

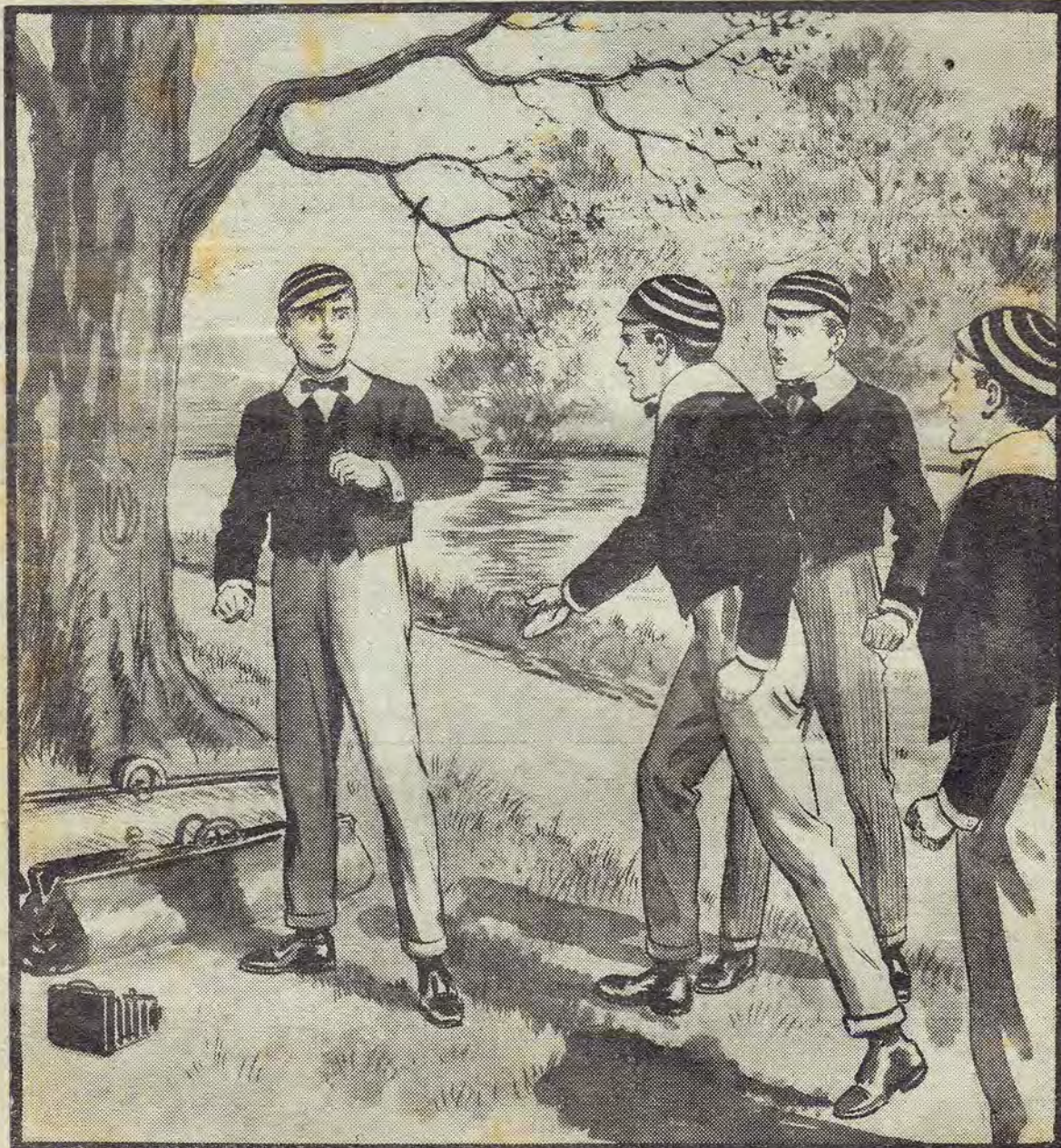
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RAIDING THE PICNIC TUCK!

Manners looked round helplessly. "It isn't fair!" he exclaimed. "You're three to one." "By gum!" chuckled Mellish, "he's going to resist. Let's rush him!" (An exciting incident in the grand tale of Tom Merry & Co. in this issue.)

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By **MARTIN CLIFFORD.**



"Great pip!" gasped the youth, "there's a fire down there!" He scrambled to his feet hastily, and crossed the floor to the opening. As he bent over he caught a momentary glimpse of a lurid, flaming mass; then a waft of thick smoke drove into his face and forced him back. (See Chapter 4.)

CHAPTER 1.

Mellish Hears Something.

WIPPIN'!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth Form made that remark as he emerged from the School House at St. Jim's. He screwed his famous

monocle into his eye and surveyed the old quadrangle with an approving glance.

Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther—the Terrible Three of the Shell—were sunning themselves on the School House steps, and they turned their eyes upon the elegant Fourth-Former.

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"Wippin'!" repeated Arthur Augustus.
 "Anything to oblige," remarked Monty Lowther humorously. "But what have you been up to, Gussy?"

"Weally, Lowthah, I fail to comprehend."
 "Didn't you say you wanted us to give you a whippin'?" asked Lowther, who never lost an opportunity of making a pun, no matter how indifferent.

Arthur Augustus glared at the humorist of the Shell.
 "You uttah ass!"

"Bow-wow!"
 "Weally, Lowthah, you are uttably wedic!" exclaimed D'Arcy stiffly. "When I exclaimed wippin', I was weffering to the weathah. It is weally a most wondah-fully sunny day for the beginning of April."

"Yes, it's like May, Gussy," agreed Tom Merry. "The giddy sun's quite warm, and when you descended upon us in all your glory, we were discussing a very important subject connected with the weathah."

"I trust I do not intwude, deah boys?" exclaimed Arthur Augustus concernedly. "If the mattah is anything pwivate I will wetire at once."

"It's all right, Gussy, we were only talking about a giddy picnic," said Manners. "These asses can think of nothing else but their tummies, you know. Personally, I think it will be a first-rate idea to devote the afternoon to taking photographs. Suppose you and I go for a ramble, and—"

"Weally, Mannahs, I am sowwy to disappoint you," interrupted D'Arcy. "but I have already awranged my programme for the aftahnoon with Blake and Hewwies. Besides, I have no inclination to go for a beastly wamble taking widiculous photowaphs!"

Manners glared.
 "You burbling chump!" he exclaimed wrathfully. "My photographs are jolly good—"

"I uttably wefuse to be called a burblin' chump!"
 "Hold on! Old Gussy's quite right," said Monty Lowther thoughtfully. "You do take ridiculous photographs sometimes, old man!"

Manners snorted.
 "Look here—"

"Now, don't get excited!" interrupted Lowther. "Wasn't that a ridiculous photograph you took the other day, when Gussy posed before your giddy camera?"

"Weally, Lowthah—"
 "Ha, ha, ha!"

"Perhaps you're right," growled Manners, grinning. "Gussy's quite correct for once!"

"You uttah duffahs!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus loftily. "I uttably wefuse to wecmain here any longah. I considah you are a set of cacklin' asses!"

And the swell of St. Jim's stalked majestically away across the quad, feeling that his dignity was considerably ruffled. The Terrible Three looked after him with grinning faces.

"Cheek!" grunted Manners. "My camera—"

"Oh, dry up about your rotten camera!" said Lowther. "I thought that was over and done with. You'd better understand, once and for all, that we're going on a picnic, and no cameras are allowed!"

"I can bring it if I like, I suppose?" asked Manners warily.

"Oh, you can bring any old thing you like," said Tom Merry patiently. "We were discussing the giddy fodder, and that's far more important than your silly camera! I vote we have a little picnic on our own—just the three of us—what?"

"Hear, hear!"

"We've got a decent amount of grub in the cupboard," went on Tom Merry, "and we can get some ginger-pop from Dame Taggles. We'll pack the giddy things in cricket-bags and sally out."

"What about some meat-pies?" asked Monty Lowther thoughtfully. "To-day's the day when the Rylcombe tuck-shop makes fresh ones. I vote we have one or two pies to lay a solid foundation, as Fatty Wynn would say."

"Yes; but we shall waste all the afternoon if we're not careful," said Manners. "What about taking the things now to the banks of the Ryll? You can keep guard over them, Monty, while Tommy and I pop into the village for the pies. No need for the three of us to

go, and waste a lot of time. You won't mind being left alone with the tuck for a quarter of an hour? Better than carting it all round by the village."

The Terrible Three had their backs to the doorway, and they didn't notice a junior pause on the point of emerging. It was Mellish of the Fourth, and Mellish had heard Manners's last words.

"What-ho!" thought the sneak of the Fourth, "a picnic being arranged! And Lowther's going to be left alone with the grub!"

He stood still and listened, just out of sight.

"Oh, rats!" said Monty Lowther, "that's a rotten idea. I don't want to be left alone, kicking my heels until you come back. Why not all go down to the tuck-shop first?"

"Because it's a silly waste of time," said Manners. "The better plan is to take the grub straight to the river bank—opposite the island; as we first arranged—and leave you with it while we buzz off after the pies. It's only five minutes' trot through the wood, and we shall be back in no time."

"Yes, that's the wheeze," said Tom Merry.

Lowther shook his head.

"I don't want to hang about," he grumbled. "I don't see—"

"Oh, blow! I'll tell you what!" exclaimed Manners impatiently. "I'll take my camera, and I'll stay with the grub while you chaps are away. I can take some decent photos of the Ryll. How's that?"

"All serene," replied Lowther cheerfully. "So be it, fair youth!"

And the Terrible Three turned into the School House. Mellish came out whistling; and they didn't suspect that he had overheard the latter part of their conversation. While Tom Merry & Co. went up to their study to prepare Percy Mellish sauntered across the quad to a spot where Levison of the Fourth was talking to Crooke of the Shell.

The pair looked at Mellish as he came up.

"I say, are you chaps game for a giddy raiding expedition?" asked Mellish eagerly.

Crooke grinned.

"Game for anything, so long as there's no risk attached to it," he replied. "What's the wheeze? You look quite excited."

"Been eavesdropping, as usual?" asked Levison. "I saw three of those Shell cads—"

"Eh?" said Crooke.

"Oh, I don't include you in the list of cads!" said Levison cheerfully. "I was referring to Tom Merry and his crowd. Well, Mellish, what's the wheeze?"

Mellish rapidly explained.

"It'll be as easy as rolling off a giddy form," he urged. "Manners will be all on his ownsome with a cricket-bag stuffed with grub. All we've got to do is to follow the bouncers, and then raid Manners when he is alone."

Crooke's eyes sparkled.

"Good egg!" he exclaimed. "We don't often have a chance of scoring off those rotters. Tom Merry and Lowther will have a surprise when they get back and find Manners there, minus the grub!"

"I vote we chuck the blighter into the river," said Mellish viciously, "and his rotten camera after him!"

But Levison shook his head.

