is correct, Merry."

"I—I know he acted like a rotten cad, sir," said Tom Merry, "but—but as I was the party he was trying to injure, I—I thought perhaps—"

"Go on, Merry."

"Perhaps you would let me intercede for him, sir."

"Do you want to intercede for a boy of that nature, Merry?" asked the Head, very quietly.

Tom Merry coloured.

"It's rough on him, sir—and on his people. I—I think perhaps the fright would be a lesson to him, sir, if—if you would let him stay."

"Yaas, wathah, sir! That is what I was goin' to say—and though I should pwobably have expressed it a little more neatly, it is weally how I look at it, sir."

"I am sorry, Merry—"

"I hope you will be as easy as possible with him, sir. It was through me—though accidentally—that the matter came out, and I feel—"

"I understand, Merry. But it is impossible for me to pardon Gore, or to overlook his fault."

"But, sir—"

"It is too serious. He intended it for an ill-natured, cruel trick—but another step in the same direction might lead him to crime. Forgery is a serious thing, Merry. The wretched boy had no intention of committing forgery, but that is what his act amounted to. It would not be consistent with my duty to the other boys to overlook it."

"I thought perhaps a—a flogging, sir—"

"That would not be sufficient—and I cannot allow such a corrupting influence to remain in the School House."

"Bai Jove, I nevah thought of that!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. And Tom Merry was silent. He felt that the Head was right—that in such a case mercy was out of place.

"Later, perhaps, when Gore has learnt by experience to alter his ways, I might allow him to return," said Dr. Holmes. "That is a matter to be considered later. For the present, at all events, he must go. He leaves the school to-morrow morning. It is good of you—very good and proper—to speak up for him, Merry; especially as he has tried to injure you. But I cannot alter my decision."

"Very well, sir."

"I am sorry, but the matter is closed."

And the two juniors left the study.

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus, turning his eyeglass upon Tom Merry when they were in the passage. "I have nevah seen the old boy with his back up like that befoah, Tom Mewwy!"

Tom Merry nodded.

"It's no use," he said. "He won't change his mind, that's certain."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I shall have to tell Gore."

"I suppose so—there's nothin' else to be done," said D'Arcy. "Pewwaps if you had left it to me to explain to the Head the mattah might have turned out bettah. Do you think that's likely, Tom Mewwy?"

"No, I don't."

D'Arcy rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Pewwaps I might go back and put it to him now," he suggested. "I could put it to him stwaight, as to an old sport, you know."

"Don't be an ass."

"Weally, Tom Merry—"

"Oh, come on!"

"I wufuse to be called an ass! Pway don't huwwy me—I want to welflect, and considah whethah I had bettah go back and put it to the doctah like an old sport!"

Tom Merry seized the swell of St. Jim's by the arm and dragged him away.

Gore was waiting for them in the School House passage. He was standing by himself. The other juniors of the House glanced at him from a distance, but carefully avoided approaching him or speaking to him.

Gore started eagerly as Tom Merry came up, and he turned a quick, hopeful look upon the hero of the Shell.

But Tom's expression was enough for him. The hope died out of his face as quickly as it had arisen there.

"No good?" he asked, in a low voice.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"No. I'm sorry."

"He wouldn't listen?"

"He listened, but he he wouldn't change his decision. I'm sorry, Gore. I hope you believe I've done my best!"

Gore nodded dully.

"Yes, that's all right—I know you have. Thank you. It was decent—more decent than I've ever been to you."

And Gore turned slowly away. They heard him shut the door of his study. There was a deep shade upon the brow of Tom Merry. He had done all he could—he could do no more.

The next morning the expelled junior, in the midst of a silent crowd, stepped into the trap, and his boxes were placed in after him, and with a white face he was driven out of the gates of St. Jim's.

The juniors turned to their usual occupations, but many of them thought of the expelled boy on the platform at the railway-station, and the thought brought a shade to their faces.

Gore was gone!

And, bitter enemy as he had been to the Terrible Three and the chums of Studay No. 6, it was a long time before they ceased to think of the pale, heavy face of the junior who had been "Sacked!"

THE END.

NEXT THURSDAY:

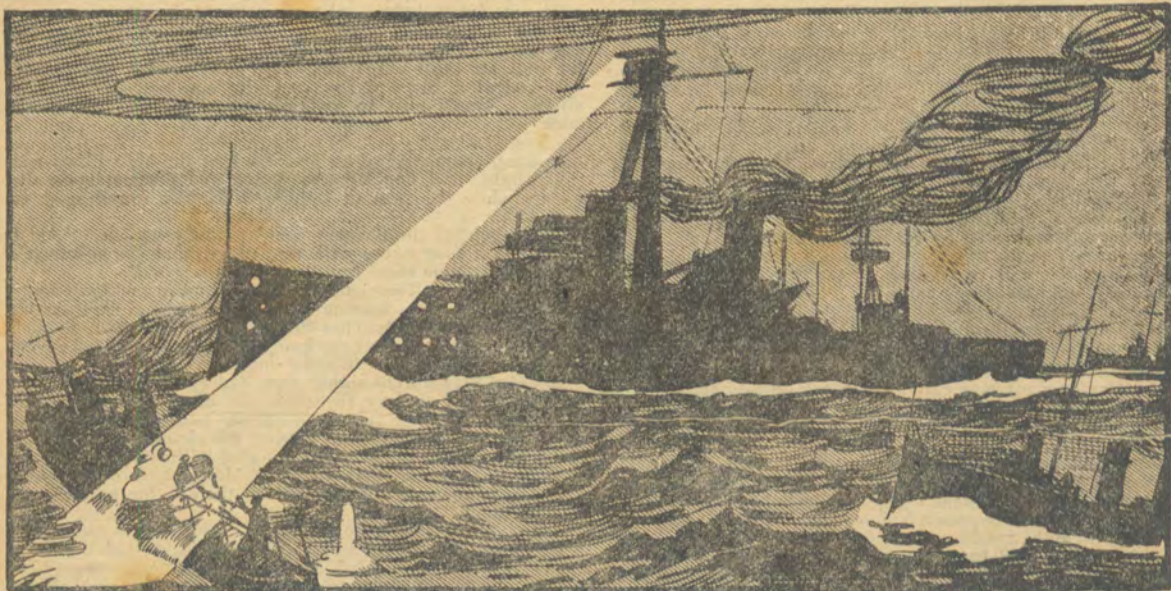
"THE HAUNTED TOWER."

