

WILL YOU HAND THIS NUMBER TO A NON-READER?

Every

Wednesday.



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CHAPTER 1. The Mysterious Letter.

"TOM!"
"What on earth's the matter, Tom?"
Monty Lowther and Manners both spoke at once. Their voices expressed surprise, not unmixed with alarm.

Tom Merry did not reply.
He was standing near the doorway, in the School House at St. Jim's, with a letter in his hand. The letter was open, and Tom Merry's eyes were fixed upon it. He did not seem to hear his chums speak, and he did not look up from the letter.

"Tom!"
Monty Lowther clapped him on the shoulder. Then Tom Merry raised his eyes from the letter, and met the startled and inquiring gaze of his chums.

"What's the matter?" demanded Manners. "What on earth are you glued on the letter like that for? Is it bad news from home?"

Tom Merry shook his head.
"Then what is it?" demanded Monty Lowther. "Has Miss Fawcett written to you, and forgotten to enclose a postal order?"

Tom Merry did not smile. He simply shook his head again. It was evident that the letter in his hand had exercised a strange effect upon him.

"Is that the letter from India?" asked Manners. "I heard there was one for you with the Indian postmark."

"This is it," said Tom.
"Is it from your uncle over there?"
"I thought it would be, but it isn't."
"Well, what is it?" asked Manners, puzzled. "What are you looking like an Egyptian mummy about? Is there anything wrong?"

"Blessed if I know," said Tom Merry, with a deep breath. "If I were in India, I should think there was something jolly

THE MESSAGE OF MYSTERY!

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St. Jim's.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

wrong, from this; but—but I suppose it must be a lark. But the letter came from India, right enough—the postmark and the stamps prove that. I don't see how anybody so far off as that could be larking with me."

"Give us a squint at the giddy epistle," said Monty Lowther.

Tom Merry handed him the letter. Lowther took it, and Manners looked at it over his shoulder. Then both the chums of the Shell uttered exclamations of amazement.

There was nothing written on the letter. It was of thin India paper, and upon it three red spots were inscribed in the form of a triangle.

That was all.
Manners looked at Lowther, and Lowther looked at Manners, and then they both looked at Tom Merry. Tom Merry's face was full of blank astonishment. Manners and Lowther were as astonished as the captain of the Shell.

"Is that all there was in the letter?" asked Lowther at last.
"That's all," said Tom Merry.

"Just this strip of rice-paper with three dotty dots on it?"
"Just that."

"Somebody got out of a lunatic asylum, and started as a funny letter-writer, I should think," said Lowther. "Have you got any lunatics in the family, Tommy?"

"No, ass!"
"Is your Indian uncle the kind of chap to play practical jokes on a simple and innocent kidlet like you?"

"Of course he isn't, fathead! That rot can't be from my uncle—though, as I know nobody else in India, I'm blessed if I know whom it is from," said Tom Merry. "It's a giddy mystery. If it hadn't come from India I should think it was some idiotic jape of the New House fellows. But Figgins & Co. couldn't have cycled over to Bombay to send a letter to me, I suppose?"

"Well, no, that would be rather a big order," admitted Monty Lowther. "But it must be a joke, and I don't quite see where the humour comes in, myself. A letter containing

Next Wednesday:

"THE BLACK SHEEP!" AND "THE CORINTHIAN!"

three dots and nothing else—unless it means that the writer is dotty, I don't see what it possibly can mean."

Tom Merry laughed, but not very heartily. The letter, meaningless as it apparently was, troubled the junior. Why should anyone in the far-off land of India take the trouble to send him a letter with no meaning in it? How had anyone there known his name, or that he was at St. Jim's? The letter must be from someone who had come into connection with his uncle, the general, and learned something of his affairs. Was it some veiled threat from an enemy? Tom Merry, from having relations in India, had read a good deal about that country, and he knew something of the strange Oriental customs—of crime and vengeance curiously mixed up with a childish theatricality.

Was that strange letter a threat?

But, if so, from whom—for what?

The thought of it was enough to bring a cloud to the sunny brow of Tom Merry. But he drove the thought from his mind. If that letter spelled danger for him, he was no coward, and it could not frighten him.

"The Johnny hasn't even put his address," said Monty Lowther, who evidently looked upon the letter as a freak of some "potty" individual unknown. "You can't address a reply to 'Three Dots, India.' Three Stars is a well-known address in England, but 'Three Dots, India,' would puzzle the post-office."

Tom smiled.

"Well, it's no good taking any notice of it," he said. "I certainly can't make anything of it, head or tail. I'll keep it, though."

He put the queer letter into his pocket-book.

"Hallo, here comes Toby!" said Monty Lowther, as the School House page approached with a telegram in his hand. "Is that for me, Toby?"

"Master Merry, sir," said Toby.

"Sure it isn't for me?" said Lowther anxiously. "My uncle might be wiring me a remittance, perhaps."

Toby grinned, and handed the telegram to Tom Merry. Tom opened it, and uttered an exclamation.

"Hallo! Not more from the 'dotty individual, I hope?'" exclaimed Lowther.

Tom laughed.

"No; this is from Southampton, from my uncle."

"I thought your uncle was in India."

"So he was, but this wire is to say that he's landed at Southampton. He's home on leave," said Tom Merry, his eyes shining, "and he's coming here to see me, on his way to London. Isn't that ripping?"

"That's according," said Monty Lowther cautiously. "There are uncles and uncles. What kind of a Johnny is he—liverish, I suppose, after being in India—with a malacca cane to lay round his dutiful nephew—eh?"

"No, ass! I haven't seen him for years, but he's a ripping chap—sends me tips from India. He's stood a good many of our study feeds."

"Good egg! We'll welcome him like a long-lost son, and perhaps he'll stand another," said Lowther. "Wire back, 'Welcome home, and don't forget your cheque-book.'"

"Ass!" said Tom.

He wired back, though not on the lines that Lowther suggested.

"Lucky it's a half-holiday to-morrow," Monty Lowther remarked, after the telegram had been despatched. "We shall be able to entertain the respected Johnny. Any of you chaps know how to make curry?"

"What are you scowling about, Tom?" asked Manners.

Tom Merry's brows were knitted.

"I wasn't scowling," he said mildly. "I was thinking. It's jolly odd."

"What's odd?"

"That that queer letter should reach me from India the same day that my uncle gets home. I wonder—"

Tom Merry did not finish. He was wondering whether there was any connection between that mysterious letter from

India, and the strange sign of three, and his uncle's return. He decided at once that he would show General Merry that strange letter, and hear what he thought about it. If it meant danger—

But after all, how could it mean danger?

CHAPTER 2.

Checks—and a Cheque.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY, of the Fourth Form, came into Study No. 6, where Blake and Herries and Digby were getting tea.

"Heard the news, deah boys?" asked Arthur Augustus.

"No," yawned Blake. "Had a fiver from your governor? If you have, it's just come in the nick of time—there are only three sardines left."

"I have not had a wemittance fwom my governah, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus. "Tom Mewwy has had a wish fwom his uncle."

Blake grunted.

"Well, we can't eat his wires," he said. "Blow his wires, and blow his uncles! How are we going to make three sardines into a tea for four?"

"His uncle has come home fwom India, aftah servin' there for a gweat many yeaahs," said Arthur Augustus. "He is home on leave, and he is comin' here to-morrow, to see Tom Mewwy."

"Oh, good!" said Blake, showing some slight interest. "He's a general or something, isn't he? Must be rolling in rupees and things. Some fellows have all the luck. I never get any uncles from India."

"The old chap is a wogulah old sport," continued Arthur Augustus. "He's seen service, you know—choppin' down twibesmen on the fwontiah, and waggin' the Thugs and things. He was engaged in puttin' down a wewolutionary society somewhah out there—awful wottahs, you know, who wanted to waise anothah Mutinay, and turn us out of India."

And Arthur Augustus shook his head indignantly.

"Awful rotters!" yawned Blake. "Why, if that came off, what would all the fellows do for jobs who can't get jobs in England? Why, they'd have to work!"

"Yaas, it would be awful," agreed D'Arcy unsuspiciously.

"I wegard General Mewwy as havin' deserved well of his country. He is a wogulah hewo, and he's got the Victowiah Cwoss."

"Has he, by Jove?"

"Yaas. Now, we don't have a V.C. come to the school ewery day, do we?" said D'Arcy. "I was thinkin', deah boys, that this is a time for us to wally wound."

"Hear, hear!"

"I think that St. Jim's ought to wise to the occasion," continued Arthur Augustus. "We'll give General Mewwy a weception that will impress him. There ought to be fireworks and things, and I was thinkin' of a twiumpah arch."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I fail to see any cause for laughtah in that suggestion, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus, jamming his eyeglass into his eye, and surveying his chums severely. "On a gweat occasion like this, with a gweat and celebawted general offiah visitin' the school, I weally considah that St. Jim's ought to spwead itself a bit."

"I don't know whether it would run to twiumpah arches," grinned Blake, "but we might have the fireworks—some crackers, at any rate, say sixpennyworth—"

"Weally, Blake—"

"And a squib or two," said Digby. "We could let them off under the general's chair, and give him a pleasant surprise."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I wegard you as asses," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I stick to my ideah of a twiumpah arch. We could wig it up just inside the gates, you know, and it would look simply wippin'! Of course, it would wequire money, and, as it happens, I am wathah short of tin. Howewah, we can make a subscription. How much can you fellows give?"

"I'll give you my best wishes," said Blake generously.

"I'll give you some good advice," said Herries.

"I'll give you my kind regards," yawned Digby.

"Wats! If you fellows do not wally wound, I shall go ovah and see Figgins & Co. and then the New House will get the ewedit of ewectin' a twiumpah arch to the general," said Arthur Augustus.

"Oh, don't!" implored Blake, looking dreadfully alarmed.

Arthur Augustus was firm.

"I shall have no othah wesource," he said. "I'm keepin' the ideah fwom Tom Mewwy. It is to be a pleasant surprise to him, as well as to his uncle. If you fellows don't back me up, I shall have no wesource but to bwing Figgins & Co. into the ideah."

"Then you'd better buzz off," said Blake, more cheerfully.

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(See column 2, page 26 of this issue.)

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"Bang! Whoosh!" said the black man, in Hindustani—or, at least, some language that Crooke could not understand. "You are the young sahib Merry?" "No!" gasped Crooke. "What? Bangewiddy! Pong, chum, gum-gum!" hissed the black man again. "Can you understand me?"

"Now I come to think of it, there isn't a sardine for you, and Figgy may give you some tea."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Good-bye!" said Blake. "You don't mind if I have the sardine, do you? But if I get a remittance in time, I'll put sixpence towards the crackers."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus walked out of the study, closing the door with unnecessary force. The chums of Study No. 6 chuckled. They could guess how very likely Figgins & Co. were to lend their aid in carrying out D'Arcy's idea of a triumphal arch.

"Hallo, whither bound?" asked Monty Lowther, as D'Arcy ran into the Terrible Three in the passage. "Wherefore that dreadful frown?"

D'Arcy unbent his brows.

"Pway excuse me, you fellows," he said. "I'm in wathah a huwwy to see Figgins. The chaps in my study have wufused to wally wound me, and I'm goin' to see Figgins about the twiumpthal arch."

"The what?" demanded Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther together.

"The twiumpthal arch, deah boy, to welcome the genewal to St. Jim's. I wasn't weally goin' to tell you, but—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the Terrible Three.

Arthur Augustus stared at them.

"What are you cacklin' at?" he demanded.

The chums of the Shell did not reply. They staggered away, still laughing, and Arthur Augustus sniffed with great scorn. Then, with his noble nose very high in the air, he

quitted the School House, and walked across the quadrangle. Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn of the Fourth were outside their House in flannels, having just come off the cricket-field. The swell of St. Jim's nodded to them affably.

"I've just come ovah to see you fellows," he said.

"Well, here we are," said Figgins genially. "No charge."

"You have heard that Tom Mewwy's uncle is comin' here to-morrow?" said Arthur Augustus.

The three New House fellows exchanged a quick glance. Figgins nodded.

"Yes; the whole school knows," he said. "We were just talking about it, in fact."

"Quite a stranger to St. Jim's, isn't he?" said Kerr.

"Tom Merry hasn't seen him for a thousand years or so."

"He hasn't seen him since he was quite a kid," said Arthur Augustus.

"Then he'll hardly know him by sight?"

"Hardly, deah boy."

"I wonder what he's like?" said Kerr thoughtfully.

"I have heard Tom Mewwy say that he is a little man, vewy sunburnt—little but good, like General Bobs," said Arthur Augustus. "But we shall all see what he is like to-morrow afternoon when he awwivies. He is a bwave man, and has won the Victowiah Cwoss, and I have thought of a wippin' ideah for doin' him honah. I was thinkin' of a whip-wound to waise the cash, and ewectin' a twiumpthal arch."

"Oh, my hat!"

"With an inscription on it, you know. 'This arch is THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 290."

expected to a man whom St. Jim's delights to honour, or somethin' like that."

"Ripping!" exclaimed Figgins.

"The chaps in my own studay won't back me up," said D'Arcy. "I wegard it as wotten."

"Horrible!"

"Even Tom Mewwy cackles at the ideah, though the old sport is his own uncle, you know."

"Rotten!"

"I'm glad to see you chaps have more sense, though one wouldn't weally expect that of New House chaps, eithah," said Arthur Augustus thoughtfully. "Howevah, I'm glad to see it. You're going to back me up, deah boys? I don't know how much it will cost, but I dare say it can be done on ten pounds."

"Ten pounds! Oh, crumbs!"

"Is that enough?" asked Fatty Wynn anxiously. "Don't stint yourself for a pound or two in a matter of this sort. Better do the thing well."

Arthur Augustus beamed upon the fat Fourth-Former.

"Quite wight, Wynn, deah boy. Suppose we say fifteen pounds?"

"Better make it twenty," said Figgins solemnly.

"Yaas, that will be bettah still, if you chaps have plenty of tin."

"Twenty quid," said Kerr, with a nod.

"Twenty soveveigns, deah boy—"

"Quids—"

"Soveveigns—"

"Quids!" said Figgins firmly.

"Vewy well, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus amicably. "Have it as you like. I will wiah to my patah for a fivah, and if you thwee chaps could stand a fivah each, there are the twenty soveveigns—"

"Quids!"

"Yaas, quids, if you like. What do you say?"

The New House trio smiled at one another. Five pounds represented a whole term's pocket-money or more to most of the juniors of St. Jim's. They did not all have noble paters like D'Arcy. And the idea of devoting so much money to the erection of a triumphal arch to Tom Merry's uncle from India struck Figgins & Co. as funny.

"Take the money now?" asked Figgins.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I suppose a cheque will do?"

"Certainly, deah boy. I didn't know you had a bankin' account," said Arthur Augustus, somewhat surprised. "A cheque would be all wight. I can get Mr. Wailton to cash it for me. Can you draw me a cheque?"

"My dear chap, nothing's easier. I don't happen to have a cheque-book in my pocket; but a cheque on the leaf of a pocket-book is all right, so long as you've got the money to meet it," said Figgins.

"Yaas, wathah! You will have to put a stamp on it then to make it legal."

"Got a stamp?" asked Figgins.

"Yaas."

"Stick it here, then."

Figgins held out his pocket-book, open. Arthur Augustus took his nobby russia-leather letter-case from his pocket, and selected a stamp from a little compartment. He vetted it with his lips, and placed it on the leaf of Figgy's pocket-book. Figgins gnawed the end of a pencil.

"Must be in ink, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"I'll lend you my fountain-pen, if you like."

"Thanks awfully!"

Figgins took the fountain-pen, and rested the pocket-book on Kerr's shoulder, and wrote. He waved the cheque in the air to dry it, and folded it carefully in four, and handed it to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"That's the contribution from the lot of us," he said. "Good-bye!"

Figgins & Co. walked rather quickly into the New House, leaving Arthur Augustus D'Arcy with the folded cheque in his hand. Arthur Augustus was not a suspicious fellow. But it was rather surprising that a New House junior should be able to draw a cheque so easily for such a sum as fifteen pounds, and D'Arcy unfolded the cheque to make sure that all was right. He read it, and gasped:

"Bai Jove!"

For Figgins's cheque was worded:

"Bank of Allan Water. Pay Arthur Augustus Adolphus D'Arcy the sum of fifteen thick ears.—G. FIGGINS."

The swell of St. Jim's gazed at the cheque, and wrath came

into his aristocratic face. He realised that the humorous Figgins had been gently pulling his noble leg. He crumpled the cheque in his hand, and rushed towards the New House. He rushed up the steps of the House with the intention of taking summary vengeance upon Figgins & Co. He rushed right in to a thin, sour-faced gentleman in cap and gown, and there was a gasp:

"Ow! D'Arcy, how dare you!"

"Bai Jove, I'm sowwy, Mr. Watchiff! I—"

"How dare you rush into this House in that manner!" roared Mr. Watchiff. "Take fifty lines, D'Arcy, and return to your own House at once! Do you hear?"

"But, sir—"

"Go!" thundered the New House master.

And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy went.

CHAPTER 3.

The Raiders.

"HUSH!"

Tom Merry uttered that warning word. The Shell fellows had gone up to bed in the dormitory in the School House, and there was a buzz of voices in the dormitory when Kildare of the Sixth came in to see lights-out. The voices died away at once, and the Sixth-Former glanced at the juniors somewhat suspiciously.

Cheerful and innocent faces met him on all sides, however, and the captain of St. Jim's was disarmed.

"Tumble in!" he said.

The Shell tumbled in. Kildare, after another glance round the dormitory, turned out the light and retired.

Then there was a buzz of voices again. There was evidently something "on" among the Shell fellows in the School House, which was being carefully kept from the knowledge of the head prefect of the house.

"You can go to sleep if you like, you chaps," said Tom Merry. "I'll wake you up at eleven o'clock."

"And who'll wake you up?" asked Kangaroo, the Australian junior.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Not too much row," said Monty Lowther. "Kildare looked as if he smelt a mouse. The way the prefects suspect us innocent kids is something shocking. How many of us are going?"

"Say a dozen chaps," said Tom Merry. "We won't let the Fourth into it. Those kids would be bound to make a muck of it, and there are enough of us to rag Figgins & Co. baldheaded."

"Hear, hear!"

"Us three," said Tom Merry, "and Kangy and Dane and Glyn and Vavasour and Gore and Murphy, and three more. Skimpole wouldn't be any good, and I suppose Crooke doesn't want to come."

"No fear!" growled Crooke. "Ratty will be bound to catch you, and you'll get it in the neck, and serve you right for playing the giddy ox."

"Thank you!" said Tom Merry. "Then that's settled."

The dormitory was buzzing with suppressed excitement. A raid on the rival House had been planned for that night. Raids and rows between the juniors of the two Houses at St. Jim's were of common enough occurrence; but it was a little out of the common for the parties to be raided in their own quarters. At night the Houses were locked and barred securely, and entrance was not easy.

There was a long passage leading from the School House to the New House by way of the other buildings at one side of the quadrangle, but this passage was closed by a great door that was always locked. Tom Merry had made the discovery that the lock could be opened. It was old and rusty, and Monty Lowther, who was an amateur carpenter of great prowess, had operated on the lock with success.

The way into the quarters of their rivals was open—for once—and the School House juniors intended to take advantage of it.

The raiders intended to invade the rival House by way of the passage, and, once in the New House, the rest was easy.

Figgins & Co. would be taken by surprise in their dormitory, and smitten hip and thigh before they knew what was happening to them. It was a gorgeous prospect. As Lowther remarked, Figgins & Co. had been putting on altogether too much "side" lately, and it was time that they were taken down a peg. Indeed, there had been so much whispering and chuckling that evening among the New House juniors that Tom Merry & Co. suspected that some "jape" was being planned over the way. It was high time that Figgins & Co. were instructed who was who, and what was what.

All the raiders were fully determined to keep awake until eleven o'clock sounded from the clock-tower.

And by half-past ten they were all fast asleep.

Tom Merry was the last to nod off. He awoke as the clock

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was chiming out, and lay half-asleep, counting the strokes. Twelve!

"My hat!" ejaculated Tom Merry, sitting up in bed. "Twelve o'clock. I say, are you awake, you chaps?"

There was no reply, save the sound of deep and steady breathing. Tom Merry jumped out of bed, and dipped a sponge into his water-jug, and proceeded to wake up the Shell fellows. There was a muffled roar from Monty Lowther, and a yell from Manners. Then there was a yelp from Crooke, whom Tom Merry had dubbed by mistake in the darkness. Crooke, the cad of the Shell, never had a hand in House raids—they weren't in his line at all. He had a strong objection to running risks, and if he had any scores to pay off he preferred safer and stealthier means.

"Ow! Wharrer marrer? Groogh!" he yelped.

"Hallo! Is that you, Crooke?"

"Groogh! Yes, you beast! You knew it was me!" howled Crooke.

"Sorry—I meant it for Noble."

"I don't want it," chuckled Kangaroo, slipping out of bed. "Never mind, Crooke. Now you're awake, you can come."

"I'm not coming, hang you!" snarled Crooke. "You rotter, Merry! You did it on purpose."

"I didn't," said Tom. "I forgot Kangy's was the next bed."

"Liar!"

Tom Merry's eyes gleamed in the darkness. He took up the jug of water, and groped towards Crooke's bed. There was a sudden swamping of water, and a wild yell from the cad of the Shell.

"Yah! Yaroooh! Ow!"

"Mustn't use naughty words," said Tom Merry calmly.

"Ow, ow, ow! Yah! Oh! You rotter!" yelled Crooke.

"Quiet!" said Manners. "You'll wake up the prefects."

"I don't care if I wake up the whole house," roared Crooke. "Yah! I'm wet! I will wake up the prefects, too, and get you a licking! Ow!"

"Are you going to shut up?" asked Tom Merry.

"No, I'm not. I—"

"Bump him!" said Kangaroo. "Jump on him! He'd like to muck up the raid, the cad!"

"If you make another sound, Crooke, you'll be ragged," said Tom Merry, between his teeth. "If you're looking for trouble, turn over, and I'll give you a licking before we go."