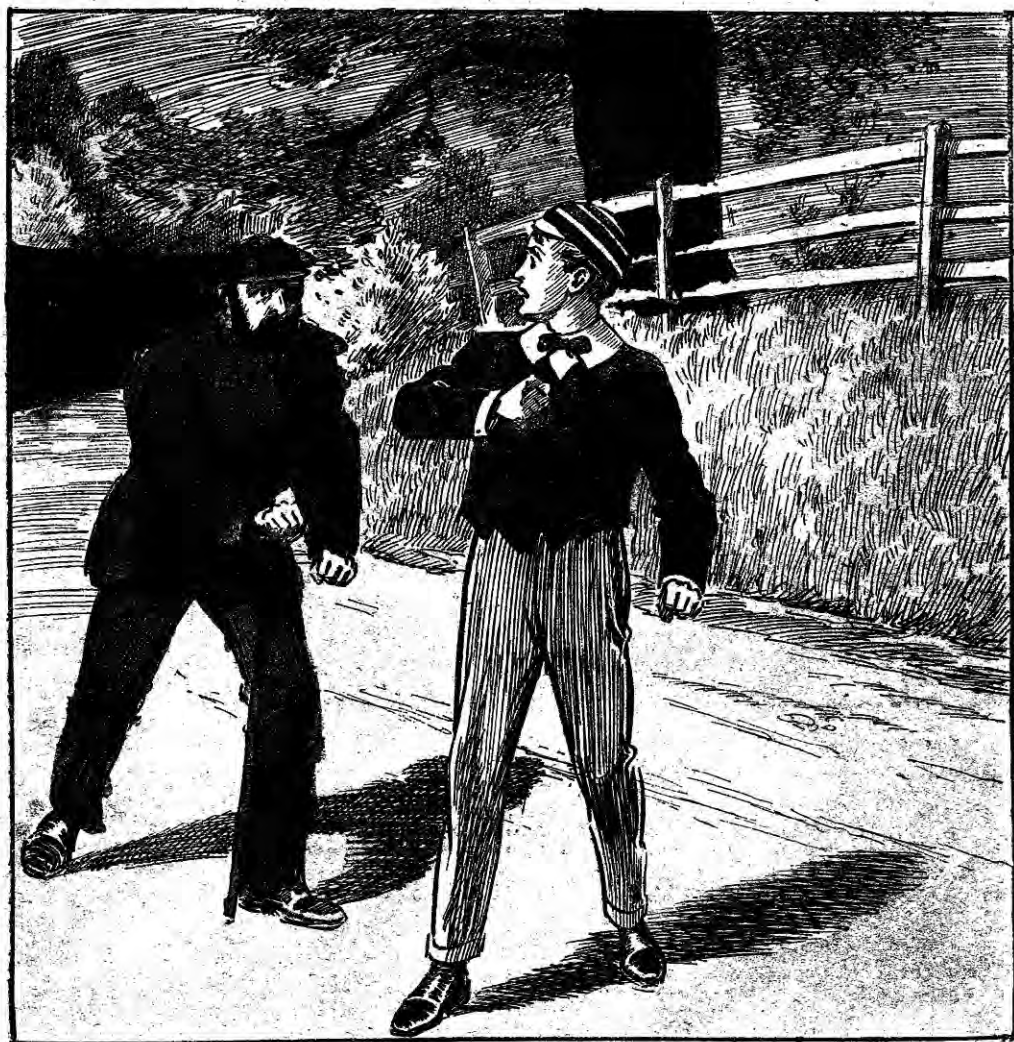
"None of that bimzey," he said. "The Ryll's jolly cold at this time of the year, and Manners might catch influenza, or something like that. And then Tom Merry and the rest would rag us pretty stiffly. If we only raid the grub they won't do anything. It's just as well to keep on the safe side."

"Rather!" agreed Crooke. "It's the grub we want—Hullo, there goes Lowther to the tuckshop—to get the ginger-pop, I expect!"

"We'd better separate," said Levison cautiously. "We don't want the bouncers to suspect things."

And Crooke & Co., having made their arrangements, sauntered carelessly off in different directions; so carelessly, in fact, and with such an air of unconcerned detachment, that had the Terrible Three observed them they would have suspected immediately that something was "on" among the cads of the School House.

Fortunately for the latters' little scheme, Tom Merry



"I want a word with you, young 'un!" Crooke's heart beat a little faster. A man stepped out into the lane. His face was bearded, and a pipe stuck out from between his teeth. "What do you want?" asked Crooke.

(See Chapter 6.)

& Co.'s attentions were elsewhere, and they had no suspicion of what was in store for the unsuspecting Manners.

CHAPTER 2. The Raiders Raided.

TOM MERRY looked round his study in the Shell passage.

"All ready?" he asked triskily.

"Waiting for you, my son," said Monty Lowther.

"Rats! I've been waiting for you chaps for five minutes!"

"Well, we won't stop to argue," said Monty Lowther cheerfully. "Life's too short, and I'm jolly hungry. The sight of all this giddy grub has given me quite an appetite."

"Same here," said Manners.

Monty Lowther looked at him with a dark frown.

"You'd better not start on it while we go for the pics," he said warningly. "My hat, if you've swallowed so much as a single crumb, or even smelt the cake, we'll slaughter you, and hurl your remains in the Ryll—we will rhyll!"

"Oh, help!" groaned Manners faintly. "If you're going to start making any of your diabolical puns, Lowther, I'll jolly well refuse to go!"

"Just as you like," said Monty Lowther. "I dare say Tommy and I can get through the grub without much difficulty!"

"Look here——"

"Oh, for goodness' sake dry up, and let's get a move on!" exclaimed Tom Merry, opening the study door. "We can finish the giddy argument going along!"

The Terrible Three left their study laden with two cricket-bags—one containing provisions and the other

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ginger-pop, knives, forks, etc. The chums of Study No. 1 were going to do themselves well. Indeed, there was a quite a decent feed without the principal item on the menu, which Tom Merry and Lowther were to fetch from the village.

Out in the passage they ran into Talbot of the Shell. "Hallo, wither bound?" asked Talbot, smiling. "Those giddy cricket-bags look suggestive of a feed."

"Quite right," said Tom Merry. "We're off for a little picnic, taking advantage of the warm weather, you know. We've got heaps of tuck. What's the matter with you coming with us—what?"

Talbot shook his head. "Thanks all the same," he replied, "but I've promised Skimmy to lend him a hand with one of his blessed inventions, and I'm booked for the afternoon."

"Oh, blow Skimpole!" said Manners. "Let him rip!"

"Sorry; it can't be did," replied Talbot. "A promise is a promise, you know. Well, I hope you will enjoy yourselves. Tat-ta! Lucky bargains!" he added as the Terrible Three disappeared down the passage.

"Pity old Talbot couldn't come along," remarked Tom Merry, as they crossed the sunlit quad.

They passed out of the gates, talking, and failed to observe three juniors saunter across the quad, from three different directions. They were Crooke, Levison, and Mellish. The cads of the School House were hot on the scent.

The Terrible Three had no suspicion that their plans were in possession of the enemy, so to speak. They did not fear anything from Piggins & Co., for they knew that the heroes of the New House had gone off for a ramble in the woods.

The Ryll looked almost inviting on that glorious day. In fact, Monty Lowther humorously suggested a bathe, but his chums politely requested him to refrain from making idiotic remarks. The river undoubtedly looked warm enough for a bathe, but a practical test would have proved that appearances were sometimes deceptive. March isn't exactly the month for river bathing.

"Well, there's no danger in sitting on the grass," said Lowther. "There hasn't been any rain for days, and the ground's as dry as a chip."

They walked along the towing-path until they arrived opposite the little island in the centre of the stream. The island itself was very often a favourite spot for picnic parties, but on this occasion the Terrible Three were going to enjoy themselves on the bank.

The cricket-bags were sent down at a chosen sunny spot.

"We'll be off," said Tom Merry. "We sha'n't be ten minutes."

"And I give you permission," said Monty Lowther generously, "to take as many photographs of the river as you like. You might possibly be able to snap a German submarine, or even a battle cruiser. The blighters are very fond of stowing themselves away in inaccessible spots, you know!"

They went, leaving Manners to his own devices. The amateur photographer of the Shell lost no time in preparing to take one or two photographs, but not of German war vessels, as Lowther had humorously suggested. So interested did Manners become, in fact, that he failed to observe the approach of the enemy in the shape of Crooke & Co.

"Better wait a minute until those two bounders are out of earshot," murmured Levison. "Then we'll stroll up and take possession of the grub. Manners will be helpless against three of us."

And Crooke and Mellish chuckled.

They waited two or three minutes, and then emerged into the open. Manners did not see them until they almost upon him. Then, with a start, he looked up from his camera.

"Hallo! What are you chaps doing here?" he asked suspiciously.

"Just come for a stroll," said Levison coolly.

"That's all!" chuckled Crooke.

"He, he, he!" giggled Mellish, who was in his element. This was a perfectly safe raid, and therefore Mellish felt bold.

Manners grunted.

"Well, don't bother me!" he exclaimed. "I'm busy." "Sorry," said Levison. "Can't we do anything? We should like to relieve you of something, you know."

"Oh, we shall do that right enough!" grinned Crooke. Manners looked at the trio sharply. He remembered the provisions, and something in Crooke's tone warned him of the new-comers' intentions.

"Oh, go away!" he said, with an elaborate air of carelessness. "When I'm taking photographs I like to be alone. I've got my camera here, you see, and—and other things in these bags, that I shall be using presently!"

"Photographic apparatus?" grinned Levison questioningly.

"Yes—er—well, not exactly——"

"Oh, come off!" said Crooke, who was eager to get busy on the spoils. "We know you've got a pile of grub there, Manners, and we'll trouble you to hand it over."

"That's it," said Mellish. "We're three to one, so you'd better take things calmly!"

Manners stood in front of the feed.

"You rotters!" he exclaimed, pink with wrath. "You're not going to take these bags! You—you burglars!"

"Rot!" said Levison coolly. "We're raiding you! Nothing new in that, is there? You've done it often enough yourself on Piggins & Co.!"

"Yes; but you belong to the School House——"

"That's nothing to do with the question," said Levison. "You've got some grub, and we're going to relieve you of it. We give you full permission to raid us when we go for a picnic!"

"Rather!" grinned Crooke.

Manners looked round helplessly.

"But it ain't fair!" he exclaimed. "You're three to one!"

"That's why we're raiding you," said Mellish candidly.

"You—you rotters!" gasped Manners desperately. "My hat, if you come any nearer, Crooke, I'll biff you on the chivvy!"

"By gum, he's going to resist!" chuckled Mellish. "Let's rush him!"

Manners had laid his precious camera on the ground, and he clenched his fists. Anyhow, he wouldn't give in without a fight. He'd go under honourably.

But Levison wasn't particularly anxious to come to fistieuffs with Manners, even with such odds on his side. A sudden gleam came into his eyes, and he made a dive downwards. Manners wasn't prepared for such a move, and before he could interfere Levison had grabbed his camera, and was off with it.

"Collar the grub, you chaps!" yelled Levison, bunking for all he was worth.

Crooke and Mellish needed no second bidding. Manners, after one furious gasp, had rushed off after Levison; all thoughts of defending the feed banished from his mind. Levison had got his priceless camera; that was enough for Manners.

"You rotter!" howled Manners. "Gimme my camera!"

What was a paltry bagful of grub compared to his camera? If the whole contents of Dame Taggles's tuck-shop had been in his charge Manners would have deserted it rather than lose sight of his beloved camera.

"You burgling bounder!" roared Manners furiously.