Another Grand, Long, Complete School Tale of the Boys of St. Jim's
By **MARTIN CLIFFORD.**

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BRITAIN AT BAY.



A Powerful and Stirring War Story.

THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

Sam and Stephen Villiers, two cadets of Greyfriars School, by a combination of luck and pluck render valuable service to the British Army during the great German invasion. They are appointed special scouts to the Army, which is forced back on London by Von Krantz, the German commander. At the time when this instalment opens, Sam and Stephen are with a Lieutenant Cavendish, who is in command of a captured German war-ship named the Furst Moltke. Cavendish is waiting off the island of Texel for some colliers intended for the German fleet. As he sees the colliers through his night-glasses steaming out of harbour, he remarks to Stephen that there will be "a very pretty spectacle presently."

(Now go on with the Story.)

The Capture of the Colliers.

"What are those two smaller craft I can just make out, keepin' on the flanks of the steamers?" asked Sam, gazing intently through his glasses.

"A pair of destroyers—escort to the collier division."

"Oh, there'll be some scrappin' after all, then!" said Stephen more hopefully. "We shall make short work of that brace, though. Ain't you going for 'em, Bob?"

"You're in too much of a hurry, my ardent young comrade. We'll let 'em get well out of sight of the coast—that is, if they don't see us first. Don't think they'll do that now, though."

"The destroyers won't use their searchlights, I s'pose?" said Sam.

"No fear; they don't want to advertise themselves."

Without so much as a glimmer showing anywhere, the cruiser lay motionless under the loom of the land, like some beast of prey awaiting the time to spring; while the unsuspecting German collier division steamed on its way seaward, bound to furnish the Kaiser's ironclads with coal. Not till they were nearly out of sight, even to the night-glasses, did the Furst Moltke slowly draw out in pursuit.

Like some sleuth-hound of the ocean she followed mile by mile, and Sam wondered why Cavendish let the enemy go so far. All his crews were ready at the guns, every man was at his station. Suddenly the cruiser stretched out to her

full stride, and went racing after the quarry, overhauling them rapidly.

"Ready the quick-firers, there!" said Cavendish. "Noy, then, searchlights on!"

The darkness was cloven through as two great beams of far-reaching white light sprouted suddenly from the Furst Moltke, and lit up the enemy's ships brilliantly.

The five great grimy colliers were tearing away as fast as they could go, but the two war-vessels were not to be seen. They were outside the circles of light.

"By gum! The destroyers had spotted us before! They're comin' for us!" cried Stephen.

It was true! The pair of German destroyers, of the fastest and most powerful type, had seen the danger. Leaving the colliers, they turned back in a wide circle, separating, and came flying towards the Furst Moltke from opposite sides. For the moment they were invisible in the darkness.

But only for the moment. The two searchlights swept their rays swiftly over the sea, one to either side, and the destroyers were discovered. Before there was time to cry "there they are!" the Furst Moltke's guns opened fire.

Two shells smacked the water just astern the destroyer to starboard, and a third, striking her full in the bows, exploded the torpedo which lay ready in the tube, and blew the vessel to fragments.

The other one, coming towards the port side, was already within torpedo-range, and nothing but the superb shooting of Cavendish's gunners could have saved the Furst Moltke. The German let go his bow torpedo, but before his deck-tubes could discharge, a terrible load of 6-inch shrapnel wrecked the destroyer, and left it a mere helpless hulk upon the waters.

There was a pause of acute suspense till it was seen whether the torpedo that had been fired would reach its mark or not. The range had been extreme, and the cruiser was going at a great pace. A line of hissing, phosphorescent bubbles just astern showed that the deadly weapon had barely missed her.

"Good!" said Cavendish. "Another fifty yards nearer, an' that chap would have got us nicely. I'm glad I can't stop to sink him an' his crew. Lights on the colliers again there!"

The five great steamers were once more lit up like a theatre by the searching rays, and the Furst Moltke was now within close range. They looked like a herd of stampeded elephants flying from a tiger as the cruiser raced up.

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"Give 'em a shot across the bows!" said Cavendish.

A four-inch shell sang noisily ahead of the leader. She stopped reluctantly, and three others followed suit. The fifth, however, lying far to the left and just outside the rings of light, tried to make a bolt for it to the southward. A small shell, slap through her bows, at once showed her the uselessness of trying to escape, and she hove to sullenly.

"Flash them the signals by Morse code to close up and lie in line abreast!" ordered Cavendish. "Warn them that the first which attempts to disobey will be sunk."

The signals were made, and the five great steamers formed up in line like mutinous Fourth Form boys making up a punishment-class, the cruiser, with her grim guns, representing the head-master with his birch.

"Pipe away the largest Berthon boat, Mr. Elcombe, and put a petty officer and five seamen aboard each of the colliers! We will now fill up our bunkers from the largest."

The Furst Moltke ranged up close to the westernmost of the line, and the grimy crews and irate German skippers of the five colliers watched her with mingled feelings as she proceeded to help herself to the Kaiser's coal.

It was a fine night, there was not much swell running, and the difficult business of coaling at sea was managed with smartness and amazing rapidity. The Furst Moltke's bunkers had been considerably emptied after so much steaming at forced draught, and Cavendish was thankful for such a Heaven-sent chance to fill up for a full cruise. He did not even oblige the collier crews to help.

"Every one of my men can do the work quicker than three of those longshore whippers!" he said. "It's first-class coal, too. The gentleman on the bridge there looks a bit sick, don't he?"

Not a man aboard any of the captured vessels dared lift a finger in protest. They stood by in sullen silence, most of them anxious to know what was going to happen to them.