"That's a fair offer," chuckled Monty Lowther.

Crooke subsided into silence. It dawned upon him that if he woke the prefects, and the raid had to be abandoned, it would have painful results for himself.

"Oh, go and eat coke!" he growled.

And the cad of the Shell said no more. But his eyes were glittering with rage as he watched the Shell fellows dressing themselves in the darkness. Tom Merry & Co. were soon ready. They had provided felt slippers for use instead of their boots, in order to make less noise.

The raiders left the dormitory cautiously.

The house was buried in silence and slumber. At midnight the last light was out, and all the masters were in bed. Tom Merry led the way along the passage, and down the stairs, and into the broad-flagged passage that led from the House. This was one of the oldest parts of St. Jim's, and was never used, and was not provided with lights. The darkness was intense.

"Got your glim, Glyn?"

"What-ho!" said Bernard Glyn.

A sudden light gleamed out. It was an electric lamp in the hand of Glyn of the Shell. Glyn led the way with the electric light, and the raiders followed him. Most of them had brought weapons with them—stuffed socks, and twisted handkerchiefs, and pillows. They reached the huge oaken door that barred the passage.

Monty Lowther handled the lock. The great door swung open as he pulled at it. Beyond was deep darkness. After the juniors had passed through, Lowther carefully closed the door, leaving it unfastened.

Then the raiders, chuckling gleefully, pressed on their way.

There were several doors on the passage, but they were never used, and they were bolted or barred, and covered with cobwebs. The juniors reached the end of the passage, after several windings, till they were stopped by another door.

"We're there!" said Lowther.

"Not fastened?" asked Kangaroo.

"No fear. This door is only fastened with bolts on the inside, and I slipped down and drew them when I was in the New House to-day."

"If they've been fastened since—"

"They haven't, ass! Nobody ever comes near this door; it isn't used."

And Lowther proved his words by pushing open the door. On the other side there was a flight of four stone steps, and the juniors mounted them, and found themselves in a passage

near the kitchen and cellars. They knew the way well enough, and Glyn turned off the light. With cautious footsteps the raiders ascended from the lower regions into the upper part of the New House.

They paused in the dormitory passage, and Tom Merry cautiously opened the door of the dormitory which accommodated the New House portion of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's.

There was a glimmer of starlight from the windows of the dormitory, and it glimmered upon a row of white beds, where Figgins & Co. lay in sound slumber. There was no sound in the dormitory save the steady breathing of the New House juniors, and the deeper snore of Fatty Wynn.

"Caught napping!" murmured Monty Lowther.

And there was a chuckle.

The Shell fellows marched in, and the door was closed. Gore bumped against a bed, and there was a startled exclamation in the gloom.

"Hallo! What's that?" demanded Figgins.

"Only us," said Tom Merry calmly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins jumped up in bed.

"My hat! School House cads! Wake up, you chaps!"

"Pile in!" shouted Tom Merry.

"Hurrah!"

And the raiders piled in, with gusto.

CHAPTER 4.

Rough on Figgins and Co.

"H!"

"Ow!"

Biff! Biff! Biff! Bump! Bump! Bump!

"Yaroooh!"

"Great Scott! Yah!"

"Line up!" yelled Figgins.

"Ha, ha, ha! Sock it to them!"

The raiders were smiting right and left, choking with laughter as they smote. The sleepy and astounded New House fellows had no chance. The odds were on their side if they had been on the alert, but they weren't.

They were rolled out of bed, bumped on the floor, smitten with pillows and socks, amid gasps and howls and yells.

Figgins, who was first to recover his presence of mind, grasped a bolster and rushed at the foe, smiting manfully, but he smote Kerr and Wynn in the dark and rolled them over, and then smote Redfern, then Lawrence. And then the great Figgins was seized by the raiders and rolled over, and Kangaroo sat on his chest and pinned him down.

"Line up!" gasped Figgins.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yaroooh!"

"Ow, ow, ow, ow!"

"Who's cock-house at St. Jim's?" yelled Monty Lowther.

"This is where the New House gets it in the neck! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hear us smile!" gasped Manners.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Smite! Smite! Smite!

The combat was terrific, but it was all on one side. The New House fellows were simply overwhelmed. They hadn't a chance. And in the confusion and the darkness, what fighting they put up was as much among themselves as against the raiders. In a few minutes the dormitory looked as if a whirlwind had struck it—bedclothes were sprawling on the floor, and gasping juniors sprawled among them. One or two of the beds had been pitched over, and several washstands upset.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Tom Merry. "I think that will do. We don't want to get Ratty and the prefects here."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Retreat!" ordered Tom Merry.

"Stop 'em!" roared Figgins.

But the scattered and bewildered and smitten New House fellows were in no condition to stop the retreat of the raiders.

Tom Merry & Co retreated in good order into the passage. Figgins jumped up and rushed after them, and was collared and hurled back. He rushed on again, and caught somebody round the neck in the darkness, and held on to him fiercely, pommelling hard. The fellow he collared pommelled with equal energy. There was a chuckle in the passage, and the door closed.

"They're gone!" howled Redfern.

"I've got one of them!" gasped Figgins, who had his enemy's head in chancery now. "Get a light, some of you, and stick at the door. This rotter isn't going to get away."

"Good egg!"

"Groogh!" came in muffled tones from the fellow wriggling in Figgins's strong grasp. His face was pressed to Figgins's chest, and he could not speak.

Figgins chuckled.

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"I've got you, you rotter!" he panted. "Hold the door, in case they come back to rescue him, you fellows."

"What ho!"

Redfern and Lawrence jammed their feet against the door. Owen fumbled in the pockets of his jacket, when he found it, for matches.

Scratch!

A light glimmered out.

It glimmered upon a scene of wreck and confusion, and the New House juniors snorted with rage as they saw it.

"My hat!" gasped Fatty Wynn. "They've done us in the eye this time! The rotters must have sneaked in through the locked passage somehow."

"I've got one of 'em!" gasped Figgins. "We'll make an example of him. Bring the light here, and lend me a hand. I dare say it's Tom Merry."

Owen rushed forward with another match. The light glimmered on Figgins's prisoner. Figgins gave a gasp of dismay as he recognised Kerr.

"Oh, my hat! Kerr!"

"Groooh!" groaned Kerr, rubbing his nose, which was streaming red. "Oh, you ass!"

"I—I thought—" gasped Figgins.

"Ow! My nose! Oh!"

"Oh, crumbs!" said Figgins. "I'm sorry, Kerr, old man! I thought it was one of those rotters. Why didn't you say?"

"Say, you ass! How could I say anything, when you were suffocating me, you fathead? Ow, ow! My nose! Ow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Redfern.

"What are you cackling at, you dummy?" demanded Figgins.

"Ha, ha, ha! You!" grinned Redfern. "Ha, ha, ha! Was it Kerr you were punching all the time? Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, shut up!" growled Figgins. "I hope you didn't get hurt, Kerr?"

"Fathead!" groaned Kerr. "Do you think you can punch a fellow's nose like that without hurting him? Ow!"

"Better get this cleared up," groaned Lawrence. "Some silly ass stuck an elbow into my ribs!"

"Some silly chump jammed his silly ribs on my funny-bone!" groaned Pratt.

"Oh, you ass!"

"Oh, you fathead!"

"Oh, shurrup!" said Figgins. "It's no good ragging one another. It can't be helped now; we've been fairly done. Never mind—we're taking a rise out of them to-morrow."

"Oh, rats!" said the New House juniors, all together. The thought of taking a rise out of the School House fellows on the morrow was not very comforting to them just then.

"Let's go after the beasts!" said Pratt.

"No good. They'll have fastened the door in the passage by this time. We'll make 'em sit up to-morrow!" growled Figgins.

The dormitory was opened.

"Hallo, they're coming back! Collar the cads!"

"Hold on!" said the voice of Thompson of the Shell. "Don't pile on me, you asses! Have the School House bouncers been here?"

"Yes, ass!"

"Ha, ha, ha! You look a pretty sight!" gasped Thompson. "You've been making a pretty row, too. I heard it in the Shell dorm. I came to tell you that I can hear somebody moving downstairs. You've woke Ratty up."

"Oh, crumbs!"

The Fourth-Formers set to work with desperate haste to get the dormitory into its normal state before the arrival of Ratty on the scene. Thompson of the Shell, having given his warning, vanished with a chuckle. Figgins & Co. worked like Trojans to get the beds in order, and they turned in and covered themselves with the bedclothes just as a step was heard in the passage.

"Quiet!" murmured Figgins.

Fatty Wynn began to snore. The juniors all closed their eyes as the door opened, and Mr. Ratcliff appeared, with a lamp in his hand. The Housemaster looked suspiciously into the dormitory. He was certain that he had heard a disturbance, but he was not quite sure from which dormitory it had proceeded.

"Are you asleep, boys?" asked Mr. Ratcliff, in his thin, sour voice.

No reply; only steady breathing, and a deeper and more emphatic snore from Fatty Wynn. Mr. Ratcliff glanced at the juniors frowningly, and then reluctantly retired and closed the door. He would have been more pleased if he had found a pillow-fight in progress; and he had thoughtfully brought a cane with him. But there was no excuse for using the cane, and the Housemaster retired disappointed—much to the relief of the juniors.

"Narrow squeak," murmured Figgins. "And he won't catch the School House chaps, either. They're in bed by this time."

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But Figgins was mistaken in that. Mr. Ratcliff went back to his own room; but if he had suspected the raid and looked for the raiders he would have been successful, for Tom Merry & Co. were not back in their own House. The raid had been a great success; but the retreat had not worked according to programme, for the School House juniors, retreating chuckling along the disused passage, had reached the big oaken door that gave admittance to their own House—and they stopped there. The door did not open to their touch.

And then the chuckles died away, and the raiders looked at one another in great dismay. Bernard Glyn flashed his light upon the big door, and the juniors tried it one after another. Lowther had left it unlocked, and it was unlocked still. There was no visible reason why the door should not open. They pressed upon it, they lined up against it all together and jammed themselves at it, and it did not budge.

It was fast!

"My only hat," said Tom Merry, at last, "it won't open!" Lowther shoved desperately at the door.

"What the dickens is the matter with it?" he grunted. "It's not locked; you can see that!"

"It's got jammed somehow," said Manners.

"Couldn't get jammed."

"There are bars on the other side," said Kangaroo. Lowther snorted.

"I know there are. But a door can't bar itself, can it, fathead?"

"But it can be barred," said the Cornstalk junior, "and that's what's happened. Somebody must have followed us and barred the door."

"Oh, crumbs!"

"Crooke!" muttered Tom Merry.

"He's cad enough," said Kangaroo. "Might be Levison of the Fourth, if he knew we were out, or Mellish, for that matter. Not that it matters much who did it. It's done. And how the deuce are we going to get back into the School House?"

It was a problem that had to be solved. And Tom Merry had to confess that he gave it up.

CHAPTER 5.

An Alarm in the Night.

TOM MERRY & CO. stood in the shadowy passage and looked at one another. Glyn's electric-lamp glimmered upon their dismayed faces, and upon the cold stone walls, and the cobwebs in the corners.

They were trapped!

Before them was the huge and heavy oaken door—immovable. Behind them was the long, winding passage, and the New House. They could not pass the door, and there was nothing for it but retreat. And the only line of retreat lay through the New House. Tom Merry looked at his watch.

"We've been here half an hour," he said. "Figgins & Co. will be in bed again now. They can't guess that we're shut out of our House."

"I suppose we can get through the New House?" said Manners doubtfully.

"We shall have to. We've got to get out of a window into the quad, and then cross over, and get into the School House somehow," said Tom. "It's the only way. I can climb into the dormitory window, and come down and open a window on the ground floor for you chaps. The dormitory windows aren't fastened. All the lower ones are."

"It's the only thing to be done," said Kangaroo.

It was, evidently. With uneasy looks, and murmured threats of vengeance upon the unknown trickster who had fastened them out of their House, the School House turned back. They traversed the passage again, and re-entered the New House, finding all dark and quiet there. This time they did not go upstairs. They stole silently to a kitchen window at the back and opened it, and one by one dropped out. Tom Merry went last, and closed the window behind him; but he could not refasten it.

They breathed more freely when they were in the open air. They were safe out of the New House now, at all events, and in no danger of being caught by the irascible Mr. Ratcliff.

The difficulty before them was getting back into their own House by way of a window. They stole round the buildings, and gathered under the wall of the School House.

In the faint glimmer of starlight they made out the dormitory window high above, with the clinging masses of ivy underneath.

"It's jolly risky, Tom," said Manners uneasily.

"There's a rain-pipe under the ivy here," said Tom. "It passes within a foot of the window. I've done it before."

"Yes; but then the window was open at the bottom. You've got to get on the sill, and push it up somehow. It's only open at the top."

"My hat!" ejaculated Lowther suddenly.

He was standing back from the wall, and staring up at the window. There was blank amazement in his face.

"What's the matter?" asked several of the juniors uneasily. They were getting into a state of "nerves" by this time, and some of them wished that that successful raid had never been thought of.

"The window's open at the bottom!" said Lowther.

"What!"

Monty Lowther pointed.

"Look!" he said.

The juniors stared upwards in amazement. Gloomy as it was, they could see the glimmer of the stars on the panes, and they saw that the sash had been raised. The windows in the dormitory were left open at the top for ventilation. But they were never left open at the bottom. And the juniors knew, too, that when they had quitted the dormitory to start on the raid the window had been closed down.

The bottom sash of the window had been pushed up since they had left.

"That's jolly queer!" said Kangaroo.

"Crooke must have opened it for us," said Tom Merry, after a pause. "Might have been a master who found the door open in the passage and closed it, and then Crooke might have spotted him, and opened this window for us."

"Yes; I can see Crooke serving us a good turn like that—I don't think!" said Monty Lowther, with a sniff.

"Well, Skimpole's there, too. He might—"

"Skimpole's an ass; he wouldn't have sense enough. Looks to me jolly queer," said Monty Lowther. "Looks as if—as if—" He paused.

The juniors looked at one another with rather scared faces.

"Looks like a giddy burglar," said Clifton Dane.

"Don't see why a burglar should get into a dormitory," said Tom Merry, with a shake of the head. "Burglars would make for the place where the valuables are. They needn't climb up dangerous walls. They have things to open windows with."

"If it was one of our chaps opened it he must be awake now," said Manners. "Give him a whistle. He's bound to hear it, with the window open."

"Good egg!"

Tom Merry put his fingers to his lips, and whistled the signal whistle well known to all the School House juniors. The sound rose in the still silence of the night. The juniors watched the mysteriously-opened window with tense gaze.

"Look!" muttered Lowther, catching Tom Merry's arm.

A head had emerged from the window. But it was not a boy's head.

It was the head of a man; and the face was dark. The head was curiously wrapped in a linen headgear of some sort, and two eyes that seemed to glitter like diamonds looked down at the startled juniors.

"My only hat!" Lowther's teeth chattered. "It's a black man!"

"A nigger!" muttered Gore.

"A Hindu!" said Tom Merry. "That thing on his head is a turban."

Tom's face had gone suddenly white. Back into his mind rushed the mysterious missive he had received only that day—the Sign of Three. That had come to him from the far-off land of India, and now— But for the raid on the New House he would have been in the dormitory at that moment. And the Hindu was there—for what?

The dark face was looking steadily down. The deep shadows of the House hid the juniors from the view of the man at the window; but the window was in the starlight, and they could see him. And the fierce black eyes seemed to possess strangely penetrating power. A sudden movement of the head showed that the man had discerned the crowd of fellows in the shadows below.

The head disappeared.

"It's a burglar, after all!" muttered Gore.

"Or—or worse!" said Tom Merry, between his teeth. "The villain! And Crooke and Skimmy are in there with him!"

"We've got to get in!"

Tom Merry made a movement towards the ivy. Lowther caught him by the arm, and dragged him back.

"You can't climb now, Tom! That fellow would only have to give you a shove from the window, and— Don't be an ass!"

"He's got to be nailed!" said Kangaroo. "Wake the House!"

"We shall get an awful ragging for this!" muttered Gore.

"Not if we nail the burglar," said Kangaroo. "That's bound to please the Head. We can lay the rotter by the heels now."

"Good egg!"

The discovery of the dark-skinned intruder left only one

thing for the juniors to do—to give the alarm. And there was no time to be lost. If Crooke or Skimpole awoke with the midnight thief in the room there was no telling what might happen.

Tom Merry ran round to the door of the School House, and dragged at the bell. The peal of the bell rang with startling loudness through the silent House. Manners and Lowther threw up pebbles to the windows of Mr. Railton's and Kildare's bed-rooms. Three or four of the fellows pounded on the door with their fists.

The sudden din rang through the silent House. Tom Merry rang the bell incessantly. In less than a minute a light gleamed out in Mr. Railton's room, and the Housemaster threw up his window. He gave a jump at the sight of the Shell fellows in the quadrangle.

"Manners! Lowther! Noble! What—"

"Burglars, sir!" shouted Lowther.

"What!"

"There's a burglar in the Shell dorm., sir! We've just seen him!"

"Are you serious, Lowther? If this is a foolish practical joke—"

"Honour bright, sir!"

Mr. Railton disappeared from the window. Tom Merry was still ringing the door-bell, and the other fellows hammered there with their fists. The alarm was spreading quickly in the House. Lights flashed to and fro, doors were heard opening, and voices calling. The great door of the School House swung open, and Kildare appeared with a poker in his hand, half dressed, his face flushed with excitement. He had turned on the electric light, and the House was lighted from end to end.

"We'll see that he doesn't get away, Kildare!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Have you seen him?"

"Yes; he's in the Shell dorm. We'll watch the window here in case he gets out."

"Good! Don't go into danger. Call if you see him."

Kildare dashed up the stairs. Mr. Railton was dashing up, too, and Mr. Lathom had come out of his room, and Herr Schneider, the German master. Half the Sixth were out, with pokers or cricket-bats in their hands, and the juniors were swarming out of their dormitories. There was a babel of voices in the School House—the old building rang from end to end.

"He's had time to get out of the dorm.," said Lowther.

"He'll try to get away from one of the other windows, and we'll nab him."

"Scatter and watch for him!" called Tom Merry.

Other fellows were swarming out into the quadrangle now, half dressed, and armed with all sorts of weapons. If the burglar fell into their hands, he was not likely to have much chance against such odds. Mr. Railton looked out of the window of the Shell dormitory, and called to the juniors below.

"Have you seen him again?"

"No, sir," called back Tom Merry. "Isn't he there?"

"No."

Tom Merry ran into the house. He was very anxious that the Indian should be caught. He could not help suspecting that the dark-skinned intruder had visited the school on his account, and his alone. But there was no sign of the Hindu in the house. High and low masters and boys hunted, and every room and passage was searched and scanned, the whole House joining in the hunt. In the quadrangle and the gardens, even in the cricket pavilion and on the playing-fields, the search went on. Taggles, the porter, bringing out his mastiff and Herries his bulldog Towser to help. But no sign was found of the midnight visitor. Short as the time had been, it was clear that he had taken advantage of it, and had escaped from a back window before the searchers could find him. Kildare had found a back window open, and if the man had escaped it was doubtless by that window that he had gone.

The Shell fellows, disappointed and fatigued, came back to their dormitory. They questioned Crooke and Skimpole, but Crooke and Skimpole could tell them nothing. They had both been asleep till the alarm awakened them; and when they awakened they had seen nothing of any stranger in the room.

"The beast didn't lose any time!" growled Monty Lowther.

Mr. Railton came into the dormitory. The Housemaster's brows were knitted. He was evidently in an uncertain state of mind, and did not know whether to be angry or not.

If the man had been there, he was gone. But had he been there? In the absence of any sign of an intruder, it was only natural that the Housemaster should have his doubts. And Tom Merry & Co., as they saw Mr. Railton's frowning face, realised that there was trouble in store for themselves.

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CHAPTER 6.

A Startling Discovery.

MR. RAILTON fixed a stern glance upon the chums of the Shell.

There was a crowd of fellows of all forms around him, most of them half-dressed, with their night-shirts or pyjamas tucked into their trousers, and their braces tied round their waists; some with bare feet, others in slippers or unlaced boots. All of them were in a state of great excitement. Tom Merry & Co. were fully dressed, in contrast to the odd attire of the rest.

"I shall require an explanation of this, Merry," said the School House master. "You gave an alarm of a burglar, but no trace whatever of a burglar has been discovered."

"He had time to get away, sir," said Tom Merry. "It was some minutes before he was looked for, and he had time to get out of a window and bolt."

"There was a window found open at the back, sir," said Kildare.

"Probably opened by these juniors in leaving the house," said Mr. Railton. "They were out in the quadrangle, fully dressed, when the alarm was given."

"That's very queer, sir."

"It will be inquired into. There certainly is no trace of a burglar. I fear that it is some trick, which I shall discover," said the Housemaster sternly. "Tom Merry, kindly explain how you and your companions came to be out in the quadrangle at such an hour."

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, who was there with a cricket-stump in his hand. "Bai Jove! The young wascals, to be bweakin' bounds at such a time! If it was a waid, Tom Merry, you should have called me."

"Pray be silent, D'Arcy. I am waiting for your reply, Merry."

Tom Merry exchanged a grim look with his chums. There was nothing for it but a clean breast now. The unfortunate incident of the burglar had spoiled everything. If the man had been captured, things would have been all right. Such a success would have condoned the breaking of bounds. But he had not been captured, and Mr. Railton evidently suspected that the juniors had invented him. The whole story had to come out now.

"We've been raiding the New House chaps, sir," said Tom Merry reluctantly.

"Indeed! The New House! You have been there?"

"Yes, sir."

"How did you enter that House?"

"By—the passage, sir."

Mr Railton raised his eyebrows.

"The door in the passage is kept locked," he said.

"The—the lock got unfastened, sir," murmured Monty Lowther.

"How did it get unfastened, Lowther?"

"I—I helped it, sir."

Some of the fellows grinned, and Kildare turned away his head. But Mr. Railton's frown did not relax.