Levison cast a quick glance behind him, and saw that his companions had succeeded in getting clear with the loot. He grinned to himself, and suddenly came to a halt. He realised that the instrument he was carrying was a valuable one, and he had no wish to damage it. So he placed it gently on the ground, and then sped off after Crooke and Mellish.

Manners panted up and clutched the camera to his breast.

"My only hat!" he gasped. "I thought the beast was going to do it in!"

He examined it anxiously, but there was no damage done. Once assured upon that point, the amateur photographer of the Shell realised that the feed, like a beautiful dream, had vanished for ever.

"Well, I'm not going to worry myself about it," he growled. "I couldn't be expected to hold out with such

odds against me. I don't see that the feed matters tuppence so long as my giddy camera is all right!"

And he walked back to the river bank, consoling himself with the thought that he and his chums would, at least, have the pies to appease their hunger. And there was plenty of water in the Ryll, if they happened to be thirsty.

Meanwhile, Crooke & Co. were chuckling hugely over the success of their raid. Levison had joined the others, and they eagerly examined the spoils.

"Ripping!" ejaculated Crooke, smacking his lips. "Tarts, sausage-rolls, cream-puffs, cakes! My hat, this is a gorgeous feed, and plenty of ginger-pop to wash it down! I vote we squat down here and set to!"

Levison shook his head.

"No fear," he said. "Tom Merry and Lowther might be back at any minute, and we're too near to be comfortable. They might even take it into their heads to make an attempt to recover the grub. We'd better get into the wood."

"Right-ho!" agreed Mellish. "Only be quick; I'm famished!"

Crooke was inclined to demur at first, but as his companions had walked off with the bags he couldn't very well do anything else but accompany them.

The thick woods were close at hand, and they plunged in at a brisk walk. Finally, on a little sunny declivity, they decided to waste no further time. The bags were opened, and the contents spread out invitingly upon the white cloth which the Terrible Three had provided. The cloth, as a matter of fact, had been borrowed, without permission, from the study of Lefevre of the Fifth, while Lefevre was elsewhere. But a little detail like that wasn't likely to worry anybody, with the possible exception of Lefevre himself.

Crooke & Co. looked at the feed with feelings of satisfaction. It was theirs by right of conquest, and it would taste even better than if they had provided it themselves. Perhaps they wouldn't have worn such satisfied looks if they could have seen what was happening behind some bushes at the edge of the hollow.

Five faces peered through the branches, and one pair of lips, at least, were hungrily smacking themselves. The faces belonged to Figgins & Co. and Redfern and Owen of the New House, and the hungry lips belonged, needless to add, to Fatty Wynn, the Falstaff of St. Jim's.

"It's a feed!" murmured Fatty Wynn ecstatically. "And they haven't started on it yet! Figg, you're absolutely a genius for having brought us to this spot!"

"Shush!" whispered Figgins. "They'll hear you, you ass! I say, Reddy, are you game for a raid—they're School House cads, you know?"

"Game for anything!" said Redfern promptly.

"Hear, hear!" murmured Owen.

"It looks a jolly good feed!" said Fatty Wynn hungrily. "My hat! Look at all those cream puffs! Oh crumbs! Look, look!"

An almost pitiful gleam came into Fatty Wynn's eyes as he pointed.

"What's the matter with you, ass?" asked Figgins, startled.

"They've started!" exclaimed Fatty Wynn frantically. "Can't you see? They've started on the feed, you chumps! Let's make a dash for it!"

Figgins grunted.

"You giddy porpoise!" he exclaimed. "I thought something was up!"

"Well, ain't that something up?" demanded Wynn warmly. "There are those three cads scoffing all the grub while we're jawing! Look here, if you chaps won't come, I'll jolly well raid the feed on my own!"

Redfern chuckled.

"Fatty's right," he muttered; "there's no sense in wasting time, my sons. Now, all together; let's spring

on the blighters, and wipe them up before they know what's happening! They'll think the Germans have invaded Old England at last!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And, with a chorus of triumphant shouts, the five New House juniors sprang out of the trenches, so to speak, and charged the enemy. Fatty Wynn led the charge, not because he was more valiant than the others, but because he wished to get to the grub first.

"New House cads!" roared Crooke furiously.

"Oh crumbs!" mumbled Mellish, with his mouth full of tart.

"On the ball!" shouted Figgins excitedly. "Back up, you chaps!"

"Hurrah!"

"Down with the School House!"

"Down with the Kaiser!"

"Down with the grub!" chortled Fatty Wynn breathlessly.

And the School House and New House juniors were, a moment later, engaged in a fearful fistic encounter.

CHAPTER 3. A Strange Encounter.

"VICTORY!"

"Hurrah!"

"New House for ever!"

Figgins & Co. were enthusiastic. The tussle hadn't lasted long, for the School House trio were hopelessly outmatched both in numbers and in muscular qualifications. Crooke & Co. were not exactly in form, which was not to be surprised at, considering that they didn't indulge in healthy exercises such as Figgins & Co. were accustomed to.

To Crooke's credit he made a desperate attempt—a kind of forlorn hope—to grab one of the cricket-bags, which was still half-full of tuck, and make off with it. But his little game was detected in time.

Fatty Wynn himself, furious at the very idea of the feed being snatched away from under his very eyes, planted a fat fist full upon Crooke's nose. The Shell fellow had released the bag with a howl, and, without

waiting for further proofs of Fatty Wynn's boxing prowess, he fled ignominiously.

Levison and Mellish had no choice but to follow his example, and the triumphant Figgins & Co. were left in sole possession of the battlefield, having captured the provisions in their entirety.

It was a severe blow to Crooke & Co. After their careful planning, the feed had been raided from them almost before they had started operations upon it. To say the least, it was extremely galling, and the feelings of the School House trio, as they faced one another, were too deep for words.

Crooke glared, Levison glared, and Mellish glared. As a matter of fact, one might have supposed that each held the other to blame for what had occurred. Crooke, indeed, did so.

"You asses!" he exclaimed, finding his voice at last.

"You blithering fatheads! You burbling——"

Levison scowled.

"What have we done?" he asked furiously.

"What have you done?" roared Crooke, dabbing his nose. "Wasn't it your silly, rotten idea to go into that rotten wood? If we'd stopped close to the river, as I suggested, those New House rotters would never have spotted us! It's all your rotten fault!"

"Rats!" shouted Levison angrily. "How was I to know——"

"You might have guessed, you idiot!"

"Don't be a silly fool!" roared Levison.

"Look here——"

"Go and eat coke!"

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NEXT
WEDNESDAY:

GRAND SPRING DOUBLE NUMBER!

Levison and Crooke glared at one another.
 "Oh, what's the good of having a row about it?" put in Mellish. "It ain't anybody's fault—at least, not mine!"
 "Of course not!" said Levison hotly. "Crooke's to blame!"

"Ma?" stuttered Crooke. "Why, y-you fat-headed chump! You were to blame all through, for not taking my advice!"

"Oh, rats!" snarled Levison. "Come on, Mellish!"
 And the precious pair stamped off furiously, leaving Crooke gazing after them with an almost homicidal glare.

The glorious raid had hardly been a success. In plain, unvarnished language, it was a ghastly failure.

And Crooke was feeling sore—in more senses than one. His nose was swollen up, and was feeling a most uncomfortable size. It had been bleeding a little, but not enough to show. But it was large and rubicund, and stood out upon his face like a beacon.

"Hang it!" muttered Crooke to himself. "This is the giddy limit in frosts! We were chuckling over the discomfort of the Terrible Three, but I'm blessed if we haven't copped it a jolly sight worse!"

He kicked at a tuft of grass savagely and walked on aimlessly. He was trying to think out a way in which he could get even with Levison and Mellish, for he considered that they were entirely to blame for the disaster. He felt that he would just enjoy a fight with somebody whom he could knock about without much risk of being hurt himself.

In his black, savage mood, he wandered on, until he reached a footpath which led through the wood on to Wayland Moor—a short cut much used in the summer, but generally neglected during the winter months.

A large stone slab lay beside the path, and Crooke seated himself upon it.

"I'll make the rotters sit up!" he grunted. "I'll—"
 He paused. Somebody was coming along the path. A moment later the new-comer revealed himself as a youth of about Crooke's own age, perhaps a year older, but slimmer, and rather more frail. Crooke looked at him beneath lowering brows.

He was a stranger; at least, Crooke had never seen him before. He was ill-dressed, and his boots showed visible signs of hard wear. Upon his back was a bundle, and a cigarette-end reposed over his left ear.

"'Allo, cocky!" he said familiarly. "You're lookin' mighty sick!"

Crooke scowled.
 The stranger's face wasn't exactly a pleasant one. It was a small face, sunburnt and sharp-featured, and his eyes were shifty.

"Been in the wars, eh, mate?" went on the stranger, grinning.

"Mind your own confounded business!" said Crooke sullenly.

"Yes, I 'spect you do feel that way!" said the new-comer. "You looks sore enough!"

Crooke gritted his teeth.

"Go away, hang you!" he exclaimed. "I don't want any rotten cheek!"

"Rats!"

"What—what!"

The youth grinned again.

"I never spoke," he said coolly; "never said a word, cocky!"

Crooke breathed hard.

"You cheeky cad!" he snarled. "I'll thrash you for two pins!"

"Right!" said the stranger promptly. "I'm willin'! Anythin' to oblige! Take your coat off, an' we'll 'ave a little bout!"

Crooke hesitated. He didn't particularly want to fight; but this cheeky stranger looked just about his mark. He could wipe him up in two minutes, and work off some of his overcharged feelings at the same time.

But Figgins & Co. weren't far off; and the Terrible Three might come along, in a vain search for their lost fed. It wouldn't do for Crooke to be seen fighting a low bouncer like this.

An idea suddenly came to him.

"I won't fight you here," he began.

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"'Afraid, eh?" grinned the other. "Ho my! A swell feller from a big school afraid to soil 'is lovely 'ands by touchin' me! 'Yah, you funk!"

This was too much!

"My hat!" gasped Crooke furiously. "I'll make you sit up for this, you rotter! Yes, I'll fight you, and give you something you won't like, too! There's an old barn, disused and standing by itself, just a little way along this path—"

"That's right, mate. I passed it; leastways, I saw it close by."

"Well, we'll fight there," rapped out Crooke. "Come on!"

The cad of the Shell realised that if the low bouncer proved a little too much for him he could use certain other methods which weren't quite allowable in the ring. And in the barn he could do so without fear of being seen.

"Just as you like, mate," said the sunburnt youth. "That'll suit me."

He turned as he spoke, and led the way along the footpath. As a matter of fact, the idea of a fight in the barn appealed to him as much as it had appealed to Crooke. For he was of the same opinion as the Shell fellow—in the barn he could fight exactly how he pleased.

He did not look a particularly strong fighting-man, but as he had challenged Crooke—never for a moment thinking that he would accept—he couldn't very well do anything but fight.

The old barn stood in a field some three hundred yards from the edge of the wood, and was quite alone. It was a ramshackle sort of place, and had been in disuse for as long as Crooke could remember.

They crossed the field, and entered the ramshackle building. The floor was of stone, and rough bricks lay loose on every side. Crooke looked round and shook his head.

"Can't fight here, you cad!" he growled. "We should be stumbling over every minute."