It was a strange, impressive sight, the British warship in the dead of night holding those five big vessels cowed and dumb while she took from them the precious fuel which she needed to use against their own side. At last the coaling was finished, and Cavendish's bunkers were full.

"What are you goin' to do with 'em?" said Sam. "All those crews'll be a nuisance aboard here as prisoners, won't they, if we're going to fight?"

"Quite out of the question," said Cavendish. "I'm afraid they—"

"Steamer coming up from the nor'ard, sir!" bawled a midshipman smartly, as he stood by the after searchlight.

In a moment all glasses were turned on the stranger. She was no warship, but a large iron freighter, and when the searchlight was turned on her she swerved away in a fright.

"Stop her!" ordered Cavendish. "Bring her to! By Jove, this is the very thing I want!"

Bang! went a gun, and the shell flung across her bows halted the strange vessel in double-quick time. She was signalled to range up alongside the colliers at once, and she did it.

"My eye! We own the earth!" said Stephen. "You were right, Bob, it's quite an amusin' night! Is that a German ship, though?"

"I don't care what she is," returned Cavendish. "She's got to perform a blessed errand of mercy, whether she likes it or not! Ah, a Belgian!" he added, as the words "Heyst Antwerpen" became visible on her stern.

The stranger's skipper, who had recognised the Furst Moltke's crew as English bluejackets, despite the German name, shouted across in a great passion.

"Vot does dis mean?" he yelled. "How dare you stop me! I vos a Belgian subject!"

"If you were a Chinese subject, or a Fijian, it would give me equal concern," said Cavendish. "Get your boats in the water and take the crews of those colliers aboard your ship. Look alive, for I'm in a hurry! Mr. Elcombe, see that the Germans man their own boats, as well as ferry themselves over, to save time!"

"I vill not stand it! I refuse!" bawled the Belgian captain.

"You'll do as you're told, or suffer for it," said Cavendish. "I'm not being funny, I mean business. You'll be performin' an act of humanity," he added, grinning. "You can land those crews at Antwerp, an' send in your bill to the German Government, an' I hope you'll get fat on it!"

The Belgian raved and protested, but all to no purpose. The cruiser's steady guns kept him in order, and in a very short time the grimy collier crews were all aboard the freight steamer to the last man.

"Now get on your course for Antwerp again," called Cavendish to the Belgian skipper; "and don't lose any time on the way!"

The captain swore valiantly, and threatened all sorts of penalties against the British Government, but he was glad

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enough to take himself and his vessel out of range, and soon had disappeared.

"It's a pity," said Cavendish, with a sigh, "that we've got to waste all that good coal; but to send it across the North Sea to our own fleet is impossible—an' besides, the German ships'll soon be turning up an' recapturing it. We've got to destroy it, an' the old iron tubs as well."

"No help for it, I suppose," said Sam. "Goin' to slam shells into 'em till they sink?"

"Not a bit of it. Mustn't waste ammunition when we may need every round of it before we've done. Mr. Elcombe, see that all those ships and their bunkers are well soaked with petrol. Stave a few casks in 'em, and set 'em well alight. Don't wait to loot anything, but get it done at once."

"Yes, sir."

In another quarter of an hour each of the big colliers was well alight, and floating abandoned and derelict upon the water, while the men of the Furst Moltke rowed back to their ship.

"So much for the Kaiser's coal," said Cavendish. "An' I think you'll soon agree with me, Steve, that the spectacle's more picturesque than you were reckoning on."

He was right. The cruiser stood by, and in another twenty minute flames were leaping from the ports and skylights of the colliers. Their hatches had all been left open to give full ventilation and feed the flames. Half an hour later they were on fire from stem to stern and deck to keel.

It was a magnificent sight. The five great ships drifted to and fro, huge roaring furnaces, the gassy coal that filled their holds burning furiously. Their iron sides and decks grew red hot, glowing and hissing till clouds of steam rose about them from the sea and mingled with the flames. So terrible was the heat that the Furst Moltke had to move well away to windward. The glare lit the sea for a couple of miles around.

"My aunt!" said Stephen, almost appalled at the sight. "This beats anything I've seen since we've started!"

"Good!" said Cavendish, his hand on the engine-room telegraph. "They're properly alight now, an' no mortal power can save them!"

The cruiser glided ahead, and forged away to the northward, and as she did so Cavendish pointed in the other direction, where eight searchlights, rapidly coming nearer, played to and fro across the sky.

"See that?" he said. "We were just nicely in time!"

"What is it?" exclaimed Sam—"the German squadron?"

"Yes, a section of 'em comin' to meet the colliers an' coal up," Cavendish chuckled. "They'll find 'em without searchlights," he added, "an' the meal nicely cooked ready for 'em."

Stephen leaned against the bridge-rail and laughed loud and long as he saw the stately German battleships slowly appear within the glare shed by the burning colliers. And the swift cruiser, having done her work, stole away to the northward.

The dawn was slowly spreading over the sea when the whirr and splutter of sparks in the Marconi tube, which the Furst Moltke's operator was watching, announced another wireless message thrown across the seas to her commander. It came from the High Admiral, as before, and was short and sharp.

"Continue on your course to the northward, and engage no enemy's vessel on the way. Be ready to make your westing instantly."

Cavendish's face brightened, though the message conveyed little to the boys.

"That's great!" he said. "The old man's going to pull me over to his side after all, an' perhaps we shall see something of the big fight. I don't want to be kept monkeying about over on this coast for good."

"Does it mean you're to hook it if a German ship comes up?" said Sam.

"It means the admiral's got a special use for us, my son, an' that we aren't to waste ourselves on unprofitable scrappin'. All the same, I hope we don't sight the haughty foeman, for it'd be a sore temptation. What are you starin' at, Steve, my boy? See a flight of rooks up in the sky?"

"Uncommon queer birds," replied Steve, who was gazing at the sky to the eastward, towards North Holland. "What the dooce are they?"

Far distant, but coming up rapidly with the fast rising wind, were three strange-looking objects in mid-air, looking like gigantic wild-fowl drifting across the sky.

As the officers of the Furst Moltke watched, the objects resolved themselves into bulky, cigar-shaped forms, travelling end-on.