"This is very curious," he said. "If you went to the New House by the locked passage, you could have returned the same way, and need not have gone into the quadrangle at all. Why were you out of doors, then?"

"Because we couldn't get back through the passage, sir. Somebody sneaked after us and fastened the door, and we couldn't open it from the New House side."

"Bai Jove! What a wottah!"

"Silence!" said Mr. Railton. "Who could have done that, Merry?"

Tom Merry's eyes rested on Crooke for a moment. The cad of the Shell curled his lip. He might be suspected, but there was no proof.

"I don't know, sir," said Tom. "It was some rotten cad, who wanted to get us into a row. We had to go back again into the New House and get out of a kitchen window, and come over here across the quad. I was going to climb into the dorm. window, and come down and let the fellows in. Then we spotted the burglar."

And Tom Merry explained how they had detected the lower eash of the window open, and he had given the signal whistle, and the dark-skinned man had looked out.

"This seems simply extraordinary," said the Housemaster. "You say it was not a white man?"

"It was a nigger," said Gore.

"Not a negro," said Tom Merry. "A Hindoo, sir—or somebody from India, anyway."

"He was wearing a turban," said Manners.

Mr. Railton scanned the faces of the juniors searchingly. They bore his scrutiny well. They understood what was in his mind. That, finding themselves shut out in the quad, they had raised an alarm of a burglar, in the hope of getting into the house in the confusion without questions being asked.

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as to how they came to be out of doors. That was the ~~not~~ unnatural suspicion in Mr. Railton's mind, and but for his knowledge of the honourable character of Tom Merry & Co, he would have come to that conclusion without hesitation.

"It is a strange story," said Mr. Railton. "The man can hardly have been a burglar—a burglar would not be foolish enough to get into a dormitory. There was nothing to tempt him here. And what business would a Hindoo possibly have in this school? How many of you saw him?"

"All of us, sir."

"And you are sure it was a black man?"

"Yes, sir."

Tom Merry wondered whether he could tell the Housemaster of the strange letter from India, and the queer suspicion that was in his mind. Had that letter been a warning of the intended visit. Had the black man come there for him, with some hidden purpose—perhaps intending violence? How had he known which was Tom Merry's dormitory? How could a native of India know anything about St. Jim's? Had the school been watched already? Strange and vague suspicions were stirring in Tom Merry's mind, but he felt that the whole matter would appear absurd to the practical mind of the Housemaster.

What had the black man wanted there? What was his purpose?

Tom Merry's eyes wandered inquiringly round the dormitory, as he wondered whether the man had left any sign of his visit. But he could see none. If he had found Tom Merry there, what would have happened?

"I cannot understand this," said Mr. Railton. "I must accept your word, Merry, but it is all very strange. You will take two hundred lines each for breaking bounds at night. But for what has happened, your punishment would be more severe. And now you may all return to bed."

Mr. Railton left the dormitory.

The fellows dispersed to their sleeping quarters, excitedly discussing the strange happening. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy tapped Tom Merry on the shoulder, and looked at him reproachfully.

"You should have called me, dear boy," he said. "I would have led the waid into the New House with pleasure, and then this wouldn't have happened."

Tom Merry laughed.

"I'd find out who bolted that door and scalp him, if I were you," advised Jack Blake. And then the Fourth-Formers departed.

"That's my idea," said Monty Lowther, turning to Crooke of the Shell. "Did you bolt the door after us, Crooke?"

"No, I didn't," growled Crooke.

"You were awake when we left the dorm., Skimmy?" said Tom Merry.

"Yes, my dear Merry," said Skimpole, blinking at him through his big spectacles. "I was certainly awake then, though I returned to my interrupted slumber afterwards."

"Do you know whether Crooke left the dorm. after us?"

"I certainly did not see him, my dear Merry, but I remember that I heard him come in a short time afterwards. I heard someone come in, I mean, and get into bed, and as it was not any of you fellows, I presume it was Crooke."

"Might have been the chap getting in at the window you heard," said Gore.

"That is really not probable, Gore," said Skimpole wisely. "For in that case the sound I heard would have proceeded from the window, whereas, as a matter of fact, it proceeded from the door."

"I think that settles it," said Kangaroo. "It was Crooke. What did you go out of the dormitory for, Crooke?"

"Oh, Skimpole was dreaming," said Crooke. "I fell asleep after you'd gone, and didn't wake up till I heard the bell ringing."

The juniors looked at him scornfully. They knew that he was lying—but Tom Merry did not feel inclined to "rag" him without absolute proof. Crooke returned to bed unmolested, but the remarks of his form-fellows passed on him made even the cad of the Shell's ears burn.

Tom Merry undressed in a very thoughtful mood. The black man had been there, and he was not likely to return, that night at least, after the alarm. If there had been danger, the danger was over for the time. Had that strange visit any connection with the mysterious letter from India and the Sign of Three?

"Hullo!" exclaimed Kangaroo suddenly. "What on earth's this?"

The Cornstalk junior was holding up a card in his hand. It was a small slip of cardboard, and the Cornstalk had picked it off the washstand. He held it up in the light, and Tom Merry uttered a sharp cry as he looked at it.

The card was blank save for three dots in red ink, in a triangular form.

It was the Sign of Three again.



"Chuck 'em away!" exclaimed Greene, "I'm feeling quite ill!" "Oh! My hat!" said Coker, as the cold chicken floated down the river after the ham and the eggs, and the beefsteak-pie and the tongue followed the chicken. (For this amusing incident, you should get a copy of this week's number of our companion paper, "THE MAGNET" LIBRARY, and read the "SCHOOLBOY SHOPKEEPERS!" by Frank Richards. Now on sale. Price One Penny.)

CHAPTER 7.

The Mysterious Message.

TOM MERRY sprang forward and caught the card from the Cornstalk's hand.

He stared at it, his heart beating wildly.

The card was of the same material and texture as the rice-paper upon which the mysterious letter had been inscribed, but thicker. The three dots were exactly the same. It was evidently the work of the same hand.

That much was certain now; his suspicion had become a certainty. The visit of the Indian to the School House had been followed up the letter from India.

Had the black man's intention simply been to leave this warning where it was bound to come to Tom Merry's knowledge? Or had he left it because, finding Tom absent, he had been baffled in his original purpose?

Monty Lowther and Manners stared at the card in blank astonishment. They had almost forgotten the letter Tom Merry had received. The Sign of Three upon the card recalled it abruptly to their minds.

"My only hat!" said Lowther.

"My word!" murmured Manners. "That again!"

"Hallo! You know it, then?" said Kangaroo, in astonishment. "You know what it means?"

"No, we don't know that."

"Somebody must have put it here," said Kangaroo. "What is it—a lark? Blessed if I see where the joke comes in, if it is a joke."

"I don't think it's a joke," said Tom Merry quietly. "But I can't quite understand what it is. But this card is intended for me."

"How do you know?"

"I've had one like it before, by post. It's either an idiotic joke, or somebody is trying to scare me," said Tom. "I can't make it out."

The Shell fellows had gathered round in eager inquiry. Tom Merry took the letter from his pocket. He had to explain the matter now. The letter passed from hand to hand.

"Well, that takes the cake!" said Clifton Dane. "If it wasn't for the postmark on the envelope, I should think it was a New House joke."

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NEXT
WEDNESDAY:

"THE BLACK SHEEP!"

A Magnificent, New, Long, Complete School Tale of
Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

"The letter came from India."

"Yes, it's a twister, isn't it? Then that nigger came here to-night on your account?" Kangaroo exclaimed.

Tom Merry nodded.

"I believe so," he said.

"How the dickens did he know which dorm, to get into, though?" said Bernard Glyn.

"I don't know—he certainly did know."

"Oh, he might have a plan of the school," said Kangaroo. "There's a history of St. Jim's published, you know, and there's a plan of the school printed in it. If the man knew that Tommy was in the Shell, he could find out his dormitory easily enough."

"Yes, that's so."

"But what can the little game be? You didn't make any enemies when you were in India, Tommy, did you?"

Tom Merry smiled.

"I was born in India," he said, "but I was brought home by Miss Fawcett when I was only a year old. I could hardly have made any enemies at that age. I simply can't understand the matter at all, but I shall ask my uncle's advice about it to-morrow. And I'm going to bed now, black men or no black men."

The Shell fellows turned in.

Tom Merry had taken the card, and placed it in the envelope with the letter. He intended to show them both to General Merry on the morrow. His uncle, at all events, would be able to advise him what he should do about the matter.

The Shell fellows slept soundly enough for the remainder of that night, and there were sleepy looks in the dormitory when the rising-bell clanged out in the morning.

Monty Lowther rubbed his eyes as he sat up in bed, and blinked in the morning sunshine that streamed in at the high windows.

Claug! Clang! Clang!

"Groooh!" yawned Lowther. "I believe Taggles gets up earlier and earlier every morning to buzz that rotten bell at us! Groooh!"

"Yaw-aw!" echoed Manners. "I'm sleepy!"

"Tain't all lavender raiding the New House of a night," yawned Kangaroo. "I've lost my beauty sleep. I shall be nodding over Latin this morning."

"Never mind, we made Figgins & Co. sit up," said Tom Merry, with a chuckle. "And they won't be able to get back at us. That blessed door will be fastened up safe enough after this. Figgins & Co. will have to take it lying down."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was satisfaction in that thought to the Shell fellows. When they went downstairs they found the Fourth-Form fellows less satisfied. Jack Blake & Co. were sore at not having been included in the raid, and it was useless for the Shell fellows to explain that fags would have "mucked up" the whole affair. Tom Merry pointed out that only a dozen fellows were wanted, and he had a dozen of the best in his own dormitory, so what was the use of coming along to the Fourth for an inferior article? That mode of reasoning did not convince the Fourth at all.

"You made a jolly muck of it, anyway," said Blake scornfully. "You wouldn't have found me getting shut out of my House."

"I don't see how you'd have helped it," said Tom Merry. Blake reflected.

"I'd have left a scout on the watch at the door," he said finally.

"Ha, ha! Yes, now; but you wouldn't have then. Anybody can be wise after the event," grinned Tom Merry. "You'd have got shut out just the same, and you'd have been licked by the New House chaps, which would have made matters worse."

"Why, you silly ass—" began Blake warmly.

"Same to you, and many of 'em!" said Tom Merry affably.

"I considah that you have acted the giddy ox, Tom Mewwy," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy severely. "You ought to have called us in."

"Well, if it was a question of playing the giddy ox, I suppose we ought to have called you in," admitted Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Lowthah, you ass—"

The bell for classes stopped the discussion, which was growing warm.

After morning lessons Figgins & Co. met the Terrible Three as they came out of the Form-room. Figgins & Co. had heard all about the happenings of the previous night, of course, and Figgins felt that he would never be able to forgive himself for not having followed the School House raiders.

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you bounders!" said Figgins, wagging a lean forefinger at the Terrible Three. "We should simply have slaughtered you!"

"And you had the cheek to come back through our House," said Kerr. "If we'd only known—"

The Terrible Three chuckled in chorus.

"You were caught napping a second time," Monty Lowther remarked. "The best thing you chaps can do is to go out of business, and admit that the School House is cock-house of St. Jim's."

"I don't think," said Figgins. "By the way, I hear that you are expecting an uncle or a grandfather or something to-day, Tommy? Gussy was talking about erecting a triumphal arch in honour of him."

"Ha, ha, ha! It's my uncle from India!" Tom Merry explained.

"I'd like to see him, if he comes before we go out," said Figgins. "Expecting him early?"

"I don't know his train," said Tom. "I shouldn't wonder if he gets here about five. There's an express from Southampton stops at Wayland about that time."

"Too late," said Figgins. "We're going out earlier. Well, if we don't see him, you can give him my kind regards, and tell him I'm sorry he hasn't much to boast of in the way of nephews."

And Figgins & Co. walked away grinning. As they crossed over the quadrangle to their own House, Kerr chuckled softly.

"Expecting him about five," he murmured.

"Lots of time," said Figgins.

"Hasn't seen him for years and years. A little chap, burnt up with the sun. Ahem!" said Kerr. "Easier thing than I have ever taken up before since I was an amateur actor. It will be simply like rolling off a form."

"You could do it on your head," said Figgins admiringly. "They are chipping us no end about their blessed raid. What's a raid, anyway? They did have the best of it last night, in a manner of speaking. But to-day—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

After dinner Figgins & Co. strolled out of the school gates, not turning up to cricket as usual, though it was a half-holiday. Tom Merry was thinking of the expected visit of his Indian uncle, and of the strange news he had for him, and he did not give much thought to Figgins & Co. Had he known the destination of the New House trio he might have given them more thought; for Figgins & Co. had walked down to Rylcombe, and they had strolled into the establishment of Mr. Wiggs, the outfitter, ready-made clothes dealer and costumier, who supplied most of the accessories for the New House Junior Dramatic Society. And the three young rascals were very busy for an hour or more in Mr. Wiggs's private room, with the assistance of Mr. Wiggs himself. And their business was interrupted by many chuckles.

But Tom Merry had other matters than Figgins & Co. and their little devices to think of, chief among which was the expected arrival of General Merry, and the mysterious message of the night—the Sign of Three.

CHAPTER 8. Warm Work.

TOM MERRY & Co. were very busy during the first half-hour of that half-holiday in writing lines they had earned by their exploit of the previous night.

They wrote them out in the Form-room, and conveyed them to Mr. Railton, and then they were free for the afternoon. The Terrible Three were coming away from the House-master's study when Arthur Augustus D'Arcy met them. Blake and the rest were on the cricket-field, but Arthur Augustus had been waiting for Tom Merry.

"Uncle not awwived yet, deah boy?" he asked.

"Not yet," said Tom. "Most likely not till five."

"Then there is still time."

"Time for what?"

"Eweetin' the triumphal arch," said the swell of St. Jim's, with some severity. "If you fellows like to back me up, I'll undertake to manage the whole affair. A triumphal arch with lauwels and things would be about the wight capah now. I wegard it as bein' up to us to give the geneval a gweat weception. We don't have a Victowiah Cwoss johanny come here ewevy day."

"We don't," agreed Monty Lowther solemnly. "But I heard that Figgins had given you a cheque for that triumphal arch. I sincerely hope that you haven't been embezzling Figgins's cheque, Gussy."

"That was a wotten joke. It was a wotten cheque on the Bank of Allan Watah, you know, which is not a weal bank at all," explained Arthur Augustus.

"Ha, ha! That reminds me of the cheque that Pharaoh got," said Lowther.

"Wats! There were no cheques or banks either in the days of Pharaoh," said Arthur Augustus.

"Fact," said Lowther. "Pharaoh received a check on the bank of the Red Sea, crossed by Moses."

"You uttah ass!"

"Chestnuts!" groaned Tom Merry and Manners.

"If you fellows like to subscribe a substantial sum—"

"Oh, I could let you have a cheque!" said Lowther. "Play me at chess, you know—"

"What has chess got to do with it, you ass?"

"Why, then I could give you a check, mate."

That was too much for Arthur Augustus. He sniffed and walked away, and from that time forth nothing was heard of the proposal for erecting a triumphal arch in honour of General Merry, V.C.

The Terrible Three walked over to the tuckshop for liquid refreshment, in the shape of ginger-beer, after their arduous labours in writing out so many lines from Virgil. They were still discussing ginger-beer and dough-nuts under the big elms outside the tuckshop in the corner of the quadrangle, when there was a shout from the direction of the gates.

"Tom Merry!"

"Buck up!"

"Here's your uncle!"

Tom Merry jumped up from his stool, and set down his glass.

"My uncle already! My hat! Come on, you chaps, and back me up!"

And Tom Merry hurried down to the gates, and Lowther and Manners loyally followed him to back him up in greeting his honoured relative from India's coral strand.

A little old gentleman had halted in the old stone gateway of St. Jim's, and he was talking to Taggles, the porter, in a crusty voice. Taggles was treating him with the great respect due to a general, a V.C., and a man rolling in rupees. He was a man barely as tall as Tom Merry himself, with a face as brown as a berry, and a white moustache that gleamed in startling contrast with his mahogany face. His eyebrows were also white, and very bushy and beetling, and shreds of white hair escaped from under his silk hat. He was not in his general's uniform, somewhat to the disappointment of the juniors, who had hoped to see him arrive covered with glory and medals. Not even his V.C. was to be seen; but perhaps the general did not consider it the thing to wear a V.C. upon a tightly-buttoned frock-coat.

He carried a malacca cane in his hand. His boots, which gleamed with polish, were evidently very high-heeled, which gave him an appearance of strutting when he walked, and the juniors smiled at the thought that the brown-skinned veteran, who had fought Afghans and Afridis and all sorts of fear-
some natives, was not above the vanity of trying to appear a little taller than Nature had made him.

"Huh!" the visitor was saying as the Terrible Three arrived, letting out that ejaculation with almost the sharpness of a pistol-shot. "Huh! Is my nephew here? Huh! So this is St. Jim's, hay? Huh!"

"Looks a rather terrifying old boy," murmured Monty Lowther, as they drew near. "Did you know he was like that, Tommy?"

"Haven't seen him since I was a kid," said Tom Merry. "But he's all right—he's often sent me tips and presents from India."

"Well, we'll back you up," said Manners. "Lucky we're in funds. We can have him to tea in the study, if he'll come, and make much of him. Looks as if he'd lived a thousand years or so on curries or brimstone and brandy hot, doesn't he?"

The Terrible Three raised their hats very gracefully as they came up to the old gentleman.

"Uncle!" said Tom Merry.

The brown-skinned veteran raised an eyeglass, jammed it into his eye, and surveyed Tom Merry critically.

"You are my nephew, hay?" he demanded.

"If you are General Merry, I'm your nephew, sir," said Tom Merry demurely. "I'm Tom."

"Huh! You're Tom, hay?" said the general, surveying him through the eyeglass, and then allowing the monocle to drop to the end of a silken cord. "Huh! Come here, and shake hands with your uncle, Tom."

Tom Merry shook hands dutifully with his uncle.

The general reached out, after shaking hands, and gave the junior a sudden rap on the chin.

"Chin up!" he growled.

Tom Merry started back.

"Wha-a-at!" he gasped.

"Chin up! Don't go hanging your head like a week-old recruit!" rapped out the general. "Chin up!"

"Oh, crumbs! I—I mean, all serene, uncle," said the dismayed junior.

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, who

had joined the crowd round the gateway. "Wathah a poppewy old sport, bai Jove!"

"I can foresee a high old time for Tommy," murmured Blake, in great delight. "I'm going to keep an eye on Nunky."

The general put up his eyeglass again and scanned Tom Merry, who was growing rather red as the other fellows grinned.

"That's better," he growled. "Chin up, and shoulders back. Don't be a slacker, hay?"

"I'm glad to see you, Uncle," faltered Tom.

"Won't you come into the School House, sir?" said Lowther suavely. "We've been looking forward to your visit, sir."

"My chum Lowther, and this is Manners, uncle," said Tom Merry. "I've mentioned them in my letters to you, you remember."

"Hay. If they're your friends, I'll do as much for them as for you," said the veteran. "Chins up, you slacking civilians!"

"Rap! Rap!"

Manners and Lowther jumped back in alarm as the general's knuckles rapped their chins up.

"Oh, crikey!" gasped Lowther, rubbing his chin.

"Oh, crumbs!" murmured Manners.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the rest of the juniors.

The general looked round, with the suspicion of a smile upon his mahogany face.

"Huh! Let's get into the house," he grunted. "I'm shivering here. Is it always as cold as this in England?"

The juniors chuckled. It was a blazing summer's afternoon: some of the fellows thought it too hot for cricket, and some that it was too warm to breathe. But, apparently, the general found it cold after India.

"Oh, no, sir," said Lowther, who was never at a loss. "This is one of our bad days. But we'll get a fire going for you if you like."

"Good!" said the general. "And the sooner the better. Come on, Tom. Chin up!" he roared suddenly, rapping Tom Merry's chin with the head of his malacca.

"Oh, crumbs!"

"March!" said the general.

They marched. Tom Merry escorted his uncle to the School House, and half St. Jim's followed them. Tom Merry's military uncle had made a sensation. Tom's face was a study. He had not known very clearly what he expected his Indian uncle to be like, but certainly he had not expected him to be quite like this. The afternoon was not likely to be so pleasant as he had anticipated. Indeed, unless the general improved on acquaintance, the Terrible Three were "in" for a decidedly bad time. For Lowther and Manners, dismayed as they were, had no intention of deserting their chum. It was "up" to them to stick to Tom Merry in this emergency.

"Well, if that old boy doesn't take the giddy cake!" murmured Jack Blake, as he followed the Terrible Three and the terrible uncle. "I don't envy Tommy his afternoon with him."

"Bai Jove! No. Of course, a chap would be pwould of an uncle like that, but I—I'd wathah be pwould of him at a distance," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy thoughtfully.

"Would you like to see the Head, Uncle?" asked Tom Merry submissively, as he led his relative into the School House.

The general waved his hand.

"That can wait," he said. "Take me to your study. Where you have the study feeds, hay? You are going to feed your old uncle, hay?"

"Oh, yes; rather, sir! We've got a ripping tea—"

"You haven't forgotten the curry, hay?"

"They—they don't keep curry at the tuckshop, uncle," Tom Merry faltered.

The general snorted.

"Huh! And I suppose you don't know the difference between a calipash and a calipee?" he demanded.

"Nunno!"

"Huh! Well, let's get to a fire—that's the chief thiag," said the general, with a shiver. "Don't you boys feel the cold?"

"Ahem! No."

"We're used to the rigours of an English summer, sir," said Monty Lowther blandly. "We can stand the frozen iciness and chilling winds of July, sir."

"Hay? Well, that's right—grow up strong and hardy—quite right," said the general. "But I'm an old boy, and I must have my fire in this dreadful climate, what?"

"We'll have a fire going in two ticks, sir," said Manners.

"Good! Huh! So this is your study, hay?" said the general, as the juniors showed him into the famous apartment in the Shell passage in the School House.

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"Yes, sir."