"What about the loft?"

Crooke directed his eyes towards a rotten ladder which led up to a hole through the upper flooring.

"Come on, then," he said gruffly. "My hat! You'll be sore when I have finished with you, my tulip."

"We'll see about that there," said the other darkly.

They climbed up into the loft. The floor was sound enough, and there was some tufts of straw lying about. It was just the place for a fight, and Crooke noted with satisfaction that there was no window. The only light that was admitted came in through a hole in the roof; as a matter of fact, there were quite a number of holes.

In a businesslike way the shabby youth removed his bundle and coat. Then he proceeded to turn up his sleeves. Crooke did likewise, eyeing the other's rather skinny arms with satisfaction. He would soon wipe up the floor with him, and it would be a first-class safety-valve for his pent-up feelings.

"I'm ready!" he grunted.

Crooke lunged out viciously. The coolness of his opponent exasperated him beyond measure, and he threw caution to the winds. But he was soon brought to his senses.

Crash!

Something that seemed as hard as a brick struck Crooke upon the jaw, and he went down with a thud that shook the whole tottering building. Crooke saw about a million stars in three seconds, and sat up dazedly.

"One to be going on with—what?" chuckled the sunburnt lad. "'Ave some more?"

Crooke staggered to his feet.

"You—you young hound!" he snarled.

They went at it again. Crooke was simply mad with rage. He caught his opponent a heavy drive upon the cheek, but in return received a violent tap upon his already aching nose.

The tears started to his eyes as he staggered back.

"I'll pay you!" he muttered thickly.

He lurched forward, and flung himself at the other. In a second he had got his opponent's head in chancery, and was hammering away for all he was worth.

"Ow! Stoppit!" roared the stranger. "You cad! You blinking worm! Yarook!"

He made a violent effort, and succeeded in getting away from Crooke's clutches. Then, with no trace of his former coolness, he kicked out with all his strength, and Crooke only just dodged in time. Had the blow gone home Crooke's shin would have been fearfully jagged.

"You beast!" panted Crooke.

But he was not averse to the same tactics himself, and he immediately proceeded to put them into execution.

The sunburnt youth, his face distorted with vicious hatred, was kicking out continuously. Crooke danced from side to side, and dodged some of the blows. Others got home, and his fury accordingly increased. In a moment it wasn't a fight that was proceeding at all—it was a wild, kicking contest.

It could not last long—and didn't.

Crooke received two painful kicks upon his legs, but in return he delivered some violent blows from his own foot, which, being better booted than his opponent's, had more effect.

It was altogether a disgraceful scene, but happily there was no one present to see it.

Had the Shell fellow had a fair opponent to deal with he would certainly never have used his feet. But the shabby youth had turned out to be an utter cad, so there was nothing else to do but treat him to some of his own medicine.

And Crooke did it.

Suddenly the sunburnt lad uttered a gasping cry. Crooke's foot had just landed upon the pit of his stomach.

It was his own fault, for in endeavouring to reach Crooke he had slipped; and Crooke's foot, lashing out wildly, had found an unexpected mark.

The stranger collapsed, and lay still upon the floor.

"Get up, you rotter!" gasped Crooke pantingly.

But the other lay as still as ever.

"Winded, eh?" said Crooke. "My hat! I reckon you're about the limit. Well, I've given you something to go on with, you kicking beast!"

Still the youth lay motionless, breathing hard.

Crooke picked up his coat and put it on. He was not particularly hurt, and was feeling satisfied that he had taught his opponent a lesson. He'd had quite enough fighting for one afternoon, and was only too pleased to clear off without any further altercation.

So he descended the rickety ladder, and stood for a moment upon the rough stone floor of the barn. The hole in the floor above was a good distance up, and the ladder was loose.

A vindictive smile appeared upon Crooke's face.

"You can get down the best way you can!" he muttered maliciously. "I reckon you deserve boiling in oil!"

He grasped the ladder, and moved it away from the hole. It was a frail thing, but, being high, Crooke required all his strength to move it. He lowered it as gently as he could, but it got beyond his power to hold it, and crashed to the ground, the rotten wood smashed to fragments.

Crooke grinned.

"That's done it!" he muttered callously. "You'll jolly well have to jump down now, my beauty!"

Crooke's action was purely impelled by a vindictive anger against the shabby youth; he meant no real harm by it. Possibly the cad would have to wait an hour or two until somebody passed, but that was all.

Crooke walked slowly out of the barn, and as he did so something happened of which he was entirely unconscious. There was a little pile of dry straw against the wall, which was of wood. Crooke stepped close to this as he passed out of the barn, and there was a sudden, almost noiseless hiss. Crooke did not hear it, and passed on, and slammed the door after him as he went out.

But that insignificant hiss had been caused by the ignition of a wax vesta, which Crooke had trodden upon. Its presence there was easily accounted for by the fact that a man had taken shelter in the barn from a rain-storm the previous week. He had been smoking, and

had dropped a match. Just that little incident was to mean much for Crooke of the Shell.

For the wax match flared up, and instantly a piece of straw caught light. Perhaps it would have gone out harmlessly but for the fact that Crooke slammed the door. The draught fanned the flame, and drove it into the little pile of straw against the wall.

In an instant the whole lot was ablaze, flaming furiously against the dry, rotten woodwork of the old building.

CHAPTER 4.

Fire!

"M Y 'at!" The shabby youth sat up on the floor of the old loft.

"Ow! I'm achin' all over me bloomin' body!" he muttered ruefully. "The blinkin' rotter! 'E's gone, thank goodness!"

The stranger heard the door slam down below, and grinned faintly.

"I diddled 'im, anyhow!" he muttered. "'E thinks I'm lying here knocked out. Just as well I spoofed 'im; I've 'ad enough for one day!"

The sunburnt youth had been malingering. That kick upon his "bread-basket" hadn't really winded him; but it had provided a good opportunity for shamming inability to go on with the fight.

For he had had quite enough. Crooke had proved too much for him, so he had taken the first chance of bringing matters to a conclusion. And now Crooke had gone. He didn't know what the crash in the lower part of the building had been; he didn't know that the ladder had been removed.

"Just like me!" he grunted. "Too blessed sure! Wish I 'adn't cheeked the beast now! Well, I'll bet 'e's smartin'—Lummy, what's that?"

He fixed his eyes upon the opening in the floor.

A cloud of smoke had just wafted up from below.

The shabby youth stared, and sat very still. Another cloud of smoke appeared, this time thicker and more pungent. And from below came the sound of crackling, mixed with a subdued roar.

"Great pip!" gasped the youth. "There's a fire down there!"

He scrambled to his feet hastily, and crossed the floor to the opening. As he bent over he caught a momentarily glimpse of a lurid, flaming mass. Then a waft of thick smoke drove into his face and forced him back.

"The bloomin' place is on fire!" he gasped, turning pale. "Lor' lummy, 'ere's a go! I shall 'ave to nip down pretty quick, or I shall be trapped up 'ere!"

He waited until the smoke cleared a little, his heart beating furiously. In a few moments the opening was visible, and he bent over it and looked for the ladder.

But it was not there.

It had vanished.

And right below the hole the woodwork of the barn was a blazing mass of fire. It was spreading with appalling rapidity, for the place was rotten with age, and as dry as tinder. There had been no rain for over a week, and then only a heavy shower.

The trapped youth turned deathly white.

"The ladder's gone!" he exclaimed huskily. "I can't git down!"

He stood still, hardly realising the horror of his position. Was Crooke responsible for this? Had he deliberately removed the ladder and set fire to the place? It seemed too awful to be true.

"No, 'e wouldn't 'ave done that. It's too 'orrible," muttered the stranger. "I 'spect the ladder fell down when he descended; that was the crash I 'eard. And 'e must 'ave lit a cigarette and chucked the match into some straw by accident."

He decided that this was the only explanation. It was impossible that Crooke had deliberately fired the place with the intention of trapping his late opponent in a raging furnace. The stranger's intelligence told him that

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no schoolboy could have been capable of such diabolical cunning.

It had been an accident. But that didn't alter his position.

He was trapped, accident or no accident. Even as he stood there the fire spread swiftly, and roared and crackled in a terrifying manner. A great puff of smoke belched up into the loft, and changed almost instantly into a livid, scorching flame.

The youth staggered back, agast.

"I can't get out!" he shouted despairingly. "Oh crikey, what shall I do?"

The exit hole in the floor was now nothing but a raging mass of fire, and sparks were shooting up in clouds. Through all the cracks curls of smoke were arising, and the very building vibrated with the fearful intensity of the fire.

The loft was thick with choking smoke, and the heat almost unbearable.

What could he do?

Was he to succumb to the smoke, and lie there to be consumed by the deadly flames?

The dreadful thought forced him into action. He staggered away from the vicinity of the flames, and went into the farthest corner of the loft. The roof was low, as in most barns, and he could easily reach the rotten beams.

But, even if he got on to the roof, his position would still be desperate. A leap to the ground would mean a broken limb, at least, and he would lie against the building helpless until it collapsed and buried him in the red-hot ruins.

His eyes smarted terribly, and his throat was dry and parched. Already his head was swimming. The fire had got firm hold now; the other half of the loft was simply crumbling away, and the flames were hissing up to the very roof.

In five minutes he would be overcome. The heat was awful.

He clutched at the roof-beams, and his feet struck something among the old straw. He couldn't see what it was, for the smoke was as thick as fog. But he bent down, and drew the object up to his smarting eyes.

A coil of rope!

His heart leapt with hope. It was a way of escape.

Feverishly he examined his find—worth more than a thousand pounds to him in his terrible predicament. It was sound and thick, and quite long enough to reach to the ground.

"Thank 'eavens!" he choked.

In a moment he had tied the rope to a thick beam. Then he threw the coil of rope out into the open air, and hastily scrambled through the hole in the roof. At any other time it would have been a difficult task, but now he was in the throes of desperation, and he hardly noticed the effort.

Grasping the rope firmly, he gently lowered himself down the sloping roof until he swung over the gutter. Would the rope hold?

It was a terrible moment.

But he got lower and lower, and at last, with a choking sob, his feet touched the ground. He staggered away from the burning building and fell into the grass.

He was free! He had escaped!

But only for a few moments did he lay there. He was not hurt, not even scorched. Only his eyes smarted and his throat felt red-hot. The fresh air revived him rapidly, and with the realisation of his escape another thought.

The fire would be seen, and would attract people. If he was found there, he would be accused of setting the barn alight.

He must escape before anybody put in an appearance. Once in the wood he would be able to get clear away from the neighbourhood.

He rose to his feet hurriedly and looked round. But nobody was in sight, and he breathed a sigh of relief. He had put his coat on, but his bundle was still in the barn, probably a mass of ashes by now.

With a hasty look round, he ran round to the end of the building, and made off at top speed for the wood. He reached it, breathless, and turned round once under cover. The barn was burning furiously, and showers of

sparks were shooting into the air amid the dense clouds of smoke. The place was doomed; there was no doubt about that.

"Well, I've escaped!" he panted thankfully. "My 'at, I thought it was all up for a minute! I'll clear off now, in case I'm spotted. I'm blown if I want to be harrowed an' bunged into a rotten cell! I didn't set fire to the place, any'ow!"

And he disappeared into the denseness of the wood.