"What are they," exclaimed Sam—"airships?"

"There ain't any such thing—at least, not fit for practical work," said Cavendish; "but that's the next thing to it. They're war-balloons, and steerable ones at that."

The high-flying objects approached so quickly that they were soon seen to be balloons indeed—not of the ordinary pear-shaped form, but with long, cigar-shaped gas-bags. The cars were also long in form, and each had three large, fan-shaped blades or sails, which moved slowly, first one way and then the other, jutting from the after-end of the cars.

"They're the things Santos Dumont invented, aren't they?" cried Stephen.

"Something like it," said Cavendish, watching them keenly through his glasses. "A later edition, and more up-to-date, I should say."

"Navigable balloons, eh? Can they actually steer?" said Sam.

"After a fashion, but not very surely, by what I can see. They're Germans, that's a cert, an' they're going to try their luck with the British Fleet. It's an experiment, I reckon," said Cavendish, "an' this wind's just suited for it."

"By gum, it looks as if they were goin' to experiment on us!" said Stephen. "Look at that!"

The war-balloons had evidently recognised the Furst Moltke for a British-owned ship. At first they had apparently intended to pass her wide, but now, heading to the southward in a long curve, they came straight towards her, at a height of fully a thousand feet above the sea.

"They can steer!" exclaimed Sam. "An', by Jove, if they're goin' to drop bombs on us from up there, there'll be an end of the Furst Moltke!"

"Gun-crews away there!" cried Cavendish. "Get those balloons as quickly as you can! Fire at the gas-bags, not the cars!"

The crash and roar of the cruiser's guns answered him, and shell after shell was sent hurtling skywards, till the air seemed full of explosions. Yet no effect was noticed, and not one of the balloons was touched, though all the smaller guns joined in. Good as the gunners were, they had no success now.

"It's the very deuce to hit those things!" cried Cavendish anxiously. "There's no way of finding the range, nor correcting the aim. If we don't get them soon," he added grimly under his breath, "we're done for!"

Furiously the guns plied, but the balloons came through it all as if they had charmed lives. One swerved off strongly, but a second soon came nearly directly overhead, hanging for an instant like some great hawk, far up in the sky.

"More steam!" cried Cavendish. "Give her every ounce!"

Something struck the water with a mighty splash close alongside. Next moment there was a tremendous shock forward, and an explosion on the fore-decks that shook the Furst Moltke from stem to stern.

The Summons to Battle.

The shock was a stunning one, and the first thought of the boys was that the Furst Moltke had received her death-blow. Whatever the missile was that the balloonists had hurled down upon her, its effect proved terrible. The cries of the wounded were heard above the drumming of the guns, which still continued to ply, and Cavendish's voice barely reached them.

"Hard a-starboard! Swing her round!"

Plunk! came another missile from aloft, travelling with the tremendous speed gained by the height it fell from. It just missed the ship as she swerved, and dashed up the water in a fountain close alongside.

"Look! They've got one!" cried Stephen.

A tremendous sheet of flame suddenly burst out far overhead. The second of the war-balloons had been struck by a bursting shell, and the silk envelope of her container was ripped and burst. The gas ignited with a roar that could be heard for a mile around, the balloon hung motionless for a moment, and then began to fall.

Down, down, down it came, plunging towards the surface of the sea, close by the Furst Moltke. The hapless occupants of the car could be seen clinging on as they passed like a flash, and the roaring, flaming mass of the half-collapsed gas-container gave out a heat that scorched the faces of the bluejackets as it went by. Then it soused into the sea, a hissing, smoking mass, the dead weight of the car and ballast dragging it down.

The first balloon, which sent the missile that wrought such destruction, had been caught by a gust of the fast-freshening wind that was now rising to a gale, and was swept to leeward. She made a strong attempt to beat back again, but to go into the wind's eye was beyond her power.

The Furst Moltke's guns fired at her mercilessly, and though the great gas-container seemed such an easy mark it was not struck. Her rudder seemed to be hit by some stray shell, however, for she suddenly lost control altogether, and, caught by the wind, was whirled away helplessly, turning round and round.

As for the third balloon, it had been unable to come above the cruiser at all, and finding itself threatened by the guns,

turned tail and let itself be driven off by the shrieking wind, as a black squall swept over the sky. In a wonderfully short time both balloons were out of sight.

The moment the danger was over, Cavendish had hastened forward to see what damage was done to his ship. He was gone some time, during which the wounded were carried below and attended to by the surgeons, and when he returned to the bridge he gave a sigh of relief.

"We're well out of that business," he said; "one more smash like that would have finished this ship's career. By great luck the charge was exhausted on the great main-deck girders, and the steel-work there helped to save us. I thought it must have gone through an' blown the bottom out of her."

"Great Scott! What a ghastly business it was!" said Stephen, who looked more shaken and anxious than his brother had ever seen him; and so did Cavendish. "Who'd he thought of such an attack?"

"I'd never have believed the beastly things could do such work as that, an' tackle a full-powered warship under way. But, as a fact, we've got off cheaply. There's a hole in our fore-decks ten feet across, but it needn't put us out of action, an' we must patch it up somehow. We've lost eleven men by the explosion."

"It's worse than bein' fired at by the biggest guns."

"Rather! No guns can fire slapdown on to your decks like that. An' the best gunners can't make sure of hittin' balloons a thousand feet up in the air; it's the most difficult thing in the world, especially when they're drivin' along at thirty miles an hour."

"I couldn't believe my eyes," said Sam. "It seemed as if they had charmed lives, with shells burstin' all round like that."

"You thought the shells did, but it's quite likely none of them were really near her. They look like that. There's nothin' to correct your aim by as there is in sea-work, and the whole thing's deceptive. Well, we pipped one of 'em," added Cavendish, "and there's no sign of her crew."

"What a pity the others got away!"

"Yes. They'll do no more damage to our side, though, I reckon," said Cavendish grimly, "even if they fall in with the fleet. This gale's risin' every minute, an' they can do nothing against it. It's not likely either of 'em 'll ever see dry land again."