The general put up his monocle and blinked round the study. As the juniors had not expected the visitor till some hours later they had not had time to put the study in order for him; and it must be reluctantly confessed that the Terrible Three were not the tidiest youths possible. The general grunted.

"You want three months in my regiment to teach you order," he growled. "Huh! If a man in my regiment had his quarters in this state I'd court-martial him, sir! Gad, I would!" He turned on Tom Merry. "Chin up!"

Tom Merry dodged away just in time.

"I—I forgot!" he gasped. "All right, uncle! Will you take the arm-chair, sir?"

The general sat down, with his back to the window.

"Light the fire!" he grunted.

The juniors hesitated. The sun was streaming in at the window, and the study was decidedly warm. But the general was not to be denied. He pointed to the grate with his malacca. And the Terrible Three, with an inward groan, set to work bringing in wood and coals, and lighted the fire.

"Pile it on!" said the general, getting a little nearer to the open window, however. "More coal! Make it roar!"

The juniors obeyed. There was soon a roaring fire in the study, and the atmosphere grew insufferably hot. The Terrible Three perspired, and grew crimson in the face. All the fellows who had intended to have tea with Tom Merry and his uncle, the general, had hurriedly cleared off. They might have stood the general, but they could not stand the heat. But the general purred with satisfaction.

"That's better, hay?" he said.

"Yes," gasped Tom Merry, fanning himself with an exercise-book.

The general gave a howl.

"Don't make that draught, here!" he roared. "Do you want me to catch my death of cold, hay? When I want you to act as a punkah-wallah I'll tell you."

"Ye-es," gasped Tom Merry.

"I—I think I'll go down to the tuck-shop and—and see about the grub," gasped Manners.

"I'll come and help you get it," murmured Lowther.

But for Tom Merry there was no escape.

CHAPTER 9.

The Terrible Uncle.

WARMER now, hay?" said the general.

"Yes, rather!" gasped Tom Merry.

"Too warm for you, hay?"

"Oh, I'm all right."

"Put on some more coal, then."

The fire was already roaring up the chimney, and the study was like an oven. Coals were piled high in the open grate, and were blazing away. Tom Merry cast a look of alarm at the chimney, down which sparks were dropping. He was seriously afraid of setting the chimney on fire. But the general was not to be denied. He pointed to the fire with his malacca, and Tom gasped and panted and obeyed. The roar of the fire could be heard outside the study now, and the heat made the very air swim. The general, seated close to the open window, perhaps did not feel it so much as Tom Merry did.

There was a thump at the door and it flew open, and Kildare of the Sixth strode in, with a knitted brow.

"You young ass!" he shouted. "Are you trying to set the school on fire? You've got sparks and a mountain of smoke coming out of the chimney! What the— Oh!"

Kildare broke off suddenly at the sight of the little old gentleman with the fierce white moustache. "Oh! I—I didn't know you had a visitor."

"It's my uncle!" panted Tom Merry.

"Is this another of your friends, Tom, hay?" demanded the general.

"It's Kildare, the captain of the school, uncle."

The general reached out with his cane, and gave the astounded Sixth-Former a rap on the chin with the head.

"Chin up!" he thundered.

Kildare staggered back, clapping his chin.

"Wha-at?" he gasped.

"Chin up! Don't come into the presence of an old soldier with that hang-dog look!" exclaimed the general. "Gad, sir, I wish I had you in my regiment for a week! I'd make you as stiff as a ramrod, sir!"

"My only hat!" ejaculated Kildare. And he retreated uncontrollably from the study. He did not want to be uncivil to a general officer and a V.C. And Tom Merry's terrible uncle was evidently not to be argued with politely. Kildare rubbed his chin ruefully as he went down the passage.

The general chuckled.

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"I'd make you young slackers sit up, if I were here a week!" he growled. "You are an awkward squad at the best in this House! What?"

"I—I suppose you would, uncle."

"There's another House at this school, isn't there?" demanded the general.

"Yes; the New House. Would you like to see it?" asked Tom Merry, who would have given all his uncle's rupees, to get out of that study just then. He felt that the heat would make him faint soon, and the general and his arm-chair barred him from the window.

"Yes," said the general. "I hope it is a little more orderly than this House appears to be, hay? Lead the way, young shaver!"

Tom Merry gladly led the way.

The general followed him from the study, and outside the School House they met Manners and Lowther, returning, laden with good things for tea.

"Hallo! Not going to have tea yet?" asked Lowther, with relief. He was glad not to have to go into the study again.

"No. My uncle's going to have a look at the New House," said Tom; and he added, in a whisper: "Get somebody to go up and put that awful fire out."

"Right-ho!"

"Stuff for tea, hay?" said the general, surveying the packages with which the chums of the Shell were laden.

"Yes, sir," said Manners.

"Bring 'em into the other House. I'll have my tea there. I dare say Figgins will take us in, hay?"

"You know Figgins, sir?" asked Manners, in surprise.

The general hesitated a moment; but only a moment.

"I know something of this school's record in sports," he explained. "Figgins is the champion junior athlete, isn't he?"

"No fear!" said the Terrible Three together.

"The New House is the cock-House here, I understand, hay? All the best athletes, and the best of everything—what?"

"Not much!" said Monty Lowther warmly. "Why, it's a regular old casual ward. The School House is cock-House, and always has been. Figgie isn't bad for a New House chap; but he isn't up to School House form. No fear!"

"Huh! Bring the stuff over to the New House. I'm not accustomed to having my orders questioned, sir!" roared the general.

"Come on, you fellows!" muttered Tom Merry imploringly.

He was feeling quite ashamed of his uncle, and his chums could feel for him. And Lowther repressed the desire to remark that he wasn't under the general's orders, at all events. The chums of the Shell accompanied the general across the quadrangle.

"Well, my hat!" said Kangaroo, as he watched them go. "If I had an uncle like that I'd boil him in oil, and scalp him afterwards!"

"Yaas, wathah! I'm not sowwy upon the whole that I dwopped that ideah of a triumphant arch," said D'Arcy thoughtfully. "He appeahs to me to be a most iwascible old boundah!"

"Horrid!" said Blake. "Lowther's asked me to go and put the fire out. Some of you fellows come and lend a hand. Anybody going to tea over there with Tom Merry's uncle?"

And the reply came like a chorus:

"No fear!"

The Terrible Three and the general reached the New House. There was no denying the Anglo-Indian veteran; but Tom Merry could not help wondering how Figgins & Co. would receive such a fearsome guest. If the general rapped New House chums with his cane there might be trouble, for they were now in the enemy's country, so to speak. But fortunately the general seemed to get into a great good humour the moment he entered the New House.

He glanced round him with an expression of great satisfaction.

"Huh! This is better!" he exclaimed. "These boys look more fit, hay? They ought to be an example to you young wasters—what?"

Quite a crowd of New House juniors had gathered to see the visitor, and they grinned assent to the general's observation. Figgins and Fatty Wynn were prominent among them, but Kerr was not to be seen.

"Figgie, old man," murmured Tom Merry, "my uncle's got a fancy for having tea in your study. Do you mind?"

Figgins rose to the occasion.

"Delighted!" he exclaimed. "Come in, sir!"

"Huh! Is that Figgins?"

"Yes, sir, I'm Figgins."

"Good! I like your looks, Master Figgins. And I hope that you will take these School House kids in hand, and teach them things. Make 'em keep their chins up, and toe the line generally."

"Certainly, sir," said Figgins. "We do keep the School House kids in order now, sir. When we have time, we teach 'em lots of things."

The Terrible Three looked daggers at Figgins. The New House juniors burst into a chorus of chuckles.

"This way, sir!" said Fatty Wynn.

And the general wheezed up the stairs, and strutted into Figgins's study, with the Terrible Three and a crowd of juniors in his wake.

CHAPTER 10.

The New House Enjoys Itself.

THE terrible visitor seemed satisfied with Figgins's study. He did not ask for a fire to be lighted, much to Tom Merry's relief. Tom did not know how Figgins and Fatty Wynn would have taken it. The general sat with his back to the light as before, and his keen eyes peered at the juniors from under the thick, white brows.

"This is better," he announced. "Now then, I am ready for tea. Ask some of your friends in, Master Figgins, hay? The more the merrier."

"Certainly, sir!" said Figgins. "How many, sir?"

"As many as the study will hold," said the general. "My nephew is standing treat—what? Hospitality was always the great trait of the Merry family, Tom. If you haven't enough stuff there for a large party, go and get some more, hay?"

"Oh, yes, uncle!" said Tom.

"And be quick about it!" added the general, giving Tom Merry a lunge with his cane. "Chin up, you young slacker!"

"Ow!"

Figgins obligingly laid the cloth. There were an unexpectedly large number of chairs in the study, and an unusually good allowance of crockery—a circumstance that was very fortunate for the occasion. The Terrible Three were too bothered and worried just then to notice how peculiar that circumstance was. It was really as if Figgins and Fatty Wynn had expected the feed to be held in their study.

The good things Lowther and Manners had purchased from Dame Taggles were spread on the table. But as Figgins's friends came crowding in, it was evident that there would not be enough for the party. Figgins was a popular fellow, and he had many friends; but Tom Merry would not have suspected him of possessing so many pals as now proved to be the case. Figgins's list of friends seemed only to be limited by the size of the study.

Redfern and Owen and Lawrence came in, smiling. Pratt of the Fourth, and Thompson of the Shell, and then French and Dibbs and Jimson followed them in. Then came more and more and more. The study was simply crammed. But more were coming. Chairs were brought from the other studies and arranged in the passage to accommodate the endless flow of juniors. Even Jameson of the Third came along with a crowd of fags. It seemed that Figgins's friends included every junior that belonged to the New House.

The Terrible Three gasped in dismay and worry. A feed for that tremendous crowd was a strain upon their financial resources, which those resources were not quite calculated to bear.

As the general was Tom's uncle, and known to be rolling in riches, he might naturally have been expected to hand out a tip of a sovereign or two, or even a liver. Nothing, however, seemed further from his thoughts.

He contented himself with making complimentary remarks about the New House and the juniors of that House, which, considering that his nephew was a School House fellow, seemed to the Terrible Three to be in the worst of taste.

Above all, he exhorted Figgins to remember to take the School House boys in hand, and teach them to come up to the form of the New House. And Figgins promised that he would—a promise that earned him deadly glares from Tom Merry & Co.

"We shall have to get some more stuff," Lowther whispered to Tom Merry. "This won't be a bite all round—especially with Fatty Wynn here. He's scoffing all the cold chicken already, the fat boonder!"

"You two chaps buzz off to the tuckshop, and get all you can," said Tom.

"What about the tin?"

"Haven't you got any?" groaned Tom. "I'm stony now."

"Only a bob left."

"Oh, crumbs! Borrow some of Gussy and Blake and Kangy. Explain to them, and they'll help us out."

"Right ho!"

Manners and Lowther departed. The general was generously inviting the New House juniors to fall in; but they hardly seemed to need inviting. They were falling to with great gusto. Most of them were laughing and chuckling and whispering, as if regarding the whole matter as an excellent joke—and doubtless it was, from a New House point of

view. But it did not seem funny to Tom Merry. He was kept hard at work handing out things to the fellows who were picnicking in the passage. He had not time to eat anything himself; and indeed his terrible uncle had taken his appetite away.

And the general gave him no rest. When Tom ventured to refresh himself with a glass of ginger-beer, the general asked him whether he was going to neglect his guests; and Tom resumed his duties as a waiter. The throng in the passage increased. Every junior in the New House, with the exception of Frank Kerr, seemed to be present.

Lowther and Manners were breathing hard as they emerged from the New House, and tramped furiously across the quadrangle.

"What do you think of him?" asked Manners.

"Beast!" said Lowther.

"Horrible old blighter!" said Manners.

"Disgusting savage!"

"Beastly outsider!"

"Frabjous old frump!"

"Poor old Tommy!"

"Well, we shall have to stick to Tommy. But if he wasn't Tommy's uncle, I'd—I'd—oh, I'd scalp him!"

Somewhat relieved by that expression of opinion, the chums of the Shell arrived at the School House. The crowd of curious fellows there greeted them with questions. They were all deeply interested in Tom Merry's Indian uncle, though none of them wanted to enjoy the pleasures of his company.

"How are you getting on with Nana Sahib?" asked Blake.

"Havin' a good time, deah boys?"

Monty Lowther brandished a clenched fist in the air. Manners sparrd into space as if he could see before him a sunburnt face, with white moustache and eyebrows. The School House juniors grinned.

"That's what I think of him!" said Lowther. "The beast is having tea in Figg's study. He's buttering up Figgins & Co., and running down the School House. He's asked Figgins to take us in hand—us!—and teach us things."

"Bai Jove!"

"He's asked the whole blessed New House to tea. They're cramming in Figg's study, and camping in the passage," groaned Manners. "They think it's a joke."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake.

"What are you cackling at?" demanded Manners and Lowther together ferociously.

"Well, it is a joke," grinned Blake. "It's the joke of the season. I suppose the old johnny's mad."

"Must be as mad as a battah. It's the sun in India that does it," said Arthur Augustus sagely. "I've heard of lots of chaps there goin' off their wockahs. I've got a cousin there who's as potty as—"

"As his cousin at home!" geunted Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"We've run out of tin," said Lowther. "Will you chaps lend us some money? We'll settle up next week, somehow. We shall want pounds and pounds to feed that crew. Every blessed worm in the New House has crawled out for the feed. It's like magic. Not a chap of them gone out, as it happens. All ready to pile in, the beasts! Lend us some money, for goodness' sake! If we don't get back with the grub, Tom's life won't be safe with that awful uncle of his."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, don't cackle! Hand out the tin!"

"Yaas, wathah! Anythin' to help a chap out of a beastly awkward posish," said Arthur Augustus kindly. "I've got a couple of sovereigns."

"I've got half-a-quid," said Blake.

"And here's five bob."

"And a quid."

"And half-a-crown."

"Small contributions thankfully received; larger ones in proportion," said Monty Lowther, gathering the generous offerings in his hat. "We'll settle it all up next week, unless the old ruffian stands Tommy a good tip. He may, but he doesn't look it. If he were my uncle, I'd boil him in oil. Thanks, you chaps! I think this will see us through."

And Manners and Lowther trotted off to the tuckshop with nearly five pounds in their possession—a sum which was quickly transferred to Mrs. Miggles's till. And then the Shell fellows dragged heavy consignments of tuck over to the New House.

Their arrival in Figgins's study was timely. The supply was running short, and the general was already beginning to shout at his nephew.

"Oh, here you are!" exclaimed Tom Merry, in great relief.

"Here's the stuff!" said Manners.

"My aunt! That looks good!" exclaimed Fatty Wynn, with glistening eyes. "I'll trouble you for the chicken."

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"Jam-tarts for me, please," said Redfern.
 "Cream-puffs this way," said Lawrence.
 "Where's the ginger-beer?" howled Owen.
 "Lemonade, please. Now then, stir your stumps!"
 "Ha, ha, ha!"

The feed proceeded gloriously. It was the time of their lives for the New House juniors. Seldom, or never, had such a feed been stood in Figgy's study—and the passage adjoining. Even some Fifth-Form fellows, hearing what was on, had come to join in it. The fresh supply of tuck, enormous as it was, was not more than adequate for the numerous and hungry company.

The general surveyed the scene with satisfaction through his eyeglass. He was eating with a good appetite himself—and his diet was remarkable for a veteran fresh from India. He had as good an appetite for jam-tarts and marmalade-tarts, and cream-puffs and ginger-beer, as any junior present.

"Quite a merry party, hay?" he said.
 "Ripping!" groaned Monty Lowther.
 "Enjoying yourself, entertaining your friends, hay, Tom?"
 "Awfully!" murmured Tom Merry.
 "Master Figgins has promised me to show you how to play cricket," said the general.

Tom glared at Figgins.
 "Has he?" he gasped.
 "Yes. And Redfern is going to show you how to row."

"Oh!"
 "Huh! Haven't you a word of thanks for their kindness?" demanded the general, in a voice of thunder. "What?"

"Th-th-thank you, Figgins!" stuttered Tom Merry.
 "Not at all, dear boy," said Figgins airily. "Always willing to show you School House kids how to do things."

"Oh!"
 There was a sudden interruption in the passage. Toby, the School House page, came pushing his way through the 'easters, amid many loud objections. But Toby persisted in advancing, and he reached the study doorway at last. Toby's round pink face was illuminated with a broad grin as he looked in.

"Master Merry here?" he asked.
 "Here I am!" said Tom Merry dismally. "What's wanted?"

"You are, Master Merry. Your uncle's come."
 Tom Merry stared at Toby blankly.
 "What?" he said faintly.
 "General Merry has arrived, sir," said Toby.

CHAPTER 11.

Spoofed!

TOM MERRY stared at Toby as if he were dreaming. Manners and Lowther gasped.

There was a momentary silence in the study. It was broken by a wild yell of laughter from the New House juniors.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!"
 The laughter rang through the study and through the passage. Fellows choked over their ginger-beer and their jam-tarts. Even Fatty Wynn ceased his operations upon his second cold chicken to join in that exuberant roar.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha!"

Toby grinned broadly. The little brown-faced general chuckled. He had risen now, and his eyes were warily upon the Terrible Three. Figgins and Redfern drew closer to him.

"My uncle?" panted Tom Merry at last.

"Yessir," grinned Toby.
 "General Merry?"
 "Yessir."
 "He—he's arrived?"
 "Yessir."

Tom Merry turned a dazed look upon the white-moustached veteran in the study.

"But my uncle's here!" he exclaimed. "Are you dotty, Toby? This is my uncle, General Merry."

"I'm afraid it ain't, sir," said Toby.
 "General Merry 'ave arrived, sir, and he's with the 'Ead now, and I've been sent to fetch you."

Then, for the first time, a glimmering of the truth dawned upon the Terrible Three. They fixed their eyes upon the white-moustached face.

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The general put his hand up to his white moustache, and it came off in his hand. Then he cheerfully removed his wig and his white eyebrows. And then, in spite of the dark complexion and the skilfully-done wrinkles, the juniors recognised him.

"Kerr!" roared Tom Merry.
 "Kerr!" shrieked Monty Lowther.
 "Kerr!" howled Manners.

The disguised junior—recognisable now—bowed calmly over his moustache and eyebrows and wig. The New House juniors shrieked with merriment.

"Huh!" said Kerr, in the crusty voice he had adopted as appropriate to General Merry. "Huh! Rather a take-in, hay? Who's cock-House at St. Jim's now, hay?"

"Oh, my hat!"
 "You—my fraud——"
 "You villain——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Figgins & Co. "Thanks for the feed! Ha, ha, ha! Who's cock-House at St. Jim's? Who's been done right in the eye? Ha, ha, ha!"

"Huh!" said Kerr. "Hear us smile, hay? Ha, ha, ha!"
 The Terrible Three glared at the impostor. Kerr had played his part wonderfully well, though it was really not a difficult part for the amateur actor of the New House to play. The School House fellows had not had a single suspicion. Tom Merry's first feeling, as he recovered from his amazement, was relief—deep and great relief that this terrible uncle was not really his uncle at all.

But Manners and Lowther were simply furious. That they had borrowed money right and left to stand a feed for the New House; that they had slaved away half the afternoon playing waiter while Figgins & Co. fed; that they had been utterly, thoroughly, and hopelessly taken in, naturally made them wrathful.

The Terrible Three made a wild rush at Kerr.

They wanted, more than anything else at that moment, to collar the practical joker; to bump him and roll him over, and jump on him, hard!

But Figgins and the rest closed round Kerr, and the School House three were seized in a dozen pairs of hands. Kerr grinned at them serenely.

"Chuck the young ruffians out, hay?" he said.

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Lemme get at him!" roared Monty Lowther frantically.
 "Lemme gerrat the beast! I'll smash him! I'll squash him! I'll pulverise him!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Chin up, hay?" said Kerr.
 "Ha, ha, ha!"

The Terrible Three struggled wildly to get at Kerr. But the odds were too great. Figgins & Co., almost suffocating with laughter, whirled them off their feet, and bore them bodily, kicking and struggling, out of the study.

"Chuck them out, hay?" said Kerr. "Chin up! Who's cock-House at St. Jim's, hay? Gad, if I had you in my regiment for a week——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther, dishevelled and breathless, were whirled down the stairs in the grasp of the chuckling New House juniors, and rolled down the steps into the quadrangle. There they picked themselves up, gasping, and shook their fists at the grinning crowd of New House juniors that packed the doorway. Figgins waved his hand to them.

"Go home!" he said.
 "Yah! Go home!"
 "Thanks for the feed!"
 "Ha, ha, ha!"

The Terrible Three charged furiously up the steps. They still wanted to get at Kerr. But Kerr was not get-at-able just then. A score of pairs of hands grasped the chums of the Shell, and they were rolled down again.

"Come on!" cooed Figgins invitingly.
 "Coming to see your uncle, Tom, hay?"

Dishevelled and dusty and crimson, the chums of the Shell tramped away towards their own House, followed by yells of laughter from Figgins & Co. From the study window Kerr frantically waved a white wig after them.