Meanwhile, the fire had been observed by other eyes—the eyes of the Terrible Three, as a matter of fact. Tom Merry & Co. were on the banks of the Ryll. The pies had disappeared, and a little argument was going on about the raided feed.

"It was Manners's fault, of course," said Monty Lowther warmly. "The silly ass was messing about with his camera instead of guarding the grub!"

"You ass!" exclaimed Manners wrathfully. "Haven't I explained what happened? How the deuce could I save the feed when there were three against me?"

"Yes; but they were not Crooke, Levison, and Mellish," replied Lowther. "Why, you could have whacked those three with one hand!"

"Go and eat coke!"

"Well, there's not much else to eat, anyhow!" said Lowther. "I said all along that you were a fathead to bring that idiotic camera!"

"Look here—"

"Bow-wow!"

Tom Merry laughed.

"Oh, chuck it, you asses!" he exclaimed. "Manners is right, Lowther, old man. He isn't to blame. I say, what's all that giddy smoke?"

Tom Merry stood up and stared across the wood. In the distance a great column of dense smoke was rising into the still air. Manners and Lowther looked; they hadn't noticed it until Tom Merry had spoken.

"My hat! It's thick!" ejaculated Manners. "I wonder what's caused it?"

"Well, I should say a fire," said Lowther thoughtfully. "Smoke usually does come from fires, you know. Of course, I may be wrong."

"Oh, shut up!" said Tom Merry quickly. "This looks pretty serious! All that smoke wouldn't come from a bonfire. It must be something jolly big!"

"Some of the Third Form fags, perhaps, cooking a herring," suggested Monty Lowther.

But his chums took no notice of his humorous explanation of the smoke. They were feeling excited. Undoubtedly a fire was raging on the other side of the wood, and a big fire, too.

"I vote we go and investigate," said Tom Merry.

Manners and Lowther were quite ready, and the Terrible Three set off at a run. They pushed into the wood, and at last came to a spot where they could see through the trees.

"My only topper!" ejaculated Manners. "It's the old barn!"

"And it's alight from end to end!" said Tom Merry excitedly.

"Come on!"

They sped on now at an increased pace, and the fire was lost to view by the thick trees intervening. Suddenly, upon rounding a turn in the path, the Terrible Three nearly bumped into Crooke of the Shell, who was leaning against some railings, gently rubbing his nose. Obviously he had seen nothing of the fire.

Under ordinary circumstances the Terrible Three would have hurled themselves at Crooke and promptly slaughtered him. But they had forgotten their raided feed in the new excitement. They halted breathlessly.

"Seen the fire?" gasped Manners.

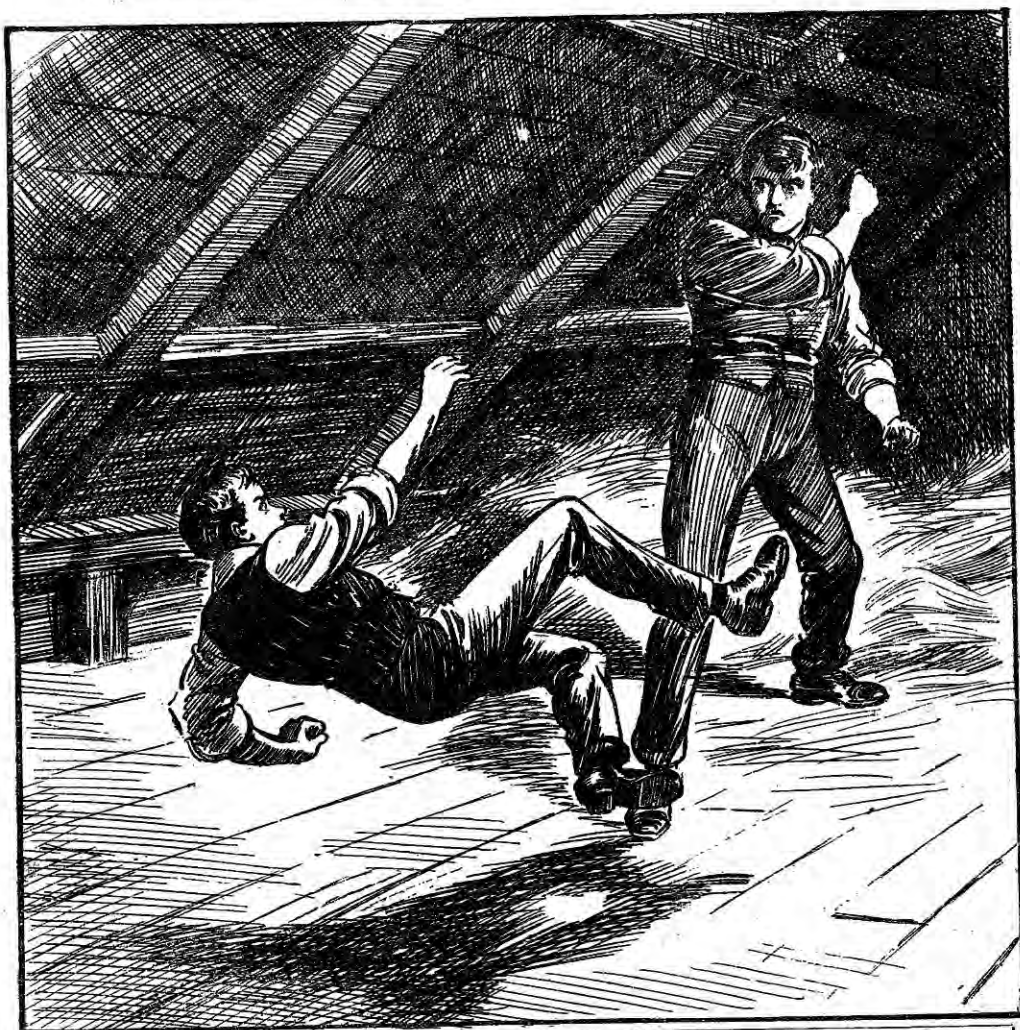
"Fire?" asked Crooke. "What fire?"

"Why, the old barn is alight from end to end!" replied Tom Merry. "Come on! We're going to have a squint at it at close quarters!"

And the Terrible Three rushed on.

Crooke stared after them, with a curious sensation in his breast. The barn—on fire! He had only left ten minutes before. Who had done it? What could it mean?

Crooke started.



Crash! Something that seemed as hard as a brick struck Crooke upon the jaw, and he went down with a thud that shook the whole tottering building. Crooke saw about a million stars in three seconds, and sat up dazedly. "One to be going on with—what?" chuckled the sunburnt lad. "Ave some more?" (See Chapter 3.)

He remembered now, with a sudden sickly feeling, that he had looked back at the barn as he had walked away. He had seen a waft of something emerge from a gap in the building, but at the time had never suspected anything wrong. But it must have been the commencement of the fire. In some manner the building had got alight. Perhaps the stranger had accidentally dropped a match.

But how could that be? He was knocked out of time, and could not possibly have moved for at least five minutes.

"Of course he's all right now," thought Crooke. "He must have scrambled down—"

He caught his breath in sharply.

The ladder!

It had been removed, and there was no other means of exit.

"Great heavens!" muttered Crooke faintly.

His eyes started from his head, and his face blanched sickly white.

CHAPTER 5.

Crooke's Terrible Belief.

CROOKE breathed heavily.

"The ladder!" he muttered. "I pulled it down! The chap had no means of getting out of the loft! There was not even a window! He must have— Oh, no, no! It can't be true! It's two awful—too horrible!"

He shook as though with ague, and gulped back a sob. Then, as though in a panic, he turned and ran after the Terrible Three. The awful thought that had come into his mind almost turned him sick. He must see for himself. Perhaps the strange youth would be there calmly watching the fire. It must be so. The other possibility was too ghastly even for a moment's consideration.

Crooke burst from the wood, and the barn was in full view. It was now nothing but a raging mass of flames from end to end, shooting up to the sky with a dreadful

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roar. Even as Crooke watched, the roof fell in, and a dense mass of sparks shot skywards.

But Crooke did not see it; his eyes were searching the field in the vicinity of the barn. The Terrible Three were there, but nobody else— Yes! A figure appeared from the other side.

For an instant Crooke's heart leapt with hope; then he groaned.

The figure was that of a man.

He ran forward, in a fever of doubt and anxiety, and joined Tom Merry & Co. His face was still deathly pale, and Tom Merry gave him rather a curious look as he came up. But the Shell captain thought the pallor was nothing but the excitement caused by the fire.

"My hat! What a heat!" said Tom Merry. "Well, the old place is doomed!"

"Yes!" said Crooke huskily.

"Not that it matters much," went on Tom. "The barn had been diseased for years—I expect the landlord will be glad to have it cleared off the field. It wasn't any use, anyhow."

"Yes. But how the dickens did it catch fire?" asked Manners.

"Ask me another!"

"There's been nobody here," went on Manners; "I know that for a fact."

"Rats!" said Lowther. "Fires don't start themselves, you chump!"

"Well, this farm labourer chap says he saw the fire right from the start," said Manners. "He says nobody was near the place."

Crooke started, and looked at the labourer. Then, without speaking to the others, he moved away and approached the man.

"Pretty serious fire!" he remarked carelessly.

"I don't know about that, master," said the labourer—an oldish man, with weak, watery-looking eyes. "The old barn wasn't no use. It's queer, though—mortal queer!"

"What's queer?"

"Why, how it got afire," said the man slowly. "I was a-workin' in yonder field all the time—been there all the afternoon—and I never saw nobody."

"He didn't see me, then," thought Crooke. "That's not very conclusive," he added aloud. "Somebody might easily have been in there without your noticing him."

The labourer shook his head.

"Not after the fire had started, master," he replied. "Before, p'raps, but not after. You see, I saw the smoke at once, and stopped my work to look at it. I could see the door as plain as I could see you. It was closed, and it never opened the whole time. There was nobody in there—leastways, if there was he's in still."

And the old fellow chuckled.

"And—did you watch all the time—every minute?" asked Crooke desperately.

"That I did, master," replied the labourer. "You see, I was working with my back to the barn for perhaps half an hour, and then I turned and saw smoke coming from it. It adn't been alight three minutes—that I'll swear."

He scratched his head.

"How it got afire is more'n I can say," he pursued. "Must have been the sun, some'ow," he added vaguely. "O' course, I didn't do nothin'—it wasn't any good! The place was afire, and, bein' mortal dry, burnt up rapid like. What could I ha' done, anyhow?"

"Nothing," said Crooke dully. "Are you sure—didn't someone come out of the barn?"

The old labourer glared at Crooke.

"Lor' sakes, ain't I told you that I was a-watchin' the door the whole time?" he asked irritably. "Once the barn was afire not a soul came out of it. I ought to know, seein' as I was watchin'. Mebbe it was some German done it for spite," he added, with a sudden inspiration.

But Crooke didn't hear. He had staggered back, and stood gazing unseeingly at the blazing mass of charred wood.

So the shabby youth had not come out.

There was proof of that—the labourer would have seen him had he escaped from the building. But how could

he have escaped when he was trapped in the loft, unable to get down?

"There was no window in the loft," thought Crooke despairingly. "The poor chap was imprisoned up there, and he couldn't even tell himself be seen. Oh, why did I take that ladder away? What a fool I was—I must have been mad!"