"All the same, I fancy it's lucky the blessed experiment wasn't made before," said Sam. "If the Germans had discovered that the things could be used with such effect, it'd be pretty rough on our Navy by this time."

"I don't think it, even then. We should soon learn how to deal with 'em. Machines like those, that blow about the sky and are only able to steer in a more-or-less sort of fashion, will never beat first-class ironclads."

"Hope not," opined Stephen; "for I must say I don't like 'em, and I never remember a worse five minutes than when those two brutes were hoverin' over us an' chuckin' out bombs. Still, if you think it's all right—"

"I think we had a bit of bad luck with them, that's all. I let 'em get too close, and I think it ought to be easy enough to out-mancuvre them an' keep to windward, once you know what to expect. Hanged if I like bein' tried experiments with!" he added, looking at the gaping rent in his fore-decks. "We must tinker that up as best we can."

The armourers and every artificer and engineer that could be spared were soon busily at work on the damage, making it as secure as the means at their disposal would let them. Mac himself was of great value at his work, and it was pushed ahead rapidly.

Meanwhile, the Furst Moltke held on her way slowly northwards, her staff not in the best of spirits. The encounter with the war-balloons had not pleased Cavendish, and he felt himself to blame for the damage his ship had suffered, though it is difficult to see what more he could have done.

"They've got a bit of their own back in return for the burnin' of their colliers," said Sam. "Still, we're a long chalk to the good yet, so buck up, old chap! What's wrong with you?"

"I wish I could get in touch with the admiral," said Cavendish, chafing. "How long are we to be kept messin' about over here?"

"Messin' isn't quite the word," said Sam. "You're a discontented bird, Bob, my boy. I'll bet there's few in the whole Fleet have seen as much fun as we have."

"I dare say. Wouldn't you like to have a hand in the big game, though?"

"Yes; but there's not much chance of that. We'd better take what we can get an' be thankful."

"Marconigram from the flagship, sir," said the orderly, stepping up to Cavendish and saluting.

Eagerly the young commander took the message that had sought him out over so many miles of sea.

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"Commander Cavendish, Cruiser Furst Moltke," it read. "Join battle line of First Cruiser Squadron, neighbourhood Spurn Head, without delay. Place yourself under orders Admiral Frobisher. Prepare ship for general action."

"HOWARD."

Cavendish fairly jumped with joy.

"Elcombe, put her on course N. 40. W.!" he cried. "Snap every ounce of speed you can out of her! Mac, go an' sit on the safety-valve, there's a good soul! Let every gun be overhauled afresh!"

"We're to join 'em, then!" cried Stephen. "Shall we see the big light after all?"

"See it? We shall be in the thick of it, man! Frankie's been given command of the big cruiser squadron, under Lord Howard, who runs the battleships! They're both joinin' to bring the German fleet to battle, an' they're evidently at the point of doin' it at last."

"And if it is so?"

"Then, before the sun sets, either the German or the British Navy will be wiped out."

The boys drew a deep breath. So long had the crisis been delayed, and so much skirmishing and casual fighting had taken place from day to day, that they could hardly realise the fate of the two nations was now to be decided once for all. Everything hung on the events of the next few hours, and but one thing was absolutely certain. That was, that many a man, and many a hundred men, on both sides would look his last upon the world that day.

The Furst Moltke, urged at the utmost pace her engines could drive her, was trembling gently, as if in eagerness for the fray, as her great propellers sent her flying across the North Sea. Before the message came, Holland had already been left two hours behind, and now her head was turned for England, churning through the waves in a lather of hissing foam.

The Rival Fleets.

"Shall we be in time?" said Stephen, almost beneath his breath.

"If twenty-three and a half knots can take us, Mac's nursing her splendidly. Yes, I think we shall be in time. If not for the opening, at least before it's over."

"They'll be too full-handed to send us any more orders, I suppose," said Sam. "What if we miss the Fleet?"

"When a hundred ironclads are hammerin' with all their batteries there's little chance of not findin' 'em," said Cavendish impatiently. "The row'll be heard from England to Holland, an' south of France."

"They haven't opened at each other yet, then," said Stephen, "for we're down-wind of 'em, and we've heard no firing."

"Right, young 'un. They may not be even in sight of each other yet—an' I hope they aren't."

"Will that rent in our decks handicap us much?" said Stephen, pointing to the havoc the balloon's dynamite charge had made.

"That!" said Cavendish, with a grim laugh. "Why, after we've been half an hour in such an action as this'll be that's comin' the whole ship'll be like that, outside her armour-belt. Wherever she's not fully protected by it she'll be just a mash-up. Still, she'll float then, unless her vitals are pierced through the armour. There's a hot time comin', an', tough as you are, you'll maybe have had enough of naval warfare by to-night—that's if you're still alive."

Cavendish's face shone with a fierce, keen satisfaction that the boys had never seen on it before, and they themselves, despite his warning, felt a strange elation at every mile that brought them nearer the enemy. There had been skirmishing enough; now they were going to take a hand in the affairs of kings, and the fate of the two greatest Powers in the world was to be settled by the death of one or other.

Great activity prevailed from stem to stern of the Furst Moltke. She was already in battle trim, but many things were done to make her fitter for the struggle. Cavendish left the navigation to Elcombe, and directed the preparations himself, and in three hours' time there was not a thing left to do to her. Yet her young commander went over everything again with untiring vigilance.

"She's fit to take her part now!" said Stephen enthusiastically. "You look a bit doubtful of her still, Bob."

"I'm anxious to see how she'll do in a big fight. Remember, we know little about her," replied Cavendish. "She was an enemy's ship a week ago, an' at the best she's only tinkered up for our Service. There's been so little time."

"She's done splendidly so far!"

"What against? She's fought no hard action. We've laid out some destroyers an' a brace of third-class cruisers, captured a liner, an' burnt some colliers. Wait till she meets the giants in open fight. No, I'm not doubtin' her, all the same. I believe she'll turn out trumps. But she's a

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stranger to us, an' the ships who were her sisters a week ago should know her weak points, an' how to tackle her—see?"