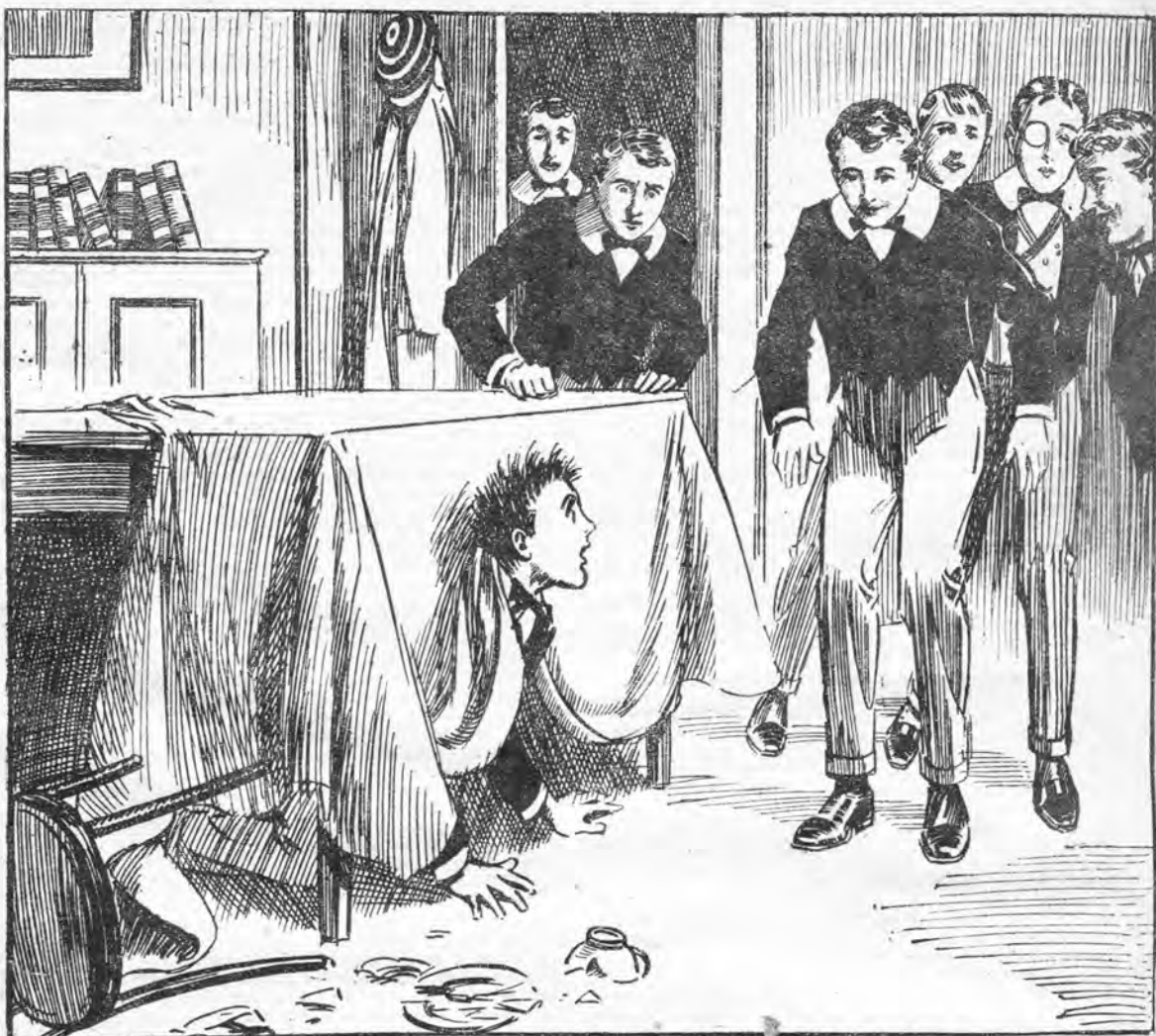
"Oh, my hat!" groaned Tom Merry.
 "All the fellows know it now. Look!"

NEXT
WEDNESDAY:

THE BLACK SHEEP!

A Grand Story of Cutts,
Robert Digby, and Tom
Merry.

Don't Miss It!
Order Early.



"What on earth are you doing under the table?" demanded Lowther. "Have you seen the black man?" gasped Crooke. "He's just been here. Help me barricade the door, for goodness' sake. He made me get under the table, and he's gone to your study to murder you?" (See Chapter 13.)

Outside the School House was a hilarious crowd waiting for them. The arrival of the real General Merry was known to all the fellows there, and that had, of course, enlightened them. The School House crowd seemed to be in hysterics as the three dusty and draggled juniors limped up.

"Here's another uncle for you, Tommy!" roared Blake.

"Yaas, wathah! A much bettah one, deah boys."

"You've been taken in!" hooted Kangaroo. "Who was it? Who was the giddy impostor?"

"Kerr!" groaned Tom Merry.

"Bai Jove! Might have guessed it, you know. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, stop cackling!" growled Lowther. "Let's get in and get tidy before we see the real article, you chaps."

"Yes, rather!" Tom Merry gasped.

But that was not to be. As the dusty and dishevelled trio limped into the School House they were met by a sturdy, broad-shouldered gentleman, with a deeply sunburnt face and a humorous twinkle in his eyes.

"By Jove!" ejaculated the sunburnt gentleman in surprise.

"Your uncle, Tommy!" giggled Blake. "Oh, my hat!"

"Is one of you my nephew?" asked General Merry, gazing at the dusty three, with a smile curving the corners of his mouth.

"Yes," gasped Tom Merry. "I'm the chap! Oh, crumbs!"

The general gazed at him, and the smile became a laugh, and the laugh a roar.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

CHAPTER 12.

The Genuine Article.

GENERAL MERRY laughed, and laughed again, and the crowd of School House juniors laughed, too. The dusty Shell fellows looked at one another sheepishly, and then they joined in the laugh. After all, it was funny—and certainly the appearance they presented was calculated to excite risibility. They were torn and rumpled and ruffled, and smothered with dust, and looked more like three hooligans fresh home from a very specially rough "scrap," than three nice boys at school.

And Tom Merry was glad to hear his uncle laugh—especially that hearty roar. It relieved him of his terrors. It showed that the real uncle was not at all like the spoof uncle.

"I—I'm afraid I look a bit dusty, uncle," said Tom Merry.

"Ha, ha, ha! You do, my boy, you do!" said the general, wiping his eyes. "What is it—one of the House rags you have told me about in your letters?"

"That's it, uncle," said Tom Merry. "We've just been ragging with Figgins & Co., and—and we've got it in the neck!"

"Ha, ha, ha! It looks like it. Never mind, my boy, you must take the downs with the ups. But what is this I have heard about someone having arrived already calling himself by my name?"

"Oh!" murmured Tom. "You've heard?"

"Yes, begad," said the general. "What does it mean?"

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"It was a New House joke," Tom Merry explained reluctantly, for he did not know how the general was likely to take it. "They knew you were coming, uncle, and—and as I hadn't seen you for so long, they palmed off a fellow on me—disguised as a general—a blessed amateur actor—"

The general gasped.

His sunburnt face grew purple with merriment, and he burst into that hearty roar again.

"Ha, ha, ha! The young rascals! And they took you in!"

"Yes," confessed Tom Merry. "Of course, the rotter wasn't anything like you really; only I didn't know just what you were like, you see. He was made up jolly well, and we never bowed him out till Toby brought us the news you had come."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry was very glad to see the general take the joke with such hearty good-humour. When the old gentleman had recovered from his merriment, which was some time, the Terrible Three went to put themselves in order, and General Merry strolled in the quadrangle with some of the fellows with whom he had made friends already. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was very attentive to him, and, finding the general such a really ripping old boy, he was mentally regretting that he had not erected that triumphal arch after all.

The general showed the keen pleasure of a boy in roaming over the historic old school. He looked at the cricket pitch and the gym., and chatted to the seniors and the juniors and the masters whom he met. He explored the ruined chapel, and looked into the old tower. Then he walked over to the New House.

"Nothing worth seeing there, sir," said Jack Blake.

"That's the New House—rotten old show!"

"Wegulah casual ward, sir," said D'Arcy.

"Mouldy old barn," said Kangaroo.

"Awful young ruffians dig there," remarked Herries.

The general grinned.

"Yes, I've heard about it from Tom in his letters to me. I take a great interest in the question which is cock House at St. Jim's. Which is cock House, by the way?"

"School House, sir," said all the juniors together.

"Rats!" came a voice from Figgins's study window.

They were quite near the New House now. "New House is cock House. Who's been done in the eye?"

"School House!" yelled Kerr and Fatty Wynn.

"Who's been taken in and done for?" yelled Figgins.

"School House!" hooted the chums.

Blake shook his fist at the juniors at the window, withdrawing a little behind the general to do so, unseen by the veteran. Figgins & Co., at the window, grinned at him, and bowed politely to the general.

"Welcome to St. Jim's, sir!" said Figgins courteously.

"This visit is a great honour to the school, sir."

"Great honour, sir!" said Kerr and Fatty Wynn.

"Is that why you young rascals have been using my name, and disguising yourselves as myself?" demanded the general.

"Ahem! Only one of us, sir," said Figgins.

"Which one was it?" demanded the general, with a terrific frown.

"Ahem! It was I, sir," said Kerr.

"Oh, it was you! Come down here at once!" said General Merry.

Figgins & Co. looked at one another in dismay. If the general was going to take it like this, there was trouble in store. But Kerr had to go, for if the general wanted to raise trouble, he had only to speak a single word to Mr. Ratcliff.

"Oh, come on!" said Figgins. "After the feast the reckoning, you know. We've called the tune, and now we've got to pay the giddy piper."

And Figgins & Co. descended into the quadrangle. The School House fellows were grinning; but Figgins & Co. looked serious enough as they faced the broad-shouldered, sunburnt veteran from Hindustan.

The general shook his finger sternly at Kerr.

"So it was you, hay?"

"Yes, sir," said Kerr meekly.

"You made up as a general, hay?"

Kerr grinned.

"I made up as a stage Anglo-Indian johnny, sir, good enough to take in the School House chaps. They're not not very keen, you know."

"Weally, Kerr—"

"Kerr, you cheeky ass—"

"Well, you are a young rascal, sir," said the general, the frown disappearing from his face as he burst into a laugh. "A regular young rascal! It was like your impudence! Ha, ha, ha! Give me your fist, sir!"

And the general shook hands with Kerr, and, to the junior's THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 290.

"THE MAGNET" LIBRARY,
Every Monday.

Our Companion Papers.

"THE PENNY POPULAR,"
Every Friday.

astonishment, left a couple of sovereigns in his palm. Then he sailed off with his escort.

"My hat," ejaculated Kerr, "look here!"

"Quids!" said Figgins.

"Two quidlets!" gasped Fatty Wynn. "Well, he is a ripping old johnny, and no mistake! I'd swap all my uncles for him!"

"Good old sport!" said Figgins.

"Let's go and change 'em at the tuckshop, Kerr."

"My hat! Haven't you fed enough this afternoon, Fatty?"

"Well, that's half an hour ago, and—"

"Come on!" said Kerr.

And one of the sovereigns was forthwith changed. And Figgins & Co. declared with conviction that General Merry was a ripping old johnny, and undoubtedly they were right.

The general strolled back to the School House with the juniors of that House, and found the Terrible Three clothed and in their right minds again, as Blake expressed it. They had washed and brushed and changed their clothes, and certainly looked a great deal more presentable.

"Tea's ready in the study, uncle," said Tom.

"Good!" said General Merry.

It was a merry party that sat down to tea in the Shell study. A further loan had been raised among the School House juniors, and a good repast was spread on the study table, and a select company invited to tea with the distinguished guest. General Merry made a great impression upon the juniors. He was affability itself, almost boyish in his good humour. And yet the juniors knew that the keen old eyes, looking out of the bronzed and scarred visage, had looked upon fearful scenes of danger and death.

The trouble given him by the "spoo" New House general had driven the Sign of Three out of Tom Merry's mind; but he thought of it again now. When tea was over, and the guests dropped off, leaving the Terrible Three alone with the general, Tom determined to speak on the subject.

General Merry had lighted a big, black, pungent cigar, and was filling the study with smoke as from a railway train. He was sitting contentedly in the armchair, his eyes on the open window and the quad, and the green playing-fields beyond.

"I've got something to tell you, uncle," said Tom. "I want to ask your advice."

"Certainly, my boy," said the general, with a chuckle. "I think I can guess the difficulty."

Tom looked surprised.

"You can guess it, uncle," he exclaimed.

"I think so. When I was at school I always found that the expenditure outran the income to an alarming extent."

Tom Merry laughed.

"No; it isn't that, sir. If it were, I'd tell you like a shot. But my other uncle makes me a good allowance, as you know, and you have always been generous. No, I'm not in any difficulty of that sort."

"Glad to hear it, my boy," said the general. "A boy can't be too careful. But what is the trouble, then? You want me to ask the Head for an extra holiday?"

"Well, that's a good idea, too; but it isn't that. I've had a letter."

"And not a dunning one?"

"No, sir. A letter from India."

"From me, do you mean?"

"No. Since your last letter, uncle. I received it yesterday."

The general sat up in his chair.

"I wasn't aware that you had any other correspondents in India, Tom!"

"Neither was I, sir," said Tom Merry ruefully. "I can't make head or tail of it. I suppose whoever wrote the letter must have got my name and address from you somehow. I don't see how it could be got there otherwise. Have you ever seen anything like this before, uncle?"

He laid the card and the letter upon the table beside the general.

General Merry glanced at them, and a sudden change came over his face at the sight of the three red dots in the form of the triangle.

He started to his feet with a sudden sharp exclamation. For a moment the colour had wavered in his bronzed cheek.

"The Sign of Three!"

CHAPTER 13.

For Life or Death.

TOM MERRY and Manners and Lowther stared at the general. It was evident that he knew the mysterious sign.

General Merry remained standing, and his brows were knitted. His glance was almost stern as it rested upon his nephew.

"What does this mean?" he demanded. "What do you know about this, Tom?"

Tom shook his head.

"Nothing, sir. I received the letter by post from India, that's all, and—"

"And the card?"

"That was placed in my dormitory last night."

"By whom?"

"A Hindu."

"Good heavens!"

The general sank into his seat again. His hand went to a pocket behind him, and the juniors realised, with a thrill, that the old soldier carried a revolver. The movement was instinctive. He withdrew his hand in a moment.

"Tell me all about it, Tom," he said curtly.

Tom Merry explained the circumstances of the mysterious visit the unknown Hindu had made to the school the previous night.

The general drew a deep breath when he had finished.

"It was a great mercy that you were not in the dormitory," he said.

"You think he came there for me, sir?" asked Tom.

"I know it."

"And—what did he intend to do, sir?"

The general was silent. The three juniors exchanged startled glances. They had been puzzled and mystified by the Sign of Three. But the general's look showed that there was real cause for alarm. A trifling matter would not have disturbed the equanimity of the old soldier in this way.

"Do you mean that he meant to—to injure me, sir?" asked Tom Merry.

"I don't know," said the general, after a long pause.

"It is likely enough. Whether he intended real mischief, or simply to scare you and me, I cannot be sure. But I know the character of the man."

"You know him, sir?"

"I knew them all—three," said the general quietly.

"All three?" repeated Tom Merry.

"There were three of them. I will explain to you," said the general. "I had no idea that you knew anything about the matter, and it is not a matter I should have told you; but now you had better know. You may have heard that I was engaged last year in suppressing a revolutionary movement in Bengal?"

"Yes, I heard about that, sir."

"There were three leaders—three ringleaders who were at the bottom of the whole mischief—three Indians educated in England, and as full of mischief as an egg is of meat," said the general, knitting his brows. "They had the usual babyish ideas of the Indian revolutionaries—a new Mutiny, and the expulsion of the English, the fools! If they succeeded in driving us out, how would they handle the Russians who would step in in our place? They would find the little finger of the Cossack heavier than the right hand of the Briton. There was some fighting and some bloodshed before their nonsense was suppressed—not much, but some. Two of them were caught and hanged—two of the leaders, I mean."

"Oh!" murmured the juniors.

"The third—Hurree Das—escaped. They were the three. That was the sign of the secret society—the three red dots in the triangle. It was the secret signal that was sent to all the accomplices before the outbreak. After it was over, and Hurree Das had been hunted out of the country, that sign was sent to me." The general's lip curled in a grim smile. "It was to let me know that the vengeance of the Three was awaiting me. Two were hanged, and the other would be sent to the Andaman Islands if he was caught. Hurree Das was more fool than rascal. The other two were the worst. But he is a revengeful scoundrel. Two attempts were made upon my life in Calcutta. But—but I did not think that the villain would have the nerve to come to England. Yet he is here, that is certain, from the visit you received last night."

"And that was Hurree Das?" asked Tom Merry breathlessly.

The general nodded.

"Then he came to—to—" Tom Merry faltered.

"I fear so. They had found me too tough a nut to crack, and the cowardly villain thought of reaching me another way—through you. By gad, it was a cunning thought, too!" The general's brows contracted in wrath.

"But, why send that warning if he meant mischief?" asked Tom Merry. "It was like placing me on my guard."

The general smiled.

"You know what Kipling has said of the black man, my boy—half devil and half child. That was a theatrical flourish—the Oriental can do nothing without that. All their revolutionary schemes are like stage plays—luckily their revolts are very much like stage fighting, too. The Sign of Three was to mystify and terrify you, and so to gratify the

conceit of the miserable rascal, to make him reel himself terrible and terrifying."

Tom Merry laughed.

"I think I understand," he said. "It's jolly lucky for me I was out of the dorm last night, then."

"Very lucky indeed. Hurree Das may intend to take his vengeance through you, or it may be a warning to me to cease the pursuit. The police are hunting for him, and when he is caught, he goes to penal settlements for life in the Andaman Islands. By threatening danger to you, he may hope to induce me to hold my hand."

"He knew, then, that you were returning to England, and guessed that I should tell you—"

"Exactly."

"And will he come again?"

"That is what we shall see," said the general grimly.

"But I can promise you that you are in no danger now, Tom, whatever you may have been in last night. He must be in this neighbourhood still, and Hindoos are not common on the countryside here. It will not be difficult to run him down, I should think. Don't talk about this matter in public, my lad—least said's soonest mended. I will go now and borrow the telephone, and ring up the police. I shall ask the Head's permission to stay at the school to-night."

And the general quitted the study.

The Terrible Three looked at one another. They were feeling strangely thrilled and excited. Into their quiet life at St. Jim's there had come an element of tragedy. The Sign of Three seemed to bring them into contact with that far-away land where the millions lay in uneasy subjection to the rule of a few thousand white men, where any or day night might come a terrific explosion of rage and hate and bloodshed.

"Well, this takes the cake!" said Manners at last.

"The whole giddy Peak Fren!" said Monty Lowther, who was never serious for long. "Tommy, my son, you are playing a leading role in a giddy melodrama."

Tom laughed, but a little uneasily.

"It's a melodrama that may become a real thing," he said.

"That Hindoo chap last night didn't look a pleasant customer. I'm jolly glad I wasn't in the dormitory when he got there, whether he meant business or not."

"The police will soon have him now," said Lowther, "and they have a delightful establishment in the Andaman Islands where they keep 'em; the place is chock-full of noble patriots who have left their country for their country's good. Master Hurree Das will be laid by the heels soon."

"I don't think I shall sleep very soundly until he is," said Tom Merry.

"The general thinks there is danger," said Manners.

"He's going to stop here to-night, and I believe he's got a pistol about him. Jolly, ain't it?"

The Terrible Three left the study. They came downstairs, and as they went out into the quadrangle, the messenger from the post-office was crossing towards the School House. He had a letter in his hand—evidently an express letter. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy bore down upon him in the quad.

"For me, dear boy, I presume?" he said. "It's all right, Blake. My patah has sent that fivah by express."

The post-office boy grinned.

"You General Merry, sir?" he asked.

"Bai Jove! It's for your uncle, Tom Mewwy."

"Come in," said Tom Merry to the post-office boy. "General Merry is here."

He hurried in to tell his uncle that a message had come for him. His face was excited. He felt that it was a message in some connection with the Sign of Three. The general came out to take the letter.

He opened it immediately and read it, his brows knitting over it. Tom Merry waited quietly until he had finished.

"Is it Hurree Das, sir, may I know?" he asked.

"Yes, Tom."

"And—might I see it?"

The general smiled and handed him the letter. At the top of it appeared the sign Tom Merry was beginning to know well.

Three red dots in the form of a triangle headed the letter.

Underneath was written the message, but it was unintelligible to Tom Merry. It was written in the Deva-Nagari characters used in India, and was as incomprehensible as the St. Jim's junior as Runie or Chinese would have been.

"My hat!" said Tom. "Can you read it, uncle?"

"Yes," said the general, with a smile. He lowered his voice. "It is as I suspected, Tom. Hurree Das wishes to make terms. If he is pardoned he will spare you, he says; but if his pursuit continues, he will strike at me through you. His visit here last night was to prove that he holds your life in the hollow of his hand."

Tom Merry drew a deep breath.

"You won't let that make any difference to you, sir?"

"What do you say, Tom?" asked his uncle, looking at him with searching eyes.

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Tom reflected.

"That depends," he said. "If the man is harmless, I'd let him clear off, but if not, it depends on what use he'll make of his pardon."

"He will return to India and begin his mischief over again—more carefully this time," said the general. "He will induce better and braver men than himself to risk their lives while he stays in the background, ready to profit by their success if they succeed, and ready to fly if they fail."

Tom Merry set his lips.

"Then he ought to be put where he can't do any more harm, sir."

"Exactly."

"Then if it depended on me, I should say, let him do his worst, and don't make any terms with the scoundrel!"

The general's bronzed face lighted up.

"Spoken like your father's son!" he said. "It was the answer I expected from you, Tom; but unless I give him the assurance he demands, your life is in danger until he is laid by the heels."

"I'm not afraid."

"Right, my boy. I expected that of you!" The general set his teeth. "This is the last round between Hurree Das and me, and I think he will finish in the Andaman Islands. But until he is safe in shackles, Tom, you will keep your eyes open. It is a matter of life or death!"

But there was no sign of faltering in Tom Merry's face.

CHAPTER 14.

The Shadow of Peril.

GENERAL MERRY remained at St. Jim's.

The distinguished officer stayed as the guest of the Head, and few of the fellows knew of his reason for remaining.

The Terrible Three kept their own counsel, and other matters, of more interest to the juniors, had almost made the fellows generally forget the mysterious visit of the unknown Hindoo to the school.

The Head, of course, had been taken into the general's confidence, and General Merry had offered to remove his nephew for a time from the school, in order to save any unpleasant happenings there, if the Head wished.

But Dr. Holmes would not hear of that. He was as anxious about Tom Merry's safety as the general himself, and he wished him to remain, with proper precautions taken.

Precautions enough were taken. The general was in communication with Scotland Yard, and the school was being watched. If Hurree Das reappeared, it seemed certain that he would be taken, and meanwhile, the search for him was going on.