The possibility that the stranger had escaped by means of the roof never entered Crooke's head. And the labourer had not seen the youth's escape for the simple reason that it had happened on the other side of the building. The boy had lowered himself to the ground unobserved, and his progress to the wood had been hidden from the labourer by the barn itself. Therefore, the old fellow had no suspicion of the occurrence.

He would have been willing to swear in a court of justice that nobody had left the barn while he was watching.

And he convinced Crooke.

The wretched boy almost groaned. Then it was true. There was no longer any hope. The poor young fellow with whom he had so lately had a fistic encounter was now lying in that raging furnace of fire, burnt to nothingness.

Crooke covered his face with his hands.

"I shall go mad!" he muttered, sobbing. "The poor chap didn't escape! I expect he dropped down from the loft, and hurt himself by the fall. And he lay there helpless, while the fire— Oh, it's too awful! And it was my fault—my fault!"

He uncovered his face, and saw that the Terrible Three were approaching him. He couldn't tell them—he daren't tell them! Not a soul but himself knew of his meeting with the stranger. He must keep his tongue still at all costs.

He pulled himself together with an effort.

The Terrible Three came up and looked at him curiously.

"My hat, you're as white as a giddy sheet!" exclaimed Manners. "What's up with you, Crooke? There's nothing very terrible in that old barn being afire, is there?"

Crooke tried to smile.

"N-no," he replied. "I'm an ass!"

"You might think that somebody had been trapped in there," said Lowther lightly.

Crooke winced.

"Perhaps that's why I'm upset," he said shakily. "I saw a big fire once—in London. Two people were killed: I saw them at the window, crying for help. Then they fell back into the flames! It was awful. This fire reminds me—"

"I understand," said Tom Merry quietly. "But don't let it upset you, Crooke. There's been nobody killed here, thank goodness! It's only a small fire—no damage, really, for the barn was worthless."

"Yes, I know," muttered Crooke. "I'm a silly fat-head!"

He moved away. He felt that he had been forced to give some explanation, and he had invented one on the spur of the moment. And the Terrible Three had accepted it, and they sympathised with Crooke. But they couldn't quite understand it, all the same.

"Jolly queer, Crooke taking it to heart so much!" remarked Manners. "I always thought he was a callous rotter. It must have been a terrible fire in London, for him to turn so pale at sight of this."

"Oh, I don't know!" said Tom Merry. "Some chaps are affected like that. Crooke's a first-class cad, we know, but even cads have feelings. The sight of this fire brought the other terrible affair before his eyes again."

They looked after Crooke as he walked quickly away. They themselves remained to watch the final collapse of the building. Several other men had come up now, and one or two St. Jim's fellows.

But the fire was almost over. In ten minutes the walls had fallen, and nothing remained but a great heap of furiously blazing wood. The barn had completely disappeared. And as everybody took it for granted that the place had been empty, there was no talk of searching the ruins for possible remains.

Crooke knew this—and it was his one comfort.

The awful truth would never be known. It was his own secret.

"It wasn't my fault!" he muttered again and again, as he walked through the wood. "I didn't set the place on fire. Like a fool I took the ladder down, but I didn't mean any harm by it. How did the place catch alight? It wasn't my fault—it wasn't!"

And, strictly speaking, Crooke was right. He had removed the ladder from motives of petty spite, never dreaming that anything serious would result. He had no idea as to how the fire had originated, but thought that the stranger had accidentally caused it himself. Therefore, it was the unfortunate youth's own fault. He had been careless with matches, and he had paid the penalty.

"Yes, he was more to blame than I am," Crooke told himself. "He was lighting a cigarette, I expect, and the fire was his own fault for being such a fool. I daren't say anything to a soul. Nobody knows about him but myself. If I let the truth be known——"

What would happen?

He would have to tell the police! They would arrest him for manslaughter! No, no! He must keep the dreadful secret to himself, and trust to wipe it from his memory. He had not been to blame, except in an indirect way.

But, although Crooke assured himself upon that point again and again, he was nevertheless in a pitiable state of mental agony as he made his way to St. Jim's.

He didn't realise it, but he was absolutely afraid to speak. He was possessed by a terrible fear that warned him to keep his tongue still.

His very safety was at stake.

CHAPTER 6.

The Bearded Stranger.

"**W**HATEVAH is the mattah with Cwooke?"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy adjusted his monocle, and gazed along the entrance-hall after Crooke, who had just come in.

"Did you notice it, deah boys?" asked D'Arcy, to Blake and Herries, who were with him.

"Notice what, ass?"

"I wefuse to be called an ass——"

"Oh, rats! Did I notice what?" asked Blake. "Crooke passed so quickly that I didn't see him properly. Has he got a pimple on his nose, or has somebody kindly presented him with a black eye? He could do with one—two, in fact!"

"Pway don't be an uttah ass, Blake," said Arthur Augustus. "I was weferin' to Cwooke's vewy singulah paleness. He weally looks as though he had seen a ghosht. I believe the poor chap is feelin' ill."

Herries grunted.

"Been smokin', I expect," he said; "that's what's the matter with him. Tried a new brand of cigarette, I expect, and it was too strong for him. It has made him ill, and serve him jolly well right!"

"Hear, hear," said Blake.

"Pway don't jump to conclusions, deah boys!" said Arthur Augustus. "P'wobably your explanation is cowwect, Hewwies, but we have no proof. Cwooke may have heard that his gwandmothah is dyin', or that——"

"His respected pater's cutting a new tooth?" suggested Blake blandly.

"You uttah ass! How could Cwooke's patah cut a new tooth?"

"I don't know. With a file, perhaps!"

D'Arcy looked at Blake severely.

"I wefuse to talk to you while you weply so wiciduously!" he said. "I considah it is vewy wepwewehensible of you to treat the subject in such a wibald spiwit! P'ewwaps Cwooke is weally ill!"

"Oh, dry up, Gussy!"

"I uttally wefuse to dwy up——"

"Bow-wow!"

"I wefuse to bow-wow—— I mean——"

"Hallo! Heard the latest?" asked Tom Merry, entering the hall from the quad, with Manners and Lowther.

"No. What is it?" asked Blake. "Have the Germans got to Warsaw?"

"Rather not," said Monty Lowther; "the war saw them jolly near not long ago, but——"

"Oh crickey!" groaned Blake. "Gag him, somebody!"

"Yes, shut up, Monty; we don't want any of your rotten puns now!" said Tom Merry. "I mean local news. The old barn against the wood has been burnt down!"

"Bai Jove!"

"My hat!" said Blake. "Who did it?"

"Nobody knows," replied Tom Merry. "It's a mystery."

"Perhaps Crooke did it," said Herries bluntly, "Smoking in there, and dropped a match. He just came in looking jolly seedy."

Tom Merry started.

"I don't think so," he said slowly. "An old labourer says he was watching the barn the whole time, and he would have told us if he had seen Crooke. In fact, Crooke was in the wood when the fire started, so it couldn't have been him."

"Yes, that's all right," said Manners. "Crooke was flabbergasted when he heard!"

All the same, Tom Merry looked thoughtful. The word of the old countryman wasn't to be relied upon; he may have missed seeing Crooke. And the Shell fellow had certainly behaved in a very curious manner. It almost looked as though he had had something to do with the fire.

If so, it would account for his paleness. He had possibly set light to the place by accident, and then was afraid to own up. Anyhow, it was a possibility, and Tom Merry stowed it away in the back of his mind. But there was no proof of any sort.

The other fellows dismissed the idea of Crooke being responsible, and the matter was soon forgotten. The destruction of the old barn didn't affect the St. Jim's fellows in the least, so there was nothing to worry about.

After tea, Darrel of the Sixth met Crooke in the entrance-hall.

"I want to speak to you, Darrel," said Crooke.

"Fire ahead, then!"

"Will you give me a pass to the village?" asked Crooke quietly.

The prefect looked at him uncertainly.

"What do you want to go for?" he asked, knowing something of the Shell fellow's habits.

Crooke hesitated.

"I'm not feeling extra well," he replied. "I want to go to the chemist's and get something for my head—it's aching like the dickens!"

"Better see the matron, and buzz off to bed," advised Darrel.

"No; I don't want to go to bed," said Crooke hastily. "You look pretty seedy, anyhow."

"I'm not—I mean, I'm not bad enough to go to bed!" exclaimed Crooke. "I sha'n't be long, Darrel. I'll come straight back."

"Mind you do!"

And he gave Crooke the required pass.

But Crooke didn't want to go to the chemist's—he couldn't purchase anything there that would bring the colour back to his cheeks. His was a mental ailment. Every moment the face of the sunburnt youth came up before him. Sometimes he could see nothing else, and he had to hold himself firmly, for fear of going to somebody and blurring out the whole wretched truth, or what he thought to be the truth.

For he had no doubt now; the boy was dead. He had perished in the flames, and his remains would probably never be discovered. It was this that had prompted Crooke to ask for the pass. He wanted to go to the village and hear if anything had been found among the ruins. His anxiety was consuming.

But when he arrived at the village everything was normal. He heard one or two laughing remarks to the effect that the old barn had gone at last; but that was all. Nobody seemed to suspect that a living person had been in the old building.

"I'm safe enough," thought Crooke wretchedly. "Not a soul dreams that a tragedy happened. But it's awful! Heaven knows I'm not to blame—it was an accident!"

He looked slowly back to St. Jim's in the gathering

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dusk. Rylcombe Lane was shadowy and dim in places, and was quite deserted.

Crooke walked on, unconscious of his surroundings.

"Hi! Young shaver!"

The voice, hoarse and strange, came from the side of the road.

Crooke paused and looked round.

"I want a word with you, young 'un!"

Crooke's heart beat a little faster. A man stepped out into the lane. He was rather short, and Crooke could see that he had one leg longer than the other, for he walked with a curious, ungainly motion, and his left foot was turned inwards. His face was bearded, and a pipe stuck out from between his teeth.

"What do you want?" asked Crooke.

He had a dread feeling that the stranger was a detective in disguise, and that he was about to be arrested! But Crooke shook himself nervously, and faced his companion with as bold a front as he could manage. Perhaps, after all, the man only wanted a match for his pipe.

"Let me see," said the other thoughtfully. "I know your name; it's—er—"

"Crooke!" said the Shell fellow.

"Yes, I know that!" said the bearded man calmly. "Well, my name is Lang. It's just as well that we should know one another."

"I—I don't understand—"

"Of course not," said the deformed man; "but you will in a minute. You and me are going to 'ave a business deal, Crooke. You don't know me, I suppose?"

"I've never seen you before."

Lang chuckled.

"Of course not!" he said again. "Well, I'll just explain who I am. Maybe you'll be a little scared, but there's no need—I'm your pal!"

"But—but—"

"I guess I'll do the talkin'," interrupted Lang, pulling gently at his beard. You've never seen me before, but I've seen you! I saw you this afternoon. I was in the wood, takin' a rest, and I saw you meet a shabby young chap of your own age. I saw you go with him to an old barn—"

Crooke turned deathly pale.

"Good heavens!" he muttered, panting.

"Don't put yourself out, young 'un; I'm not goin' to blab!" said Lang coolly. "I saw the pair of you enter the barn, and I saw you come out. But the other poor youngster remained there. He's there now, buried amid—"

"Don't!" gasped Crooke hoarsely.