"We can't be far off 'em now," said Stephen.

"I say," said Sam, who just came from the Marconi operator's quarters, "the wireless telegraph thing is simply fizzing and spouting!"

It was. From every quarter the Hertzian waves, beating through the atmosphere, made themselves felt upon the receiver. Yet no message could be read. The instrument seemed alive with the constant shocks of the currents.

"That means we're approachin' the enemy's fleet," said Cavendish. "Their signals, travellin' all ways, are bein' caught by our instruments. It's always so. Only we can't read 'em, for we neither know their code, nor the pitch their transmitters are tuned up to."

There was something weird about those busy signals, coming over the seas from the great unseen force of the enemy, while nothing was in sight for miles. The Hertzian waves grew stronger and stronger as the Furst Moltke ploughed on her way, and presently the smoke of a large assembly of vessels could be seen on the horizon, a long way out on the port-bow.

Cavendish turned his glasses on them, and all watched anxiously. Soon the vessels could be made out. They were warships of the largest size, steaming slowly north-westwards, in "gridiron" formation, and beyond them was a host of smaller craft.

"The German battle fleet!" said Cavendish.

It was but a glimpse that the Furst Moltke caught of them. She steamed ahead till her young commander was able to tell the number of them and their disposition. His knowledge of the German Navy enabled him to recognise them ship by ship with his powerful glasses; and as soon as he had learned what he needed the Furst Moltke turned away and sped northwards till she was out of sight of them, afterwards curving in in a long circle towards England.

"We've got to get round 'em," he said drily, in answer to Stephen's inquiry. "We haven't got orders to attack the German Navy from the rear single-handed."

"There are more ships ahead!" cried Stephen. "See!" He pointed to the westward. "An' there's the English coast!"

"Our Cruiser Squadron," answered Cavendish. "An' these should be the battleships away beyond," he added, gazing at a pall of smoke further to the southward.

Dead silence fell upon the Furst Moltke, and all watched eagerly as she drew nearer at her best pace. She was still a full ten miles even from the cruisers, but every minute they grew nearer.

"Do they know where the Germans are, d'you think?" said Stephen eagerly.

"Of course. Both sides have probably got each other in sight already, an' they're steamin' in for battle. Howard's brought 'em to the scratch at last!" said Cavendish enthusiastically.

The thick wind-baze and flying scud grew clearer as the Furst Moltke approached, and a splendid sight greeted her crew. At the back of all the surf was showing white along the grim English coastline at Spurn Head, and the Humber's mouth opened beyond. Six miles out from it the British Cruiser Squadron of sixteen swift and powerful armoured ships was steaming out in a double line. Beyond them, farther south, was the Battle Squadron, whose twenty-three huge grey, turreted monsters were swinging out in line abreast.

And now, plainly visible, came the enemy's fleet, which Cavendish had sighted farther to the eastward an hour before. It was moving slowly to meet the British advance.

Till that day no man had ever seen such a sight as two great steel-clad navies, each belonging to a first-class Power, meeting each other at sea. The waters for mile upon mile were thronged with the mighty vessels, each one of which could have sunk an entire old-time navy single-handed in a single hour.

First came the German Cruiser Squadron, made up of all the ships that could be got together after the first German defeat off the Thames. There were twelve powerful vessels to meet the British sixteen, and already they were nearly in extreme battle-range. Britain had at last mustered her full strength upon the seas, and, even after her first great loss in the North Sea when the war opened, she was still to the good.

The German battleships, far beyond, were already manœuvring to meet the British battle-line; but these, as yet, the boys could hardly spare a glance for. All their attention was riveted on the rival fleets of cruisers, where Sir Francis Frobisher's flagship, the Fearless, to which his flag had been transferred, was already exchanging distant signals with the hurrying Furst Moltke.

"We're in time!" cried Cavendish exultingly. "And now

for the last grip! Britain shall not fail to-day, for this battle, if she is not victor, will seal her fate!"

He had hardly spoken when the flash of a 12-pounder from Frobisher's flagship gave the signal for action. Both the German and British squadrons opened with sighting-shots, and the great battle had begun.

The Final Blow.

As the first rattle of the guns grew into a continuous, drumming roar, Sir Francis Frobisher turned his line to port, to bring the full effect of his batteries to bear. At the same time he signalled to the Furst Moltke to join the rear of the line and open fire as soon as she was within range.

"Only the rear!" said Stephen, in disappointed tones, quivering with excitement as they neared the scene of action.

"As hot there as anywhere else," replied Cavendish coolly.

He and the boys, with a warrant-officer and a midshipman, were now in the conning-tower, whence they had complete control over the ship and a high view over the whole area of the battle.

The crews were at the guns, every man was at his post, and the cruiser was cutting across to reach the rear end of the British line, which was just ahead of her. Beyond, in clear view, were the German cruisers of Admiral Von Birne, hammering away at long range at Frobisher's ships, both rapidly drawing nearer.

The Furst Moltke, with every ounce of power she could raise, was fast nearing her place, but as yet she was out of shot. From the fire-control stations aloft the range-finders, intent on their work, were sending down the distances to the gun-crews in the barbettes.

"13,000 yards—12,000 yards—11,000 yards—10,000 yards!" Boom! opened the single great 9.2-inch gun in the Furst Moltke's fore-barbette. Cavendish felt a thrill of satisfaction as he watched, for he had substituted that gun for the two six-inchers before leaving Sheerness. The big shell howled on its way towards the rearmost German cruiser, and a heavy explosion was seen just abaft her fore smoke-stack.

"Good for the men behind the gun!" said Cavendish, with satisfaction. "I'll bet there's not another ship in the Squadron could beat that shot! Ah! Now the ball opens!"

The Furst Moltke took her place in the line, exchanging signals with the cruiser next ahead, and all her starboard batteries opened sharply. At the same time she came within the zone of the German fire, and the enemy's shells came aboard with deadly force.

Far around the water was pocked and cut with the falling projectiles, and one of the first shells fairly swept away Cavendish's repairs to the fore-decks, and left the gaping rent bare once more.