That he was still in the vicinity the general felt assured; but if so, he was lying very low, and was not to be found.

The next day, and the next, there came a letter for Tom Merry, with widely different postmarks on each; and each of them contained nothing but a slip of paper bearing the now familiar sign.

If the intention of the hidden enemy was to wear down the nerves of the marked victim he did not succeed. Tom Merry was made of too stern stuff for that. He was the son of a soldier who had fallen in battle for his country, and he was not easily to be frightened. He only wished that, instead of sending his threats by post, the black man would come to within hitting distance. In that case, as he confided to his chums, he felt fully equal to putting a stop to his tricks.

The general was very popular with the Co. He witnessed the cricket matches, and cheered the good hits and the good catches as loudly as the juniors themselves. He stood a "feed" in the common-room, to which the heroes of the New House were invited, and he made Kerr adopt his famous disguise as an Anglo-Indian officer, and go through a performance of "General Merry," and laughed at it till the tears ran down his bronzed cheeks.

Several days had passed, and apart from the threat of the Sign of Three nothing had been seen of the Hindoo.

"I expect he's cleared off," Monty Lowther remarked one afternoon. "He knows he's being looked for, and he won't come round this way any more."

"Looks like it to me," said Manners. "What do you think, Tommy?"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"My uncle doesn't think so," he said.

Afternoon lessons were over, and the chums of the Shell were coming in from cricket practice. They came up to their study to tea.

"Well, my idea is that we sha'n't see any more of him or of his blessed Sign of Three," said Lowther. "Still, the longer the general stays the better. He's a jolly old boy. I—hat!"

"What's the matter, Monty?"

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"Look!"

Monty Lowther, his face suddenly white, pointed to the table.

Tom Merry and Manners looked, and their own faces became pale, too. Tom Merry's grasp closed more tightly upon the cane handle of his bat.

For in the centre of the table lay a sheet of paper, and upon the paper were inscribed in red ink, three dots in the form of a triangle. It was the Sign of Three again!

The chums of the Shell looked quickly round the study. They had expected to see the dusky face and glittering eyes of Hurree Das glaring from some corner. But the study was empty. There was no one in the room but themselves, and no trace of a visitor save that threatening sign upon the table. Tom Merry drew a deep breath.

"Well, this beats everything!" he exclaimed. "He's been here!"

"In broad daylight," said Manners.

"The nerve of it! How could he get into the house without being seen? Blessed if it doesn't look like magic!"

There was something terrifying in the thought that the Indian was able to penetrate into the very house undiscovered in broad daylight, with the house, the quad., and the playing-fields swarming with people. How had he come? How had he gone?

"This wasn't here an hour ago," said Tom in a low voice. "I came here after lessons for my bat. I know it wasn't here then."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy looked in at the open doorway.

"Comin' to tea, you chaps? Bai Jove, what's the mattah?" His eye had fallen upon the fatal sign. Study No. 6 had been told the secret, in confidence, of course, so D'Arcy knew all about the Sign of Three. The general had considered it safer for Tom to let his nearest friends into the secret, as their vigilance added to his safety.

"Gwreat Scott!" ejaculated D'Arcy. "Has that wottah been heah?"

"That card was put here during the last hour," he said.

"Bai Jove! And you haven't seen him?"

"Nobody has, or there'd have been an alarm. If a Hindoo were seen inside the school the fellows would give the alarm," said Tom Merry. "Though how on earth he got in here, and got out again without being spotted, is too deep for me."

"It is vewy wemarkable. I've been in Study No. 6 for the last half-hour, and the door was open, and I didn't see him," said Arthur Augustus thoughtfully.

The swell of St. Jim's picked up the paper and scanned it carefully, adjusting his famous monocle for the purpose.

Then he grinned.

"Bai Jove! Ha, ha, ha! Bai Jove!"

"What are you cackling at?" demanded Monty Lowther indignantly. "It isn't a laughing matter, you ass!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared D'Arcy.

"You silly chump!" shouted Manners. "Where's the joke?"

"You frabjous ass—" began Tom Merry.

Arthur Augustus chuckled.

"My deah boys, it's all wight. The black boundsh hasn't been heah. I suppose this gave you a fright—what?"

"No, it didn't," said Tom. "It startled us."

"It's a wotten jape, deah boys. Look!"

Arthur Augustus held up the paper to the light. It was half a sheet of the ordinary impot. paper, and there was the watermark on it to prove it. The paper belonged to the school, and had evidently been inscribed with the three dots in the School House itself.

"My hat!" said Tom Merry, as a new thought struck him. "That's not the same paper that I've seen before—that black boulder uses a kind of Indian rice-paper. If he came here he wouldn't chance finding paper in the study. It's a rotten jape of some fellow in the House."

Manners and Lowther looked greatly relieved.

"Asses not to think of it before," said Monty Lowther. "But who was it? We've got to put a stop to little jokes of this kind."

"Yaas, wathiah!"

"It wasn't one of Study No. 6—they wouldn't do it," said Manners.

"Wathah not!" said D'Arcy warmly. "Some mean wottah has been spyin' it out. Pewwaps it was Cwooke; I know he has been vewy cwious about the mattah."

"Cwooke, of course," said Manners. "He was looking over your shoulder when you opened the letter yesterday, Tommy, and found that dotty paper in it."

"We'll go and see Cwooke," said Tom Merry grimly.

"Wight-ho!"

The four juniors hurried along the passage, and entered Cwooke's study without ceremony. The cad of the Shell was alone there, and he was bending over a paper on the table, and chuckling softly. He had a pen in his hand, and a bottle

of red ink before him, and was in the act of inscribing dots in a triangle upon the paper.

He sprang up with an exclamation of alarm as the juniors came in.

His hand was thrown over the paper on the table at once, but not before the juniors had seen it.

"Caught in the act!" said Monty Lowther blandly.

CHAPTER 15.

The Courage of Crooke.

CROOKE glared angrily at the chums of the Shell. He had, indeed, been caught in the very act, and the juniors did not need any further proof than the paper on the table, upon which he had clapped his hand so quickly as they entered. Crooke had evidently been planning further little jokes of the same kind, but his misdirected humour was likely to be nipped in the bud now.

"Can't you knock before you come into a fellow's study?" demanded Crooke.

"Not when we want to catch him napping," said Lowther. "What are you covering up with your paw, Crooke?"

"Mind your own business."

"Will you let us see it?"

"No, I won't."

"Why not?"

"It's a private letter," growled Crooke. "Have you taken to prying into fellows' private correspondence among your other nice ways?"

Tom Merry did not answer that question. He grasped Crooke by the shoulder and whirled him away from the table. The paper fluttered to the floor, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy picked it up, and held it aloft for the fellows to see.

"The Sign of Three!" said Manners.

Crooke jerked himself away from Tom Merry, and burst into a laugh.

"You put a paper like that on my study table," said Tom.

"Suppose I did?" growled Crooke.

"What did you do it for?"

"A lark, of course," said Crooke sarcastically. "You have been scared to death by some ass sending you things like that, and I thought I'd give you another fright. Did it make you shudder? Ha, ha, ha!"

"It was a rotten trick to play," said Tom Merry. "You couldn't know so much about it unless you'd been spying, and if you've found out what is the matter, you know that it's serious."

Crooke shrugged his shoulders.

"Rats!" he said. "You're in a state of nerves, and getting frightened at shadows. Blessed if I'd allow a nigger to scare me!"

"Oh!" said Lowther. "You wouldn't be scared if the black bouncer came after you—eh?"

Crooke laughed mockingly.

"I should say not!"

"I think it was a rotten joke," said Tom Merry. "I don't like that kind of joke. Will you put the gloves on with me, or shall I pour your precious red ink down your neck? You can take your choice."

Crooke backed away round the table. He did not want to choose either of those unpleasant alternatives. But Monty Lowther unexpectedly intervened.

"Come away, Tommy; tea's ready, and you're not going to keep us waiting for tea while you hammer Crooke. Come on."

"Look here, Monty—"

"Peace, my child, peace," said Lowther; and he dragged Tom Merry from the study, much to Crooke's relief. "Let dogs delight to bark and bite—"

"Look here, you ass—"

"It is their nature to," said Lowther. "Come into the study and listen to your uncle."

He dragged his reluctant chum back into their study. Monty Lowther's eyes were gleaming with humour. He carefully closed the study door, and chuckled gleefully.

"Crooke says he isn't afraid of any old black man," he remarked. "We'll give Crooke a chance to prove his giddy words."

"What do you mean?" growled Tom.

"I mean that this is where Kerr comes in."

"Kerr! What's that New House bouncer got to do with it?"

"Everything. If he can make up as a general from India he can play the giddy role of a black man from the same country—much easier, in fact."

"Oh, bai, Jove!" murmured D'Arcy.

"The props used for Othello in the dramatic society will come in useful," said Lowther calmly, "and Crooke will enjoy himself, and show how brave he is."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Buzz over to the New House and fetch Kerr, Manners, old man, and whisper in his little ear what we want. He'll come like a shot."

Manners departed, grinning. Five minutes later Kerr was in the study, and the School House fellows greeted their old rival of the New House with effusion.

Meanwhile, Crooke of the Shell was having tea, in his study. Murphy, his study-mate, was gone to tea in the end study with Kangaroo, and Crooke was alone. Being alone, he had laid in some extra little supplies, and was "doing himself down" remarkably well. He was almost at the end of his tea when the study door was softly and cautiously opened from without.

Crooke turned his head carelessly.

"Is that you, Murphy? My hat!"

Crooke leapt to his feet with a shout of alarm.

A black face was looking in upon him—a face black as the ace of spades, with a white turban wound round the head above it.

Crooke gazed at the dreadful apparition in horror.

The black man advanced into the study, and closed the door behind him. Crooke gave a yell of horror and fear.

"Oh! Help!"

"Bang-kickibidy-bang!" hissed the black man. "Silence!"

From under the soiled white robe that enveloped the form of the black man his hand emerged, and Crooke turned sick with terror at the sight of a gigantic knife.

The black man deliberately locked the door, and then fixed his rolling eyes upon the cad of the Shell.

"Shuckaback-bang!" he hissed. "You understand?"

"No!" panted Crooke. "I—I—keep off! Oh, heavens, help! I—I say, it's not me you're after! I—I—"

"Bang! Whoosh!" said the black man, in Hindustani—or, at least, some language that Crooke could not understand. "You are the young sahib Merry?"

"No!" gasped Crooke.

"What? Bangawiddy! Pong chum gum-gum!" hissed the black man. "Can you understand me?"

"N-no! I—I—I don't speak Hindustanee!" gasped Crooke. "I—I say, Tom Merry's study is the next but one. I'm Crooke."

"You lie! You are Tom Merry!"

"I'm not!" panted Crooke. "Tom Merry's room is further up the passage. Wh-what do you want?"

"Shackaback gum-gum chickabiddy!" snarled the black man.

"I—I don't understand."

"Blood!" hissed the dreadful visitor.

"What-a-at!"

"Blood! I have come to slay! Look at this knife! Ere I leave this room this blade must be imbrued in thy heart's blood, base Feringhee."

Crooke dodged round the table as the black man made an advance towards him. His heart was in his throat with terror.

"I—I'm not a Feringhee!" he gasped. "I don't know what it is, but I ain't anything of the sort. I'm Crooke of the Shell. Oh, crumbs!"

"You swear you are not Sahib Tom Merry?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Swear it on your knees!" shouted the ferocious black man.

Crooke dropped on his knees. He would have sworn it on his knees, or on his head, to get rid of that dreadful visitor.

"Swear!" hissed the black man.

"I swear!" stammered Crooke. "Oh, lord!"

"It is well. Yet it would be safer to plunge this blade to thy heart, that thou keepest silence."

And the black man flourished the knife.

"Mercy!" howled Crooke, almost howling with fear.

"Mercy!"

"Dog!"

"Grooh! Keep off! Mercy!"

"Thou diest!"

"I—I swear I'm not Tom Merry. I—I'll show you to his study if you like. Keep off!"

"Slave! Wilt thou keep silence while I go to his room and slay him?"

"Yes, yes, yes!"

"Swear!"

"I—I s-s-swear! Oh, scissors!"

"Crawl under the table, dog that thou art, and do not appear until the deed is done!" said the black man. "Remain silent while this dread blade drinks the gore of the victim."

"Yes, yes, yes!" stuttered Crooke. He crawled under the table; he would willingly have crawled up the chimney.

"Remain there, and in silence, or, chack-shackawang-bang!" hissed the black man. "You understand?"

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"Yes, yes."

"Bhang-woosh, koosh, ping-pong and solo whist!" hissed the Hindoo. "Silence, on your life, while the deed of blood is done—I mean done."

And he unlocked the study door, and left as stealthily as he had entered. Crooke gave a gasp of relief as the door closed after him. He made a bound to the door to lock it, but the key had been taken away. There was a footstep outside, and he bolted under the table again like a scared rabbit, in dread of the Indian's return.

The door opened.

From under the table-cloth Crooke could only see trousers, but they evidently belonged to juniors, and he ventured to put his head out from under the table. Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther, D'Arcy and Blake and Herries and Digby came into the study, and they stared at the head protruding from under the table-cloth.

"What on earth are you doing under the table?" demanded Lowther.

"Have you seen him?" panted Crooke.

"Him! Whom?"

"The black man."

"You're dreaming," said Tom Merry. "There isn't any black man here."

"He's just been here," panted Crooke. "Help me barricade the door, for goodness' sake! He made me get under the table, and he's gone to your study to murder you."

"And you were going to let him do it, without trying to warn me?" asked Tom Merry contemptuously.

"He's got a knife."

"You cowardly bound!" said Tom. "You couldn't risk buzzing out when he had gone to give me a call, eh?"

"He—he—I—I— He may come back any minute. Help me barricade the door!" howled Crooke, dragging the table towards the door.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It isn't a laughing matter, you fools! You may all be murdered as well as me," shrieked Crooke.

"As well as I," corrected Lowther gently. "Don't forget your grammar, Crooke, even in the hour of danger!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The door opened as Crooke was jamming the table against it. The black face looked in, and Crooke, with a yell of fright, fled back behind the juniors.

"Aha! Shack-bang-chicken-soup-flop-flop!" hissed the black man. "I have thee now!"

"That's Tom Merry!" yelled Crooke.

"Art thou Tom Merry of that ilk?" demanded the black man.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Looks pretty, doesn't he?" went on the black man, in quite a different tone of voice, grinning at Crooke, who was trying to hide himself behind the burly Herries. "Crooke, old man, buck up! Get under the table again!"

Crooke stared at the black as if he were dreaming. The sudden change of voice astounded him.

"What—who—what—I— Oh—" he stuttered.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the juniors.

It dawned upon Crooke's mind at last that he had been japed.

"You rotter!" he roared. "Who are you?"

"Chick-a-biddy, bang-bang, wallop—"

"I know your voice now," hissed Crooke. "You're Kerr! You beast! You rotter! You—you—" Words failed Crooke. He snatched up the poker and ran at Kerr, but Tom Merry & Co. seized him, and he was bumped down promptly.

The juniors, almost in hysterics, staggered from the study. Crooke scrambled to his feet, panting with rage. Outside in the passage, there was a roar of laughter. The whole Shell and Fourth seemed to be in the joke. Fellows opened the door and grinned into the study, and asked Crooke if he had seen any black men lately, till the end of the Shell was almost frantic.

CHAPTER 16.

Hurree Das's Last Blow.

TOM MERRY jammed on his brake with a frown.

It was getting dark, and Tom had been over to Wayland on his bicycle, and was in a hurry to get back to the school before locking-up.

He was following the bridle-path that skirted Rylcombe

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Wood, and in the dusky shadows of the trees he had suddenly caught sight of a branch thrown across the narrow path.

If he had ridden into it in the dark, it would certainly have overturned him, but fortunately it was still light enough for him to see the obstacle.

"What silly ass chuckled that there?" muttered Tom angrily. "Idiotic idea of a joke, I suppose! Might have busted some chap's jigger."

He jumped off his bicycle, and dragged the loose branch to the side of the road.

There was a rustle in the underwood and a dark form leaped out, and Tom Merry was borne with a crash to the ground.

The suddenness of the attack and the heavy fall almost stunned him.

He rolled in the grass under the weight of his assailant, gasping for breath.

With a great effort he twisted over, so that he could look up at the man who had so suddenly attacked him.

A chill ran through his very veins as he saw a brown face looking down upon him—the same brown face, with the glittering black eyes, that had looked down upon him from the window of the Shell dormitory at St. Jim's a week before.

He knew the man at once.

It was Hurree Das.

And he realised that the scoundrel, lurking in the woods and awaiting his opportunity, must have seen him in the distance on his machine, and laid that trap for him upon the lonely bridle-path.

The Indian was above him, with a knee planted on him, pinning him down with cruel force to the earth.

Two savage brown hands were grasping him, and the strength of that grasp showed Tom Merry how little chance he had in a struggle with the Last of the Three.

His eyes looked up into the glittering orbs of the Hindoo. The cruel mouth above him curved in a smile of mockery.

"The sahib knows me!" muttered the Hindoo in English.

Tom Merry tried to calm his throbbing heart. He realised his terrible danger, but his courage did not desert him.

"I know you," he said. "You are Hurree Das!"

"I am Hurree Das!"

"What do you want with me?" said Tom Merry, as quietly as he could. He wondered whether Manners and Lowther had ridden to meet him. It was probable that they would, as he was late for calling-over.

If they came, if there was time, or his uncle? He had not told the general that he was going out; he had intended to return before dark. He was courageous, but he had not intended to be foolhardy. But he had been delayed in Wayland, and now he was in the hands of his foe.

"What do I want?" the black man grinned. "You know what I have asked the sahib general, and what he has refused?"

"Yes."

"You will die, to pay for the lives of Nalouth and Swadi Das," said the Hindoo, showing his white teeth. "I shall leave you lying here like a dead dog, with the Sign of Three upon your forehead."

Tom Merry shuddered.

The man looked desperate. He was travel-stained, torn and dusty. Evidently the hunt for him had been close, and he had been for days in the open air. Yet, with fanatical persistence, he had remained in the vicinity of the school, resolved upon his revenge before he fled.

As he looked into the savage face, the fierce, rolling eyes, Tom Merry realised how little mercy he had to look for.

Even as he spoke, the Hindoo was feeling for a weapon.

Tom Merry half-closed his eyes, and sank back limply in the ruffian's grasp. He looked as if he was fainting with terror. And so the rascal believed. His grasp unconsciously relaxed.

It was Tom Merry's chance.

He was not fainting; never had he been more alert—more resolute. He had his life to fight for, and he knew it.

He made a sudden, tremendous effort, and the unprepared Hindoo reeled sideways from him. Tom Merry's fist, clenched, and as hard as iron, came with a thud upon his jaw, and Hurree Das uttered a shriek of pain and rolled in the grass.

Tom Merry leapt to his feet.

His glance went to his bicycle, but it was lying on its side. Before he could reach it and mount, the man would be upon him—and he was armed.

Tom turned and dashed away at top speed.

There was a fierce cry behind him, and then the sound of heavy footsteps pounding in pursuit.

Tom Merry ran on desperately.

All depended on his fleetness of foot now. He had no chance in a struggle with the muscular man behind.

He could never reach the school! He felt it, but he dashed desperately on! If only his chums had come to meet him—

Ting-a-ling-a-ling!

It was the ring of a bicycle-bell on the darkened road.

Two cyclists loomed up in the dusk, and Tom Merry dashed desperately towards the oncoming machines, shouting:

"Help! Help! Rescue!"

"Here we are, Tom!"

"We're coming!"

Manners and Lowther shouted back as they scorching on.

But ten yards still separated them from Tom Merry, when the bounding form of the pursuer leaped upon the captain of the Shell.

Tom Merry felt him coming, and swung desperately round and faced him. There was a glimmer of steel in the gloom.

"Stand aside, Tom!"

It was Lowther's voice.

Tom Merry made a sideways spring, and the blow that was descending upon him missed him.

Then there was a terrific crash.

Lowther had ridden right at the ruffian, and his front wheel struck the Hindoo and hurled him to the earth.

The bicycle buckled up in the collision, and Monty Lowther went sprawling into the road.

He was up in a second, and Manners was off his machine, rushing forward. The Hindoo lay in the road.

His right leg was twisted under him, and his head lay like a log on the ground. The back of his head had struck the earth with stunning force in his fall, and he was insensible.

"Stunned!" gasped Manners.

Tom Merry panted for breath.

"You came just in time!" he gasped. "You've saved my life!"

"Jolly lucky we came to meet you," said Monty Lowther. "Let's make sure of this scoundrel while we can. Tie the brute up."

The Hindoo was stirring.

But long ere his senses returned the juniors had deftly bound him, hand and foot, with strips torn from his own clothes.

When Hurree Das came to himself he was a prisoner, and he wriggled helplessly in the tight bonds upon his limbs.

His black eyes rolled and gleamed. Tom Merry looked down upon him grimly.

"You bound!" he said. "You're laid by the heels now, and you won't get away in a hurry! One of you chaps scorch to the police-station, and get the bobbies here. I'll stay and look after him. One of you fetch the general."

"The general's coming!" grinned Manners. "He was in a way when he found you were out alone and hadn't come in. I can tell you!"

"I'll go for the police," said Lowther. "I'll take your jigger, Manners; mine will have to be walked home—that beast has buckled up the front wheel. And you, Mister Hurree Das, you can get ready for a little trip to the Andaman Islands."

Hurree Das did not reply. His black eyes gleamed, but otherwise he made no sign. His fate had come upon him, and he bore it with Oriental stolidity.

Ten minutes later General Merry was upon the scene. He gave the bound Hindoo a grim look, but did not speak to him. He grasped his nephew's hand with an emotion he did not attempt to conceal.

"Thank Heaven you are safe, Tom!" said the general huskily. "You should not have taken the risk, but it is over now. That scoundrel will be safe for life."

And when the police arrived, Hurree Das, with handcuffs on his wrists, was taken away, and General Merry went with him. He did not mean to lose sight of the prisoner until he was disposed of in safety.