He stared at the deformed man in terror.

"It was an accident!" he panted frantically. "I took the ladder down, I know, but I didn't set fire to the place, I'll swear it! It was all a terrible trick of Fate. When I took the ladder down I had no idea—"

Lang removed the pipe from his lips.

"So that's why the youngster couldn't get out, eh?" he said calmly. "You took the ladder down, and he was trapped there? Poor kid! The place was ablaze from end to end in less than five minutes. He had no time to escape. I saw him try—"

"You saw him?" gasped Crooke. "How can that be? An old labourer was watching the barn the whole time, and he saw nothing!"

The man gave a hard chuckle.

"He was round the other side of the building," he explained. "I was just in the wood, you see. I saw you leave, and I saw the place on fire directly afterwards. Looks suspicious—what?"

"I didn't do it!" sobbed Crooke huskily.

"Well, I ain't goin' to take your word for that," said Lang a little roughly. "Five minutes after you had gone I saw the other poor kid climb through a hole in the roof."

Crooke gave a gasp.

"He escaped then?" he asked eagerly.

"Not he! The poor chap didn't have a chance. Overcome by the smoke, I expect, for he fell back through the hole. I didn't see him again."

The wretched Shell fellow covered his face with his hands. Then, in a sudden furious outburst, he faced the other.

"Why didn't you try to save him?" he asked passionately. "You say you saw it all, and yet you made no attempt to rescue him!"

"What could I do?" rapped out Lang. "I'm deformed, and it was all over before I realised what had happened. There was no time to save him—the barn was alight from end to end in a minute."

He regarded Crooke with a curious expression.

"After this you won't deny it, I suppose?" he asked.

"Deny what?"

"That you removed the ladder and fired the barn."

"I do deny it!" shouted Crooke furiously. "It was an accident!"

"An accident!" scoffed the other. "Do you take me for a fool? You admit that you took the ladder down; the rest is obvious. What will the police say if I take my story to them? I saw the pair of you quarrelling, and I saw you enter the barn. A short while afterwards you came out alone, and the buildin' was on fire. And you've admitted to me that you removed the ladder. What does it all point to, eh? Will the police believe it was an accident?" he added harshly.

Crooke stared at the man, horrified. He knew that Lang was speaking the truth. The police would believe his story if he took it to them; for, indeed, the evidence against Crooke was overwhelming.

And yet he was innocent.

He knew no more than a babe how the barn had caught fire.

But it had caught fire in some manner, and all the evidence pointed to Crooke as the perpetrator of the act.

And Lang knew everything. It was a terrible blow for Crooke, and he hardly realised what it might lead to. But he guessed that the man was a scoundrel, and that he had some motive in withholding his evidence from the authorities.

What was that motive?

Crooke was soon to learn.

CHAPTER 7.

In a Villain's Power.

"WELL?"

The deformed man said the word sneeringly. Crooke pulled himself together somewhat, and drew back.

"The evidence is all against me!" he muttered. "But I didn't set fire to the barn; I'll swear I didn't."

"Is that the truth?" asked Lang sharply.

"Yes; every word!"

"I believe you; I believe that the affair was accidental—"

"Then—then you won't give me away?" asked Crooke eagerly.

"Hold on; not so fast, young 'un!" exclaimed Lang. "If I decide to keep your secret, I do so only on one condition."

"A—a condition?"

"That's it. It happens that I'm rather hard up," said the deformed man coolly. "I want ten pounds to—pay a pressin' debt. If you can manage to lay hold of that amount, and give it to me, I won't blab!"

Crooke stared.

"Ten pounds?" he faltered. "You want me to give you ten—?" He uttered a forced laugh. "I haven't got ten shillings!"

Lang frowned darkly.

"You can get it," he said. "Borrow it from your schoolfellows!"

"I can't! Even D'Arcy couldn't lend me a tanner!" gasped Crooke. "Besides, he wouldn't if he could; I'm not on friendly terms with his rotten set."

"Then I shall inform the authorities—"

Crooke clenched his fists.

"You scoundrel!"

"What?"

"I called you a scoundrel!" panted Crooke hotly. "And so you are! This is nothing more than blackmail!"

"Call it what you will," said Lang calmly. "I reckon

it's an easy way out of a pretty deep hole for you. You're either got to give me a tanner or be arrested!"

Crooke groaned. He saw that the man's words were only too true. He was in the scoundrel's power, and was helpless. Yet he must never allow him to take his story to the police.

It would mean arrest—a trial—conviction.

"I've only got five bob," he said huskily. "I'll try to get the ten pounds—"

"I'll give you until to-morrow evening," said Lang roughly. "I'll be at this spot. If you don't turn up I shall go and blab."

Footsteps sounded down the lane, and the deformed man looked round quickly. Two seniors were approaching from the village.

"We mustn't be seen together!" muttered Lang.

"To-morrow evening, remember, at this time, I shall expect you, Crooke. If you don't come—"

He left the sentence unfinished, and hobbled to the side of the road. Next second he had disappeared through the hedge. Crooke looked round dazedly. It all seemed like some awful dream.

Rushden and Mulvaney of the Sixth came up.

"Hallo! What the deuce are you doing out here on your own?" asked Rushden, looking curiously at Crooke in the dusk.

"I—I've been down to the village," faltered Crooke.

"Darrel gave me a pass."

"Didn't I see somebody with you?" asked Mulvaney.

"No: I was alone," said Crooke untruthfully. "I was alone, Mulvaney!"

"Well, don't look at me as if I were a ghost," said Mulvaney. "You'd better buzz off up to the school."

And Crooke, having been brought to himself, hurried off at a trot. He arrived at the gates, and Taggles let him in after a considerable amount of grumbling.

"I don't 'old with you young rips staying out after lookin' up," growled Taggles.

"Rats!"

"Wot's that?"

"Rats—and many of 'em!" snapped Crooke. And he stalked off across the quadrangle, leaving Taggles glaring after him wrathfully.

Crooke was in a desperate mood. He must have ten pounds. But where could he get it? His very safety was at stake, for he believed that the deformed man had seen the tragedy and would inform the police if his demands were not satisfied.

Crooke's face would not have been so pale, nor his eyes so feverish, had he known that the boy he thought dead was every bit as much alive as any junior at St. Jim's.

But Crooke didn't know, and wasn't likely to know. To him, the sunburnt lad was dead; and ten pounds had to be found before the following night.

How could he find it?

He walked into the School House with a thoughtful frown on his brow. Rack his brain as he would, he could think of no way of raising the money. He was just about to mount the stairs to the Fourth Form passage when he observed the elegant figure of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy descending. A newspaper fluttered in the Fourth-Former's hand.

"Anothah Bwitsch victwry, deah boy!" he exclaimed, waving the newspaper. "Isn't it wipin'? The wotten Germans have been dwiven back—"

"Oh, blow the Germans!" exclaimed Crooke impatiently.

"That's just what they are doin', deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, with a chuckle. "They're blowin' the howwid boundahs to smithahweens! Pway listen to this."

"Oh, shut up!" snapped Crooke. "Let me pass, you young idiot!"

"Weally, Cwooke—"

"Clear out of the way!" shouted Crooke wrathfully. He was in no mood to listen to war news now; there was something of far more importance on his mind.

"I uttally wufuse to clear out of the way," said Arthur Augustus indignantly. "I considah that you are a wotten boundah. You have no more mannaahs than a Pwussian!"

"What!" roared Crooke.

"I wepeat," said D'Arcy firmly, "that you are uttally lackin' in mannaahs, Cwooke. It will be necessary for me to inflict a feahful thwashin' unless you instantly apologise as one gentleman to anothon; or, pewaps I should say, as one gentleman to a wottah. There is no need for me to add that you are the wottah."

"You silly idiot!" shouted Crooke. "Clear out!"

"I uttally decline to be chawactahised as a sillay idiot!" exclaimed D'Arcy warmly.

"Rats!"

"I wufuse to wats—I mean—"

"Oh, shut up!"

Crooke wanted to get up to his study, where he could be alone, and he had no intention of prolonging this interview with Arthur Augustus. He glared at the swell of the School House furiously.

"Are you going to let me pass?" he roared.

"Not until you have tendahed a complete apology," said Arthur Augustus firmly. "I considah that you have behaved in a perfectly wotten mannaah. I am pwepared to wead you the latest war news, and you wufuse to listen."

"I wufuse to be made a fool of!" rapped out Crooke.

"If you don't let me pass in two seconds, I'll knock your silly head off!"

"Weally, Cwooke—"

Crooke waited for no more. He gave the elegant Fourth-Former a violent shove, and Arthur Augustus sat down upon the stairs with considerable force. He clutched at the banisters to save himself, missed, and caught his head a frightful crash against the wall.

"Ow!" he roared inelegantly. "Yawooh!"

"Serve you right!" growled Crooke savagely, as he mounted the stairs, incidentally stepping on D'Arcy's prostrate form as he did so.

"You uttah wottah!" groaned D'Arcy. "You feahful wuffian! My clobber is wuined, and my collar is howwibly cwmpled! Wescue!"

Crooke mounted the stairs rapidly. But just as he got to the top there was a scuffle of feet, and Blake and Herries appeared in answer to D'Arcy's first yell. They came so quickly, in fact, that they couldn't pull up at the top of the stairs.

Crash!

Jack Blake, who was leading, collided violently with Crooke, and the Shell fellow tumbled backwards with a howl. There was a fearful bump as he hit the stairs, followed by a series of minor bumps. Then, as a grand finale, so to speak, came a terrific crash, followed by anguished howls.

That final crash had been caused by Crooke's person striking Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. The swell of St. Jim's had only just picked himself up when Crooke descended upon him like an avalanche; and sent him flying half-way across the entrance-hall.

"Gweat Scott!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "What has happened? Has a wotten Zeppelin dwopped a bomb—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"No, Gussy, it's only Crooke. He won't explode, you know."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

But Crooke did explode—violently.

He was hurt, and he let ~~anybody~~ it. His yells drew quite a crowd of fellows to the spot.

"Ow!" roared Crooke. "I'm bruised all over! I fell—ow!—from top to bottom of the rotten—ow!—stairs! I believe I'm brained!"

Blake shook his head.

"I don't see how that's possible," he remarked. "A chap who's only got water in his noddle can't be brained. You're watered, Crooke!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Very funny, isn't it?" snarled Crooke.

"Very!" agreed Blake blandly. "Quite an entertainment, in fact!"

"I fail to see wheah the intahtainment comes in!" groaned Arthur Augustus, brushing himself down. "I'm a perfect w'eck, deah boys. Weally, I feel howwid. It's all the fault of that boundah Cwooke!"

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"Let's bump him!" suggested Digby.
 "I fancy he's been bumped enough already!" chuckled Lumley-Lumley. "If those fearful crashes I heard a minute ago were caused by Crooke he must be sore all over his giddy body. You'll have your allowance stopped, Crooke, to pay for a new staircase!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "What's the excitement?" asked Monty Lowther, putting in an appearance. "Hallo, there's been a battle. Another British victory!"

"Ha, ha ha!"
 "Gussy, too, by Jove!" went on Lowther. "Really, Gussy, I'm surprised to see that you have been fighting! Fancy fighting in the entrance-hall!"