On both sides the smaller guns were coming into action, and a hail of 12-pounder missiles was added to the thudding of the larger shells.

The noise and crashing were tremendous. All along the British line, extending nearly two miles, the vivid flashes of the guns were cutting through the great swathes of smoke that began to envelop each vessel.

The cruisers were travelling at fully eighteen knots, and through it all the signals and commands were given and received, keeping the Squadron in admirable order, and manœuvring as the skill and pluck of Frobisher demanded.

Farther landward, waiting like a flock of black gulls upon the sea, were over sixty vessels—the destroyer and torpedo flotillas.

Beyond the German cruisers, hardly visible, was the enemy's reserve of the same sort of vessels. Their time had not yet come. The British battleships, too, five miles farther south, and now in full view, had a destroyer flotilla in attendance.

"My word!" gasped Stephen, as the crash and quiver of the gun-firing increased. "Isn't this terrific!"

"The battleships are at it, too!" said Sam.

And the vast steel monsters under Lord Howard, whose flagship led the six Dreadnought ships which manœuvred separately from the ruck of the battleships, were now hard at it with the German Fleet.

Those on the cruisers had little time to give an eye to the other division, however. Their own was the swifter and the sharper fighting—for their greater speed and agility, and bristling batteries of quick-firers, made them the champion light-weights of the sea.

And now the range decreased so rapidly between the two squadrons that the destruction was appalling.

The Furst Moltke shook and vibrated under the shock of the shells crashing against her armour. Beyond the armour-belt itself the wreckage was fearful, and a tangle of smashed girders and twisted steel were all that remained in many parts of her, though no vital spot was pierced.

Her decks were swept with a storm of steel splinters and shrapnel, and fire broke out twice, even though hoses were constantly spouting water on the decks.

The fire was got under swiftly, Sam and Stephen helping

smartly the second time, but it was difficult and perilous work.

Over thirty men were dead or wounded, cut down by the hail of splinters, which also cut the fire-hoses twice.

Stephen received an ugly gash across the forearm, which was bound by his brother when they returned.

The conning-tower itself was shaking and trembling under the hail of small projectiles that beat on it.

At any moment one of the bigger shells from the largest German cruisers might strike and demolish it—for the Furst Moltke, though pressed into the service, was a lesser ship, and not meant to stand the attacks of such giants. Yet through it all her guns plied rapidly, and with deadly accuracy.

"Great heavens! This can't last!" muttered Stephen.

"The flagship's gettin' it worse than we are!" said Cavendish, in a momentary lull of the firing.

It was so, indeed. The magnificent Fearless, from which the old sea-dog Frobisher directed the line, was receiving a fearful bombardment.

Again and again the big guns of half the German Squadron were concentrated on her all at once, till she moved in a lurid pall of smoke from the bursting shells.

It was a favourite plan of the enemy, for they knew the master-brain of the whole Squadron dwelt in her.

Her smaller guns were all out of action, and her battered sides were red with great streaks of blood that swilled over them from the scuppers. Her casements, full of wrecked quick-firers and mangled bodies, were dumb.

Yet still her heavy guns plied steadily and swiftly as ever, and her conning-tower still stood.

"She's turning the whole line!" cried Stephen suddenly.

Cavendish had already noted the signal, and his ship turned as smartly as if she were still unhurt. The effect of Frobisher's move was to reverse his entire formation, so that his van became his rear, and his rear his van.

With the Furst Moltke now at its head—though, of course, not commanding it—the Squadron steamed on a long slant towards the south.

The reason for it was seen directly afterwards—the German destroyer flotilla was on the move.

The enemy's cruisers suddenly came at the British ships in line abreast, and their destroyers, seventeen in number, swung round, cut across, and charged towards the front half of the British Squadron in one furious rush; while the big ships behind poured in a fire with all their available guns.

"Shrapnel!" cried Cavendish; and the order was sent instantly through the speaking-tubes. "Shrapnel in all the six-inchers!"

He did not choose to keep to plain shells to repel such an attack, though some of the ships did. The sea seemed black with the charging destroyers, and behind them came twelve first-class torpedo-boats.

The British ships met them with a tremendous fusillade. First one and then another of the destroyers seemed to melt and disappear, or else blow up in a cloud of steam.

Still the others came on, and as though there were a special spite against the Furst Moltke, four were attending to her alone.

"Can we stop 'em before they've the range?" thought Stephen, his fists clenched with excitement.

The splendid shooting of the Furst Moltke's gunners saved her, and without much difficulty.

Two of the destroyers were cut to pieces simultaneously by the deadly shrapnel, a third followed ten seconds afterwards, and the fourth was shattered by the quick-firers.

She discharged her torpedoes, but so fierce was the hail of small shells beating on her that she missed with both, and sank directly afterwards.

"The shrapnel's cut the others down!" cried Sam. "Couldn't the quick-firers have settled the lot?" he added, in surprise.

"We've only two of 'em left," said Cavendish grimly, "an' those are silenced now!" he added soon afterwards.

The words were hardly spoken when a deafening crash and a fearful shock sent them reeling.

A nine-inch shell had struck the conning-tower fair and square, and for fully half a minute they were too dazed and stunned to move.

When Stephen recovered his wits, with throbbing head, he saw there was a gaping crack in the tower's thick steel armour, and the interior was full of choking fumes.

Cavendish staggered up and altered his course again, looking white and shaken.

His nerve was as steady as ever, none the less; and now the whole line, turning again, moved straight in to the attack in line abreast.

Two of the British cruisers were out of action, torpedoed by the destroyers, and were deep down by the stern.

Another, the Orion, was sinking fast, her barbettes still firing as she went down. Two others were so sorely damaged that they could scarcely steer or keep afloat.

But the German Squadron was in far worse case, and the

remorseless British fire, backed by Frobisher's skilful manœuvring, now showed its effect.

Three of the largest German cruisers were sunk, four more had left the line and were striving to reach the land and beach themselves before they went down, and Von Birne's flagship, the Norderny, was a helpless hulk, from which gaseous flames were roaring furiously.