The Terrible Three walked their bicycles back to St. Jim's in a subdued mood. Tom Merry was still breathing hard after his run, and his narrow escape had made a deep impression upon his mind.

"I'm jolly glad they've got that chap," he said at last. "It was touch-and-go for me, and but for you fellows—"

"All's well that ends well," said Monty Lowther, rather huskily. "He'll be safe enough for the future, Tom, and you're done with the Sign of Three."

Tom Merry did not see Hurree Das again.

The rascal went to the convict settlement at the Andaman Islands, and the outer world had finished with him.

But it was likely to be a long time before Tom Merry forgot the terrible peril that he had so narrowly escaped, or the dark face of Hurree Das, and the Sign of Three!

THE END.

(Another splendid long complete tale of Tom Merry and Co. next Wednesday, entitled "THE BLACK SHEEP." Order your copy now to avoid disappointment.)

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A Magnificent, New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

NEXT WEDNESDAY: "THE BLACK SHEEP!"

Our Weekly Prize Page.

LOOK OUT FOR YOUR WINNING STORYETTE!

THE OMINOUS SILENCE.

Quack Doctor: "Yes, gentlemen, I have sold these pills for over twenty-five years, and have never had a complaint. Now, what does that prove?"

Voice from the Crowd: "That dead men tell no tales!"—Sent in by C. Camm, Leeds.

A LIFELIKE PORTRAIT.

Photographer: "To have the picture more lifelike, sir, I would suggest that your son should put his hand on your shoulder."

Parent (with expensive son): "I think if he put his hand in my pocket it would be still more lifelike!"—Sent in by H. Baldwin, Tooting Junction.

QUITE CORRECT!

A gentleman was travelling to his office in the City, and he cursed inwardly as the train pulled up for the sixth time.

"Guard! Guard! What's up?" he shouted.
"Signal, sir," replied the guard.—Sent in by W. Davies, Pentonville.

A GOOD EXCHANGE.

South American Commander (to the rebel leader): "You have captured one of our generals."

Rebel: "Correct."
S. A. C.: "We are prepared to give you two captains and a colonel in exchange for our general."

Rebel: "Not good enough."
S. A. C.: "Then two captains and two colonels."
Rebel: "No go! But you can have him for a tin of condensed milk!"—Sent in by R. W. Walkington, Sheffield.

MIKE THE LITERAL.

A soldier, crossing the barrack square with a pail, met a sergeant, who noticed that Mike was wearing a very disreputable pair of trousers. Intending to report him for unsoldierly appearance, he stopped him, and asked:

"Where are you going?"
"To get some water, sor," answered Mike.
"What, in those trousers?"
"No, sor; in the pail."—Sent in by L. Tully, Aberdeen, N.B.

A POOR BAC.

A Scotch laird, on whose ground game was scarce, invited a party of sporting friends to a day's shooting. For five hours they wandered without getting a single shot, and at length one of the sportsmen sarcastically inquired of the solitary gamekeeper:

"What on earth does your master kill when he goes out shooting?"
"He kills time!" was the grinning rejoinder.

A SAFE STEP.

Smith and his friend were chatting together over a good hot dinner in a restaurant, when the friend, thinking to score over Smith, said:

"I say, did you hear of that terrible accident which happened yesterday?"

"No; what was it?"
"Why," said the friend, "a man fell from a 20-foot ladder."

"And was he killed?"
"Oh, no!" replied the friend. "He fell from the bottom step!"—Sent in by W. Jackson, Morecambe.

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"THE MAGNET" LIBRARY,
Every Monday.

NO DANCING ACADEMY.

She had tried vainly to stop the tram in the usual feminine fashion, but without result, until at least eight people had shouted "Hi!" stentoriously, and half a dozen small boys had entered for an impromptu whistling competition.

At last she was aboard, and she glared viciously at the conductor.

"Why didn't you stop the car for me?" she demanded.
"How was I to know you wanted to get on?" he retorted.
"Didn't you see me swinging my arms and jumping up and down, and vigorously waving my umbrella?"

"Course I did!" he said agreeably. "Nobody could help it. The whole street was looking at you!"

"Then why didn't you stop?" she asked, in exasperation.
"Oh, I thought you were just dancing to the street organ," was the conductor's quiet reply, in acid tones.—Sent in by W. Jackson, Sheffield.

THE HANDY MAN.

A colonel wanted a manservant, so he inserted an advertisement in the local weekly, and received a great many applications, but none of them suited his requirements. But at last an Irishman was shown into his presence.

"What I want," said the colonel, "is a useful man—one who can cook, drive a motor, look after a pair of horses, clean boots and windows, feed the poultry, milk a cow, and do a little painting and paperhanging."

"Excuse me, sor," cried Murphy, "what kind of soil hev ye here?"

"Soil!" rapped the colonel. "What's that got to do with it?"

"Well," replied Murphy, "I thought that if the soil was clay I might make bricks in me spare time."—Sent in by S. Rothman, London, E.

A SPECULATIVE MATTER.

A Dublin optician advertised spectacles by the aid of which anyone could read the finest print. A verdant countryman heard of them, and called on him one day. Having tried one pair of spectacles after another, and being unable to read with any, the annoyed optician lost his temper, and rudely asked:

"Can you read at all, sir?"
"Bad cess to yer impudence!" answered the indignant countryman. "Would I be after coming to you for specs, to enable me to read if I had learnt to read without them?"—Sent in by C. Gerber, Manchester.

A TRUE GENTLEMAN.

Tommy had been making a study of etiquette. When his little sister was opening the door to leave the nursery, he pulled her back by her hair, and, roughly elbowing her aside, exclaimed in angry tones:

"Don't you know it is a gentleman's place to open the door, you ignorant thing?"—Sent in by W. McClurg, Stoke-on-Trent.

THE WORST TO COME.

A thrilling melodrama was being produced at a local theatre. The hero forgot his lines, and began to mumble badly, and quite lost the sympathy of the gallery. Just before the crisis of the play he clasped his sweetheart in his arms and said:

"Keep a brave heart, darling; the worst is yet to come."

Promptly a voice from the gallery cried:

"What are you going to do next mister—sing?"—Sent in by G. Garrett, Liverpool.

MONEY PRIZES OFFERED!

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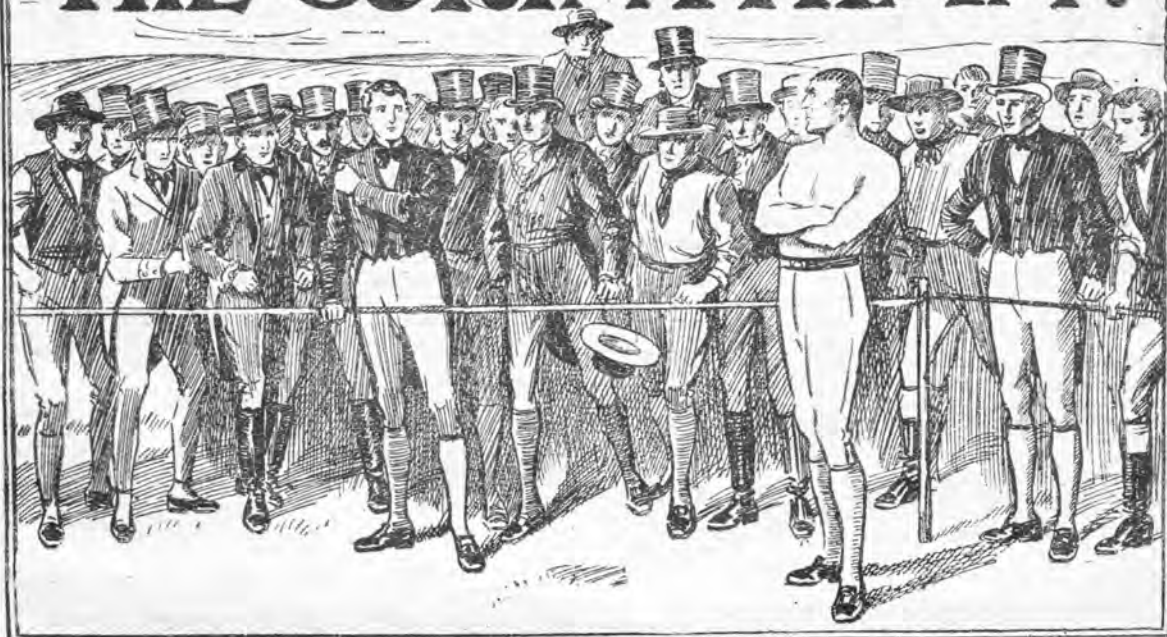
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Every Friday.

THE CORINTHIAN.



A Magnificent New Story of the Old-Time Prize-Ring. By BRIAN KINGSTON.

READ THIS FIRST.

Hilary Bevan, a sturdy young Britisher of gentle birth, who has been living in the country, sets out to walk to London

TO SEE HIS FATHER,

Sir Patrick Bevan, whom he has not met for three years. Arriving at his father's house, Hil learns that the latter has been absent for three days at the house of Sir Vincent Brookes, one of the leading bucks of the time. He also learns that Sir Patrick has earned the nickname of

"PLUNGER" BEVAN,

and is heavily in debt, having dissipated his fortune.

Bending his steps to Sir Vincent Brookes's house in Grosvenor Street, Hilary finds two sheriff's men waiting outside to arrest his father when he should come out. The lad enters the house, and

FINDS HIS FATHER AT THE GAMING-TABLES,

where he has been, without intermission, for three days and nights. Among the circle of faces round the tables, Hil recognises a friend in Squire Oliver, a big landowner from his neighbourhood.

Sir Patrick rises from the table an utterly ruined man. Hilary, his heart full of grief, slips out of the house, and, engaging the two waiting sheriff's men in a fight, puts both of them to flight, thus saving his father from immediate danger of arrest. The sum for which a warrant is out against Sir Patrick is only twenty guineas; and in order to raise this amount, Hilary's next act is to accept a challenge offered in the prize-ring at Moulsey Hurst. His opponent is a Jew pugilist, Barney Isaacs by name, while Hil, fighting under the name of Farley, gains a decisive victory, and awakens the interest of a young Corinthian named D'Arcy Navasour.

Hil seeks out Sir Vincent Brookes, and pays him the twenty guineas Sir Patrick owes, taking no trouble to conceal his contempt for the rascally Sir Vincent. The lad is powerless to avert the catastrophe, however, and on going to his father's house finds everything being sold up, and his father gone no one knows whither. In the meantime, Sir Vincent, who is in a vile temper after his interview with Hil, receives a visit from a shady accomplice of his named Captain Cokeley.

(Now go on with the story.)

The Schemers!

With an eager air, rather overdone, and an assumption of good-humoured familiarity that was hardly genuine, Cokeley entered, to be greeted as soon as the door was closed with an outburst of vulgar abuse that would have done credit to a hackney coachman. His joviality vanished, to be replaced by a sulky scowl, beneath which lurked something very like fear.

There were matters concerning Captain Cokeley public knowledge of which would not be good for that gentleman's health, and he was aware that his patron was acquainted with them.

"Here's a to-do about nothing!" he said sullenly. "What has come about that two good friends should fall quarrelling? Now, if I'm in the wrong, sure I'll apologise like a gentleman!"

"Have you caught the knack of that?" sneered Brookes. "What of the work you told me was as good as done? I was a fool to rely upon you! You think yourself clever, and yet your confounded clumsiness allows the man to slip through your fingers!"

"It was not my fault Sir Patrick Bevan got loose!" Cokeley cried hotly. "If others had done their work as well as I did mine, he'd never be where you wanted him! I had my men waiting, as I told you. It was no fault of mine if they skipped before they could get their claws on your bird. Don't you be blaming me or cut up nasty!"

"It was managed confoundedly ill!"

"Or maybe I'll be opening my mouth, and that in a quarter which wouldn't be good for you," continued Cokeley, with an ugly expression. "If my hands ain't so clean as they might be, there're others as dirty, as'd soon be seen if there was any taking off of gloves. And, rot me, but—"

It was no part of Brookes' policy to quarrel with a valuable ally, and at this frank reminder of the unpleasant position in which he would be placed did his confederate choose to blab, he thought it wise to check his anger.

"No need for you and me to quarrel, Cokeley," he interrupted. "We're too useful to each other. It was the rascals you employed I was blaming, not you. And now, what was the important business brought you here?"

The gallant captain—cashiered from the Army on account of the misappropriation of certain moneys—was at once

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mollified. Sir Vincent was certainly useful to him. Without such patronage, he would drop back into the gambling-house bully and hanger-on of the Turf and the Ring, as he had been.

"Why," he said, losing his sulkiness, "I wanted to acquaint you of a new discovery."

And he fell to relating of the appearance of the new pugilistic star that the meeting that afternoon at Moulsey Hurst had brought to light—one Ned Harley—and the thrashing administered to Barney Isaacs.

"Maybe we could do something through him," he concluded. "He is worth keeping an eye upon, at least. Belcher thinks so end of him. Darcy Vavasour looks like taking him up; and, begad, but 'tis a peacock that would pay for the stripping. 'T would be vastly pleasant to tap that fine gentleman through his latest fancy, if he be serious. What think you?"

"It is worth thinking over," Sir Vincent said slowly. "Have you something in your mind, captain?"

"That have I, and I'll tell it to ye now," Cokeley said briskly.

At the Fives Court.

At the Fives Court Tom Cribb, the champion of England, was taking a benefit, and from seven in the evening St. Martin Street had been thronged with traffic. Around the entrance a dense crowd had gathered, and as there came up to the door anyone who was recognised—a pugilist who had made a name for himself, and arriving on his own feet, or some aristocratic patron of the prize-ring, who had descended from his fast-driven curricle or barouche—he was greeted with a cheer of thundering welcome.

"Captain Barclay! Hooray for the captain—the gentleman that helped Tom Cribb lick the nigger!" was yelled as a tall, handsome-looking man passed through.

"Tom Belcher! Three cheers for Tom! Who'll you have the muffers on with to-night, Tom?" greeted the landlord of the Castle.

"Here come Oliver and Painter. Good luck, Ned!" "Lord Yarmouth! Way for Lord Yarmouth, who never yet missed a guinea for a deserving man."

It was an enthusiastic crowd. Not a man of them would find a place inside the building, but all knew by sight every man of note, patrician or plebeian, to whom the Ring owed anything, and they shouted themselves hoarse in expressing their delight of seeing them.

"That's Mr. Vavasour! Is he a fighting-man or a swell with him?" shrieked a little man in the front row, as Darcy Vavasour, with Hil Bevan by the side of him, descended from a high turn-out, and made for the entrance.

"Shut up, you fool! Don't you know a slap-up Corinthian when you see him?" demanded a voice reprovingly.

Darcy Vavasour glanced at his companion, smiling slightly. Nothing in Hil's face indicated that he had even heard the confident description of himself the man in the crowd had given.

But it was as a performer in the ring instead of a Corinthian and patron of the fancy that Hil was to make his first appearance at the most celebrated of the boxing establishments in London, a building which might be described as the National Sporting Club of the period. There were given the really important displays of sparring by the most noted performers of the day, and there Hil had been brought by his patron for an introduction to those who comprised the most influential part of the pugilistic world.

From the desolated house of his father Hil had gone straight to the man who had offered to assist him. Left to his own resources, with empty pockets, knowing no friends, and too proud to beg help if he had owned any, he had made up his mind to depend upon the talent which he had proved he did own.

Nor did he conceive any disgrace in becoming a fighting man. It was honest work, demanding skill, courage, and the sacrifice of no honourable principle. As has been well said, "A profession never yet degraded a man who takes care not to degrade his profession." Gentleman Jackson had been a fighter in the Ring, yet because of his own conduct Jackson was a man respected by all, a gentleman, and the friend of gentlemen.

"I am pleased to see you," was all Vavasour had said when Hil came to inform him of the resolution taken.

If he felt any curiosity about the young man whose appearance was so little in keeping with the profession he had resolved to adopt, the Corinthian asked no questions, nor did Hil volunteer any information. With Vavasour he went to Jackson's celebrated boxing-rooms in Bond Street. There, after a short bout with the professor himself, it was proposed that Hil should have a trial with Captain Barclay, a mighty patron of the Ring, and reckoned so good with the muffers that he was always ready to put them on with any

good man who found his way to London. But Barclay, a fourteen-stoner, declared himself too heavy for Hil to do himself justice, and a substitute was found in an amateur present, nearer to Hil's weight.

This gentleman, reckoned the best cricketer in England as well as a master of the gloves and the hardest hitter to be found of his weight—twelve stone—was willing enough, and a three-round set-to took place; but so fine was the defence Hil exhibited, that, try as he might, the amateur found no opportunity for getting in one of the heavy body blows for which he was noted.

"Well," he said, as he pulled off the gloves, "I'm not sorry that's over. Jackson, did ye ever see a man more difficult to hit?"

And Jackson, of whom it was said no man alive could hit him when he chose to act on the defensive, nodded approvingly.

"Ned Farley, if you choose, there is such a future before you as you choose to make," he said, with emphasis. "It has been a rare treat to me. With such a defence as yours, and your powers of hitting, you should go far."

The outcome of that morning's work was the invitation to take part in the display at the Fives Court.

Inside the building were to be found none of the luxuries of the modern boxing-hall. Seats were few, and of the hundreds who crowded the floor the great majority had to stand. But of this none complained; they were present for the sport, and that would satisfy them. From the bare walls a few boxes opened, and these were the resort of the most noble or less hardy spirits. The arrangements were of the most rough-and-ready character: the boxing-stage but a boarded platform—no felt covering in those hardy days—elevated four feet above the floor; the ring simply four tall posts at the corners connected by a single rope, and innocent of the modern padding. To be knocked clean off the stage was no unusual happening, but one of which the tough fighters of the time thought little.

The walls were bare, the lighting crude; but none complained. And when such performers as Ned Painter and Ben Burn, Oliver, Firby the "Young Ruffian," Rimmer, and others were in the ring, the display of pugilistic prowess was sufficient to compensate for all inconveniences.

Mr. Jackson, the master of the ceremonies, quickly noted the entrance of Hil and Darcy Vavasour, and came forward to greet them.

"A place for you, Mr. Vavasour, has been reserved on one side of the ring; you will find some of your friends there already," he said. "Farley, we have picked Scroggins to oppose you."

"A dangerous man, Scroggins," observed Vavasour, when they were in their places. "He is no boxer, but a fighter to be wary of. Take care he does not drive you off the stage."

Hil remembered the warning. Half a dozen pairs had succeeded each other, and been warmly welcomed, and then Harry Harmer and Shelton, called "The Navigator," appeared on the platform. Shelton, a rough, bruising fighter without much science, immediately set to work with vigour, and in less than a minute a bout that was nearer a fight than a friendly spar was in progress. But it raised the excitement of the onlookers, and when Harmer took his lusty opponent's head under his arm, and fibbed him in the style of the real thing, the building rang with the shouting. There was some dissatisfaction when a summary stoppage took place, and when Mr. Jackson entered the ring, and announced that the next bout would be between Scroggins and a novice, Ned Harley, few seemed interested. Blood was warm, and the sight of so vigorous a miller, as the ex-sailor was known to be, pummelling a novice, promised little of interest, except to the few who had witnessed the licking of Barney Isaacs.

The boxers ascended the platform, and men glanced casually at Hil. Nothing in him to make a fuss about was the opinion of most. He was well set-up and athletic, but no more. Conversation became general.

But before thirty seconds had elapsed came a change. When men spoke it was in a whisper. Scroggins, short, alert, tough as a chunk of mahogany, gave one long look at his opponent when "Time" was called, then lowered his head and ran in, swinging his gloved hands with tremendous power.

Hil waited, stepped coolly aside almost as the other man came within arm's length.

There was a resounding "thwack," and Scroggins lay on the floor six feet away.

There was a laugh here and there, an isolated cheer. Men who had not been looking at the ring at all turned their eyes upon it. They saw Scroggins pick himself up, stare at his opponent in amazement, shake his comical head, and run in again.

Thud, thud! Bang, bang! went Hil's gloves upon the crown of the little man's head, and he sat down suddenly upon his nether end. This time the laugh ran all round the Court.

Once more the sailor got up, looking at Hil as though seriously wondering if it really were the lad who had hit him. Hil smiled, waiting for him to put up his hands again.

"All right, my hearty, you won't do that ag'in!" cried Scroggins.

And he rushed a third time.

Without changing his feet, Hil stopped his blows and hit him out.

The sailor was nonplussed. No one had ever done such a thing to him before. But he knew only one way of going to work, whether with the gloves or bare knuckles, and, as he had a big heart, he tried again.

When he found Hil was not in the same place, but three yards away, he went after him, but got his gloves anywhere on the lad, except his arms or shoulders, he could not. He meant well and he tried hard, but at the end of the round he had done nothing.

"What's the matter with ye?" shouted to him an admirer.

"What's the matter with him?" retorted Scroggins. "It's like boxing a streak of lightning, but, blow me, I'm game!"

He was game, and he was on his mettle, and presently the before indifferent spectators were surging and shouting about the ring, carried off their feet by what was no longer an exhibition of sparring, but a downright glove-fight.

Hil was forced to hit hard, little as he liked to do so at a man inferior to himself in physique; but with Scroggins losing his head, nothing else was to be done.

Pure defensive tactics failed. When the sailor was in earnest a brick wall wouldn't stop him. Again and again he was on the boards. Once a mad rush carried him underneath the rope and he alighted on the floor, his head first making severe acquaintance with the stomach of a stout man who happened to be in the way. But he was back again and milling away for dear life.

The calls of "Time" were lost, drowned in the uproar; minutes went, but the fighting continued.

Hil had no help but to keep on, for Scroggins battled like a clockwork figure that cannot cease working until the machinery has run down. Pandemonium reigned. Aristocrats and prizefighters were yelling at the top of their voices, some to Scroggins to stop, others for the bout to continue. From his post Jackson looked on helplessly.

At last a straight shot knocked the little fire-eater clean out of the ring, where he was pounced upon by a couple of attendants. But he had not had enough.

"Let me get at him!" he roared, breaking from his captors and tearing at the gloves to get his hands free. "A fair fight, and I'll show him!"

But such a thing could not be. Scroggins was picked up bodily by big Ben Burn and carried out of the Court, while order was restored, and the announcement made that the grand wind-up between Tom Cribb and Tom Belcher would take place.

Yet there was no ill feeling in the little man. In the dressing-room, somewhat calmer, but just as determined, he went up to Hil.

"Messmate!" he said, holding out his hand. "You're the kid for me, shiver me if you ain't. Shake hands! Blow me, but I likes you all the better for woppin' me so 'andsome. But you wouldn't do it with bare 'ands—not you. You and me'll 'ave to take a turn like that, an—an—well, if you beats, why—why, I'll let you do it again."

"Why, he's just done it!" laughed one who heard him.

"And that's more than you ever did, Sam Beak. I served ye once, an' I'll serve ye ag'in if you laugh at me!"

Hil shook hands willingly enough, put on his clothes and went back into the Court. Pushing his way through the crowd, he was the target of scores of pairs of curious eyes, but took no notice. Ten feet from where he passed stood a man whom he knew well, but Hil did not see him.

But though he failed to see Sir Vincent Brookes, the latter saw him. Very intently the shifting eyes were fixed on Hil, so much so that the owner failed to hear the words spoken by a tall man beside him.

"That's him—Darcy Vavasour's last fancy. And what d'ye think of him, eh? After seeing how he trimmed Scroggins, d'ye wonder that—"

"So it was he beat Isaacs, eh?"

The speaker of the words was thinking, and not pleasantly, of another victory the owner of those light, stalwart, light-brown shoulders had gained, a victory the recollection of which filled him with cold fury.

"Yes; that's Ned Harley! Why?" replied Cokeley.

"Also, my friend, he is the son of a friend of ours—of mine for several reasons; of yours, because he failed to believe

your pretty story about the loss of the regimental money, my dear Cokeley, and broke you in consequence."

Cokeley uttered a subdued oath, turning an astonished face upon his friend.

"You mean—"

"Yes; not so loudly, my friend. Ned Harley is Master Hilary Bevan. I am of opinion that the knowledge may be useful!"

A Big Wager.

A sporting supper, "limited to a select few noble sportsmen, patrons of the Fancy, and friends," as "Uncle Iden" Burn hoarsely whispered in the ear of those invited, was to follow the display; and to the Rising Sun in Windmill Street, Piccadilly, the house of the giver of the feast, Darcy Vavasour and Hil made their way.

Cunning fellows, these old pugilists turned publicans. Well enough did they know that the amount spent in their houses on such occasions would more than recoup them for the cost of the meal, even if a stiff figure were not charged those who could and would pay it for appearing. But such meetings were popular, and more than one important match had its origin in the arguments and discussions that followed the removal of the cloth.

The Marquis of Queensberry had been elected into the chair, and to support him were such staunch upholders of the Fancy as Lords Pomfret and Yarmouth, the Marquis of Worcester and the Earl of Sefton, Sir John Shelley, General Barton, Sir Thomas Apreece, Mr. Darcy Vavasour, Sir Vincent Brookes, Mr. Sant, the wealthy coal merchant who had been a backer of Tom Cribb, Captain Barclay, the Hon. Tom Duncombe, and a dozen more members of the sporting aristocracy. At the other end of the table was Mr. Jackson, and scattered here and there such shining lights of the ring as the "Two Toms"—Cribb, the champion, and Belcher, nearly as good a man with the gloves as the champion himself; old Tom Owen, Oliver, Harry Harner, Ned Painter, the one man who would be able later to say he had beaten Spiry, the tall Lancashire lad who had had the pluck to stand up against the terrible Molyneux for twenty-one rounds.

The negro, Bill Richmond, who had given up the ring to become the master of a public-house, and who had brought out Molyneux, and who, though in his fifty-second year, had but a few days before fought a stiff battle with a man twenty-eight years younger than himself, and was to fight yet again.

Near him was seated a sturdy man of middle age, black-haired, and black-eyed, of Jewish feature—the famous Dan Mendoza, and still capable of doing execution, with or without the gloves. Further away, and next to the champion of the light-weights, Randall, sat, one, a man of huge bulk, and with a good-looking face, whom Hil's neighbour whispered to him was Shaw, the Lifeguardsman, Captain Barclay's conqueror, with the gloves, and the best swordsman in England.

"Beat Burrows of Bristol in seventeen minutes, and I saw Burrows fight a long hour with Molyneux, and that was when the black was at his best. It's a toss up whether he wouldn't lick Cribb, if they could be brought together," went on Hil's informant, none other than Captain Cokeley.

Brought in with Sir Vincent Brookes, the captain had taken his position for a purpose. And what this was became evident when, the cloth removed, cigars were lighted, and bottles of wine on the table becoming numerous, tongues were loosened.

"It's said, Richmond, you're coming out again," called out the captain across the table, in a half-bantering manner.

"Wouldn't be surprised, massa; nebber know!" grinned the negro.

"Well, you beat poor Davis easily enough. Like to take on another youngster?"

"All depen's massa. Who yo' tinkin' ob?"

"Well," said Cokeley, in an attempt at a well-bred drawl: "if I did not think you hadn't a chance, I'd be agreeable to backing this lad here"—he touched Hil on the shoulder—"against you. He beat Scroggins fairly with the gloves to-night, and Scroggins would give you a fair fight."

There was a general laugh in which Richmond himself joined, attracting the attention of the whole table.

"Tink I beat Massa Scroggins all right, but I not fight him!" replied the negro. "As for de young massa yonder—" He shook his head.

"What would you lay, Cokeley?" shouted Tom Duncombe from the far end of the table. "It's the old one for my money."

"A hundred guineas."

"Have you a hundred guineas?" asked Darcy Vavasour, turning a contemptuous eye upon the ex-officer. "Moreover, it would be as well for you to know that you are not authorised to make matches on his account."

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Cokeley would have ventured a rejoinder, but he caught the eyes of his master fixed on him, and held his tongue. But he had given Sir Vincent an opening.

"You suggest, Mr. Vavasour, that is your privilege?" he asked smoothly.

"As you should know, sir, I never suggest—I assert!" came the answer. "In this matter I do not depart from my custom."

Brookes smiled gently, but his shifting eyes glinted wickedly. Before he could reply, however, half a dozen voices took up the subject. Highest above these rose that of Sir John Shelley.

"And what do you assert, Mr. Vavasour, of your man?" he shouted.

"That there is no man of his weight in England whom he would not be able to beat!" declared the dandy Corinthian.

There was a shout of laughter. Men named their favourites. Professionals rose excitedly from their seats, asserting conviction of superiority.

"I believe Tom Belcher could thrash him with one hand," said Sir Vincent Brookes insolently.

"But he's not going to try, gentlemen!" laughed that boxer. "No, no; when I licked Dogherty, I went into the ring for the last time."

"But you'd try again, Tom, with such a gift before you?"

"Not I! Give the younger men a chance, sir!"

"And there's plenty to take it!" shouted Rimmer, who had been drinking freely. "And do it now, too!"

He jumped up from his chair, face flushed, and fists clenched, meaning mischief.

"Harley, you will not fight this fellow!" cried Vavasour across the table.

"I must defend myself if necessary," Hil replied, watching the burly Lancastrian.

"If that a man, stand oop!" the latter roared.

"But he won't. His master would rather his white feather wasn't shown to everybody!" sneered Cokeley.

"Nay, nay; Mr. Vavasour is anxious you shall not be hurt, Rimmer," corrected Sir Vincent Brookes mockingly.

That was enough for Rimmer. Shaking off Jackson, he ran at Hil, now on his feet, and launched a crushing blow. But it struck nothing more solid than air, and a sharp face that sent Rimmer's head back told of Hil's better accuracy.

With a cry of anger, Rimmer again came to the attack. Crowded about, with hardly six feet of clear space in which to move, Hil contrived to keep out of harm's way. And then came a sudden crack as his fist shot past Rimmer's arm, and met his jaw. Down went the Lancashire man in a heap.

The fight hadn't lasted a minute.

But Rimmer was senseless, and Jolly Ben Burn, bustling through the crowd, picked him up, and handed him over to a couple of waiters.

"Outside, and don't let him come in again!" he ordered.

And then he begged his guests to resume their seats. He was sorry the merriment and harmony of the evening had been interrupted; but Rimmer had had a lesson, and should not interfere any further. The bringing in of steaming bowls of punch and fresh boxes of cigars provided a further inducement against what threatened to be a premature breaking up of the merry-making; seats were resumed, and the exuberant spirits found an outlet in wordy argument.

Hil's feat of knocking down Rimmer, however, far from increasing feeling in favour of his powers, had the effect of increasing the warmth of discussion thereon. Himself a silent listener, he heard his merits and demerits commented upon freely. At last Vavasour brought the chatter to a head.

"Sir Vincent Brookes," he said, "you appear to have a strong feeling against my man; you questioned his courage just now. Are you willing to back your opinion with something more than words, or is discretion too much for you?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Why, simply that I am less prudent," drawled Darcy.

"Already I think that a trifling sporting wager is between us?"

"A thousand guineas, level money, pay or play, that my gamecocks are superior to any of yours, and my shooting nominee beats yours," replied Brookes promptly. "Well?"

"Well, sir, if you are agreeable, I will back Ned Harley against any man within seven pounds of his weight you can select for an additional thousand. And more, I wager you a further two thousand to five I win all three events!"

And at that daring wager the whole room fell silent, staring at Brookes, wondering what would be his answer. But the waiting was short.

"Done!" he snapped. And he smiled as though well pleased.

(A long instalment of this grand serial next Wednesday.)

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 239.

"THE MAGNET" LIBRARY,
Every Monday.

Our Companion Papers.

"THE PENNY POPULAR,"
Every Friday.

A NEW FREE CORRESPONDENCE EXCHANGE.

The only names and addresses which can be printed in these columns are those of readers living in any of our Colonies who desire Correspondents in Great Britain and Ireland.

Colonists sending in their names and addresses for insertion in the columns of this popular story-book must state what kind of correspondent is required—boy or girl; English, Scotch, Welsh, or Irish.

Would-be correspondents must send with each notice two coupons, one taken from "The Gem," and one from the same week's issue of its companion paper, "The Magnet" Library. Coupons will always be found on page 2 of both papers, and requests for correspondents not containing these two coupons will be absolutely disregarded.

Readers wishing to reply to advertisements appearing in this column must write to the advertisers direct. No correspondence with advertisers can be undertaken through the medium of this office.

All advertisements for insertion in this Free Exchange should be addressed: "The Editor, 'The Gem' Library, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C."

W. E. Harris, care of George Bros., P.O. Box 81, Germiston, Transvaal, South Africa, wishes to correspond with a girl reader living in England, age 19-21.

J. Rothwell, 1105, Eighth Street, E., Calgary, Canada, wishes to correspond with a girl reader living in England, age 19-23.

F. C. Whitefield, Central Dispensary, Amoy, China, wishes to correspond with girl readers.

B. Griffith, Herald Street, Cheltenham, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader, age 13-23, living in Liverpool or Cheltenham.

F. Turner, 2, Gower Street, Kensington, Melbourne, Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader, age 15.

Miss D. Whyte, 5, Amherst Street, Green's Valley, Fremantle, West Australia, wishes to correspond with a reader interested in postcards.

W. S. Mann, c/o Glebe P.O., Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader, age 15-16.

E. Townsend, 92, Cook Street West, Auckland, New Zealand, wishes to correspond with boy readers interested in stamps, age 14-15.

R. H. Blair, 24, Martin Street, Wellington, New Zealand, wishes to correspond with a girl reader, age 16.

H. Cooper, 77, Cambridge Terrace, Wellington, New Zealand, wishes to correspond with readers.

Miss L. Lisle, Edgecliffe P.O., Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, wishes to correspond with boy readers in the United Kingdom, age 14-15.

Miss P. Raymond, c/o P.O., Broken Hill, New South Wales, Australia, wishes to correspond with readers, age 18.

J. Beal, c/o Burns Philp, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, wishes to correspond with readers in Canada or England, age 14-15.

T. Wheatley, Hygeia, Lyon Street, Ferang, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with a reader living in England, age 17.

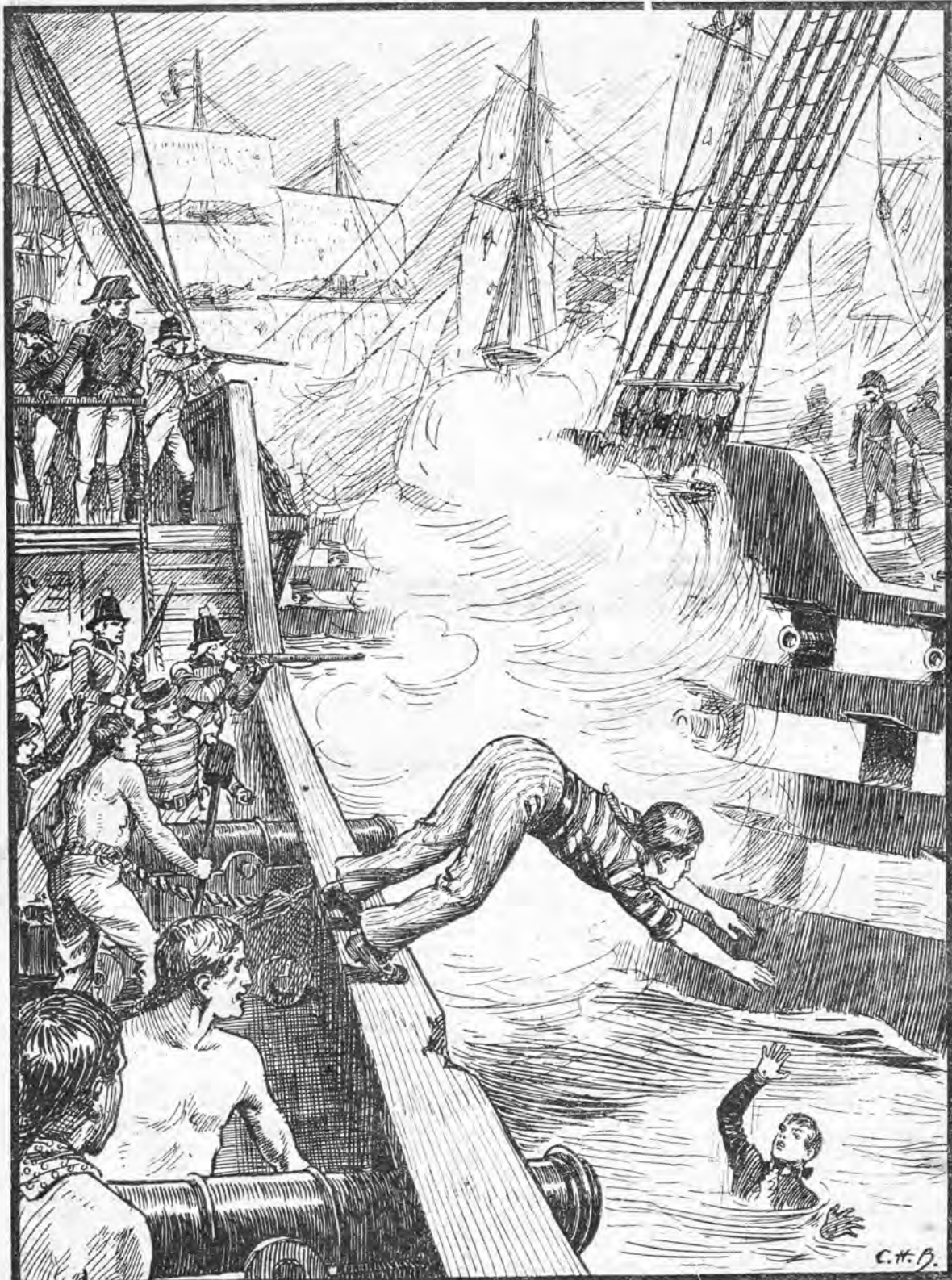
H. S. Clarke, P.O., George Street, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader living in England, age 19-20.

C. W. Johns, Knight Street, Shepparton, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader living in the British Isles, age 16.

F. G. Sinclair, A.L.C.M., Sunbeam, Meeks Road, Marrickville, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader, age 13-14, living in England.

The Editor specially requests Colonial Readers to kindly bring the Free Correspondence Exchange to the notice of their friends.

FAMOUS FIGHTS FOR THE FLAG. No. 17



Specially drawn for "THE GEM" Library by C. H. Blake,

During the Battle of Trafalgar, on October 21st, 1805, a powder-monkey, called Albert Huggett, at imminent risk of being jammed between his own ship and that of a Frenchman which was drifting down upon them, bravely dived from the side to the rescue of a midshipman who had fallen overboard. His wonderful action inspired his fellow-countrymen around him to perform deeds of gallantry during that famous fight, with what result every Britisher is proudly aware.

OUR SPECIAL WEEKLY FEATURE



For Next Wednesday.

"THE BLACK SHEEP!"

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

In next Wednesday's magnificent, long, complete tale of the chums of St. Jim's, entitled as above, Cutts, of the Fifth—the black sheep of St. Jim's—makes a last desperate effort to extricate himself from the straits into which his blackguardly ways have led him.

In this task he is unconsciously aided by Digby, of the Fourth, one of the members of the famous firm of Jack Blake & Co., of Study No. 6. Digby, in fact, falls fairly into Cutts's toils, little realising the terrible danger he is running. Cutts's scheme, almost diabolical in its cunning, is within an ace of coming off, when Tom Merry is enabled, by a fortunate chance, to frustrate the villainy of

"THE BLACK SHEEP!"**THIS WEEK'S "PENNY POPULAR."**

The issue of our splendid companion paper,

"THE PENNY POPULAR,"

which is now on sale, boasts such a splendid programme of attractions as to draw all my chums' special attention.

"THE MASTER CHEAT."

A thrilling tale of Sexton Blake, the world-famous detective's, encounter with the Prince of Cardsharps.

"ROUGH JUSTICE."

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

A grand, complete school story of the popular chums of St. Jim's—Tom Merry & Co.

"ON EQUAL TERMS."

By S. CLARKE HOOK.

One of Jack, Sam, and Pete's most interesting and exciting adventures; and

"POPLETS."

the great competition, by means of which dozens of "Penny Popular" readers are supplementing their pocket-money by winning the splendid

*** CASH PRIZES.**

which are offered every week. I don't want a single one of my "Gem" chums to miss this week's "Penny Popular"—it's a "top-hole" number! So get it to-day, readers, if only to satisfy yourselves that I am right in my estimate of it.

A PROSPEROUS LEAGUE.

I have recently received the secretary's report and quarterly balance-sheet of the Three Leaders League, which has its headquarters at 26, Prince's Square, Cable Street, London, E., and these show that the League—which is formed of readers of the Invincible Trio of Companion Papers: "The Gem," "The Magnet," and "The Penny Popular"—is in an eminently prosperous and satisfactory state. From the documents sent me, I have formed the opinion that this pleasant state of affairs must be largely due to the extremely correct and businesslike way in which "The Three Leaders League" is conducted, with its head office, three separate departments, and four branches.

The quarterly statement, too, shows a handsome balance on the right side, and bears witness to the progress this League is making among my chums in that part of London. I must heartily congratulate Master L. Schwartz, the general secretary, and the members as a body upon the success of their League. Long may it flourish!

HOW TO BECOME A FILM REVIEWER.

To become a film reviewer requires no little amount of literary ability, combined with a fair knowledge of the trade itself.

There are numerous men earning substantial livings at this work, but they are all men who have watched and waited for their posts.

There are many phases of film reviewing, and in order that you may decide which one appeals to you—and more important still, which you are best qualified for—I will enumerate them.

To begin at the top, there is the feature film reviewer. A feature film is one of unusual length and interest, and is so called because it "features" as a star on the programme. The film renter screens the feature films he has for hire in his private show-rooms, and the film reviewer of a trade journal watches the programme through, and duly writes up the story of the film for his paper. In doing this, he has to remember that he must do the film full justice, and in as short a space as possible bring out the most salient points, so that an exhibitor in the provinces, who cannot get up to London to see the film, may be able to decide from the review whether it is likely to be of use to him.

Next on the list comes a general film reviewer. This writer has a certain number of the week's releases allotted to him, and he is allowed so many lines per film, for which he is paid at the rate of a penny per line. When you remember that on the average a trade journal, apart from feature films, reviews some two hundred pictures, you will see that there is plenty of work for the reviewer. The other possibility is connected with your local picture-house and newspapers. Scan your weekly and daily papers, and if they contain neither advertisements nor pars about picture-houses, either see or write to the editors, and ask whether you may introduce such a feature. State as briefly as you can that you have studied the pictures carefully, and would like to try your hand at reporting for him. Better still, get a specimen feature, with reviews (of about six lines each) of the feature films of the best halls. You may be informed that the editor will consider pars, if you can get advertisements for him. If this is so, obtain a list of his advertisement rates, and travel round the picture-houses to see if you can secure small advertisements, promising the manager a bright and attractive paragraph about his show. If you only get one advertisement at first, there is no reason why, later on, your connection should not grow. When you visit a picture-house for journalistic purposes, of course, you will not have to pay, but do not be unappreciative about this, and don't try to pass in your friends on the strength of it.

In preparation for this, visit your picture-houses regularly and practise reporting the films, afterwards comparing your report with the one you find in the trade journal or on the programme. For brief, terse synopses, you cannot beat the "Kinematograph Weekly."

In conclusion, boys (and girls, too), I want you to remember that in writing these articles, I do not specially advise you to take up any of the lines enumerated, but I show you how you may do it if you so wish. I cannot promise you success, that depends upon yourself entirely. Many argue these professions are overcrowded. Even then there is room for young blood as time goes on. Make up your mind what you are to be, and work to that end, even though you may be doing work in the day-time which is not quite congenial. But, above all, whatever your idea, it is absolutely essential you take a keen interest in the trade generally.