Two great explosions aboard, caused by the shells of the Fearless, had made a wreck of her, and her bows were slowly sinking lower.

Yet every gun not out of action in both fleets was still firing viciously; nor did the victory yet lie with one or the other.

But the German Cruiser Squadron, that had so long lorded it over the North Sea and flown its insolent flag where Britain had so long been mistress, was now broken and confused.

From Frobisher's flagship at that moment flew a fresh signal that made Cavendish's eye gleam joyfully and his lips shut grimly.

"Combine with destroyer flotilla," it read. "Execute shielded attack. Furst Moltke to lead to the south."

"The time's come!" he said, as his hand grasped the telegraph indicator. "And now, if you live through it, you shall see Germany swept off the seas!"

Queen of the Seas.

A long, deep wail rang over the sea above the sound of the guns. It was the flagship's steam syren, and well did the squadron know what it meant as they turned bows-on to the foe.

"Callin' up the stingers," said Stephen, with appreciation, though his head was ringing like a bell, and he felt bruised all over with the shocks. "How are they going to attack?"

"Wait, an' you'll jolly soon see," was all Cavendish replied, his eyes fixed on the cruiser next in the line.

From the neighbourhood of Spurn Head, in answer to the call, the British destroyer flotilla came racing to the scene of action like a pack of hounds in full cry, smoke streaming aft over their low, black hulls, and the water thrown up in great white cushions on either side of their bows. Till now they had been forced to be out of reach, impatient spectators of the great fight.

"I'll bet they've been bitin' their nails off, an' cursin' the Old Man for not lettin' them in!" said Stephen, watching the rushing flotilla eagerly. "Almost wish I was on one of 'em!"

"They've got their turn now," said Sam.

His thoughts went back to the old days aboard No. 66, in the Swayle, when they torpedoed the two German ships off Sheerness. He knew well how the commanders of the deadly little craft were feeling, and the wild exhilaration of that rush through the water in the face of the enemy's fire.

Yet, to attack a full squadron in broad daylight was a very different matter to torpedoing anchored ships at night. The boys had seen how the German destroyer attack had

failed, and though Von Birne's cruisers were now very much weaker, it seemed there was a very good chance of the British flotilla being annihilated in the same way, without doing much good. But they had yet to learn the admiral's plan.

The British cruisers were now advancing slowly upon the German squadron on a long slant, and both sides were hammering away at each other furiously. To remain anywhere outside the protected parts aboard the Furst Moltke, was almost impossible for mere flesh and blood. Steel splinters and shell fragments swept the decks and upper works like a veritable hail of death, and the larger projectiles were beating a devil's tattoo on the big cruiser's armour.

"My word, are they going to run into us?" exclaimed Stephen, glancing back at the destroyers.

The flotilla was coming straight at the British line, and as yet no shells were

directed at it, for the big ships were keeping each other busy. Suddenly the destroyers spread out and scattered. There were thirty in all, and a couple of them joined each cruiser, and slowed down alongside.

The British ships turned and slanted their course still a little more, clapping on all speed. As they approached the Germans, each cruiser now sheltered a pair of destroyers, whose frail hulls were thus protected from the German fire by the big armoured ships that escorted them. The whole squadron advanced swiftly upon Von Birne's cruisers, the destroyers keeping station perfectly.

"Neat—oh, uncommon neat!" said Sam enthusiastically. "That's what you call a shielded attack—eh?"

Cavendish nodded, but did not open his lips. Through a perfectly infernal fire he advanced his ship upon the enemy, who was now demoralised and keeping station badly.

On came the cruisers, all their available guns going, till within a bare thousand yards of the Germans. Then, at a signal, the British cruisers turned sharply to the eastwards, and steamed away, still firing with their whole broadside.

The destroyers were now left unprotected, and instead of following their big consorts, they all leaped out into their utmost speed, and charged the German line at thirty knots.

Stephen involuntarily broke into a cheer that was drowned by the roar of the guns. The flotilla, thus brought, unhurt, within so close a range, were able to make a terribly effective attack. The German cruisers put on all speed, and turned every gun in their batteries upon the destroyers; but to sink many of them in so short a time was impossible. With bated breath the boys watched the mad rush of the deadly little vessels.

One was hit almost immediately, and vanished under water in a halo of white steam. Another had her stern blown bodily away, and was put out of the fight, though her bulkheads kept her from filling. The Germans, in their haste to check or escape the attack, were in something very like a panic, and their line was in worse confusion than ever.

Before another destroyer was hit, the nearest let go their fore and deck-tube torpedoes, and away went the big Whiteheads on their errand of death. The whole twenty-eight vessels discharged within twenty seconds of each other, and as they did so, two more of them were struck, and sunk.

But the effect on the Germans was far more fatal. The waters seemed to shake with the muffled thuds of the torpedoes as they struck home. Many were bound to miss, but a mass of water shot up alongside the cruiser Kraken, and she heeled violently and began to settle. The Sea Hound had her bilge blown bodily in, and listed heavily, immediately afterwards careered over towards the British squadron, showing her decks on a fearful slant, with a horde of blue-clad figures tumbling helplessly to leeward.

The Vaterland, Schnell, Vorwaerts, and Wachwitz were all hit, the first two making for the land in a sinking condition, and the others going down so rapidly that nothing could be done to save them. Von Birne's flagship, the Kaiserin, was struck by no less than three torpedoes—two amidships, and one right forward. Powerful ship though

she was, the shock was so great that it practically broke her in two. Her two ends rose up and her middle sank, while half a dozen 9-inch shells from Admiral Frobisher's ship, put into her in quick succession immediately afterwards, gave her her death-blow. The conning-tower was wrecked, and every man in it killed, the port engines blew up, and the German flagship, turning slowly in a circle, went to her doom.

In all, seven German ships were put out of action by the attack, and the destroyers, having lost eight of their number, came surging back through the British squadron, greeted by ringing cheers from the big ships.

Of the Germans, only five remained afloat and able to fight, all more or less damaged, and now they tried to draw off.

(Another long instalment of this stirring serial next week.)



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