"I haven't been fightin', you uttah ass!" shrieked Arthur Augustus.

"Then you've been under a steam-roller," said Monty Lowther. "Crooke must be the steam-roller in disguise, to judge by his appearance! My hat, you are in a state, Crooke!"

"I fell downstairs!" snarled Crooke savagely. "Blake pushed me, and I fell on to D'Arcy, Lucky I did, too!"

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus. "Luckay! I wegard it as wottenly unluckay, you uttah wottah!"
 "Wottah fuss you are making, Gussy!" began Lowther.

But that was just a little too much for the fellows. Monty Lowther's puns were renowned, but that was quite the limit. There was a rush, and Lowther was seized.

"Hi! Whatter you at?" gasped the unfortunate humorist. "I say, stoppit! Ow!"

Bump!
 Lowther descended upon the hard, unfeeling floor with a crash. There was a roar from the fellows and a roar from Lowther, but they were vastly different roars. And amid the laughter Crooke mounted the stairs, and proceeded painfully to his study.

It was empty, and Crooke went in and closed the door. Then he discovered that he had something clenched in his left hand; he hadn't noticed it before. He lit the gas, and discovered that it was a portion of D'Arcy's precious newspaper.

"Hang them all!" muttered Crooke savagely.
 He was about to throw the torn paper into the fireplace, when his eye caught a paragraph heading, and he arrested his hand. There was something in the paper which interested him greatly, and the next moment he was perusing the paragraph intently.

CHAPTER 8.

Crooke's Scheme.

"BY George!" ejaculated Crooke.
 He was staring at the scrap of newspaper interestedly. The paragraph he had just read was quite short, but full of meaning for Crooke:

"REPORTED MISSING."

"We hear, with considerable regret, that Corporal F. Jacobs and Sergeant Arthur Hills are reported missing in the latest casualty list. Both were members of the R.F.A., and are believed to have been killed in action at La Bassée."

"By George!" repeated Crooke. "Old Hills killed—eh?"

Crooke was naturally interested because Hills had been in the employ of Crooke's father before the war. He had been Crooke senior's chauffeur, and had, indeed, visited St. Jim's at the commencement of the Christmas holidays to take Crooke away. It had been such an unusual occurrence for Crooke to depart from St. Jim's in a motor-car that it had attracted quite a lot of attention, so Tom Merry & Co. knew Hills by sight. In fact, there had been a little joke on with the chauffeur, for a party of juniors

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had attempted to board the car just as it was going off. Crooke had been fearfully ratty about it, but Hills had grinned, and taken it all in good part.

"Well, it's his own fault," muttered Crooke, throwing the paper aside. "He couldn't very well expect anything else."

In Crooke's present state of mind he didn't waste much time over the old servant of his family. He had his own troubles to worry over, and they were appalling enough for any schoolboy.

He stared unseeingly before him.

"How shall I get that ten pounds?" he asked himself again and again. "I can't go to D'Arcy after what's happened to-night, and even if it hadn't happened he wouldn't have let me have anything. The same with Lumley-Lumley or Bernard Glyn. They've got plenty of quids knocking about, but if I asked them to lend me any they'd think I wanted it to shove on a rotten horse, or something like that!"

Crooke's dilemma was a knotty one.

There wasn't a single fellow from whom he could hope to borrow such a large sum, and it was quite impossible for him to go round asking for small loans.

"What could he do then?"

There seemed no way out of the difficulty. He would have to meet the deformed man the next evening empty-handed, and the man would go to the police.

"No, not that!" muttered Crooke. "I must get the money somehow!"

He rose from his chair, and paced the study in a fever of anxiety. His mental anguish with regard to the unknown youth who had, he thought, come to such an untimely end, was overwhelmed by the new problem which confronted him. He almost forgot the burning of the barn in the worry of the moment. The most important thing now was to satisfy Lang's demands.

"There's plenty of money about now," thought Crooke. "There's no fund being raised, or anything—"

He started.

A fund!

Why shouldn't he raise a fund on some pretext—a fund of ten pounds? If he made the object sound plausible enough the fellows would contribute readily. It was an idea, and if he developed it he might be successful.

For ten minutes he paced up and down, turning over idea after idea. But all were dismissed as useless. The fellows would never contribute to a fund organised by Crooke unless they knew positively what the object was.

Crooke sank into a chair, and his eyes fell upon the scrap of newspaper. Suddenly he started to his feet with a triumphant expression upon his face.

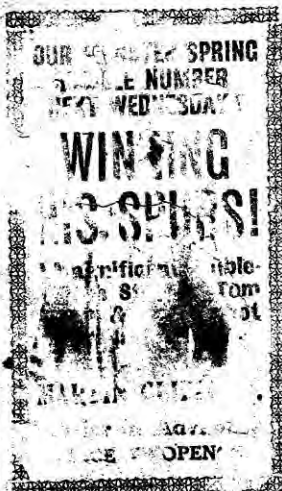
"My hat!" he ejaculated. "I've got it!"

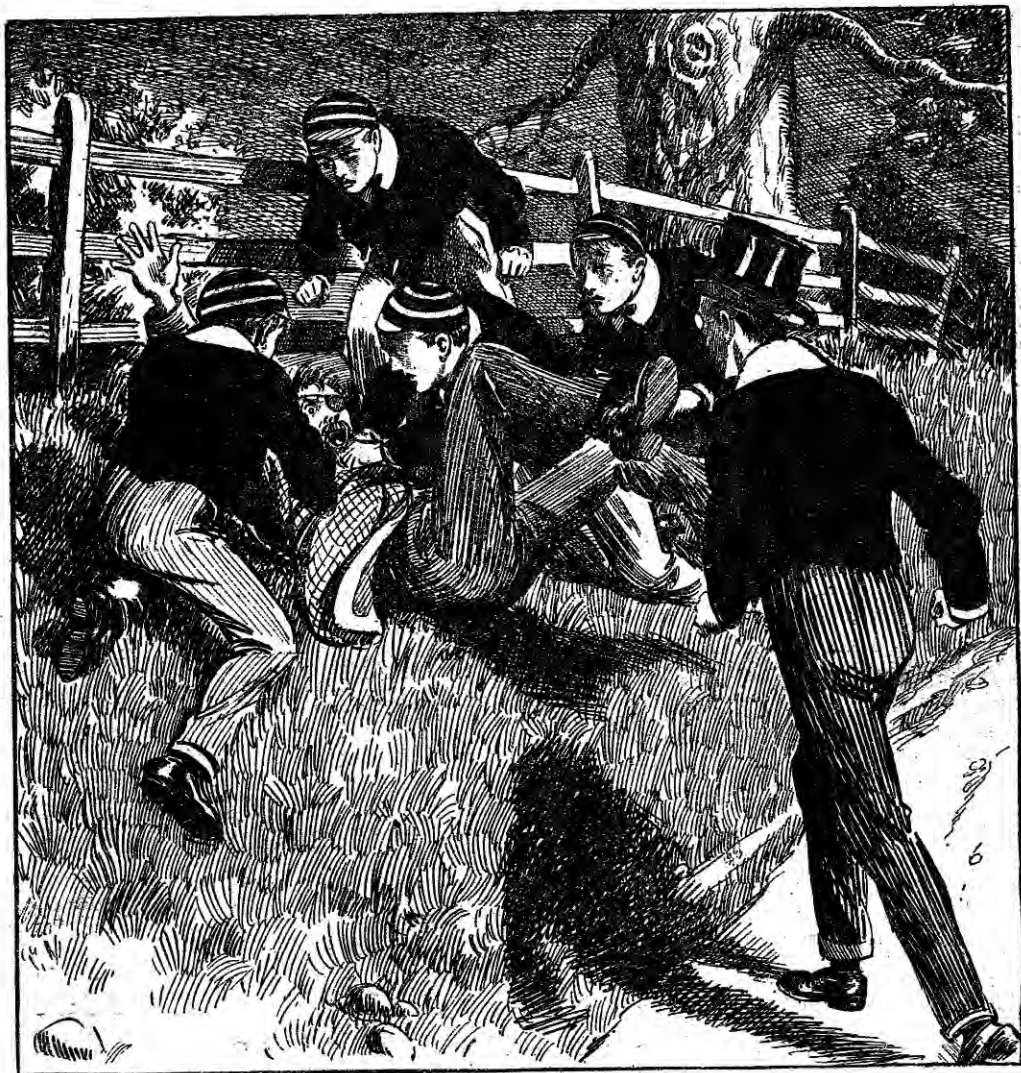
It didn't strike him that the scheme which had come into his mind was a basely fraudulent one, that although he would be asking the fellows for contributions for a certain object, the money would be used for another.

The sole thought which obsessed Crooke's mind was that he had to raise ten pounds by the next evening. How or by what means didn't matter in the least. To have the ten pounds in his hand was all that he cared about. Crooke was not troubled by scruples over such details. He had performed many shady acts in the past, so this was nothing new.

"A fund," he muttered—"a fund of ten pounds for the widow of Sergeant Hills! Hills wasn't married, and there isn't any widow, but that doesn't matter a hang; the fellows won't know it. They'll contribute liberally for such an object. By Jove, I shall get out of the hole, after all!"

He was rather glad that Hills had been unmarried, for perhaps he would have felt a little compunction at the thought of depriving the poor woman of what would be rightfully hers. As there was





"Now, on the ball!" And Tom Merry & Co. dashed forward with many excited shouts. The stranger standing by the stile started back in alarm, but before he could move an inch the avalanche of juniors was upon him.
(See Chapter 13.)

no widow Crooke wouldn't mind in the least appropriating the money for his own uses. The scheme also had the advantage that as the ten pounds would not be a loan he would not be called upon to refund it. And even if his duplicity was discovered by the juniors he felt sure that they would not give him away. They would punish him by their own peculiar methods, and Crooke could stand that.

"I'll do it," he decided briskly, "and I'll set about it at once!"

A little colour had come back to his cheeks, and he had forgotten the bruises caused by his fall downstairs.

He picked up the piece of paper, turned out the gas, and left the study. Then he descended to the common-room, and found the apartment crowded with juniors. The Terrible Three were there, and Blake & Co., Talbot, Bernard Glyn, and many others. Evidently a meeting

of some sort had just been held, for everybody was talking football.

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "What have you come down heah for, you awful boundah? Weally, I believe you have got the missin' piece of my newspapah in your beastly flippah!"

"Quite right, Gussy," exclaimed Crooke; "and I'm jolly glad I tore it off too. There's a piece of news in it that's interested me tremendously!"

"You wottah! And you wouldn't let me wead you a single line—"

"It's not that kind of news, Gussy," said Crooke gravely. "As a matter of fact, it's bad news, and I'm rather out up!"

The juniors gave Crooke their attention at once. He was not at all popular, except among his own particular

set, but if he had received bad news they were all ready to extend him their sympathy.

"Bai Jove, I twust it is nothin' sewious, deah boy?"

"Well, it is pretty serious," said Crooke. "You remember I went away from St. Jim's in the pater's car at Christmas?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Yes, we remember it."

"Well, the chap who drove the car—the chauffeur, you know—was named Hills—"

"A decent chap too," said Tom Merry. "We had a lively time with your pater's old 'bus, Crooke, and you got frightfully ratty. Hills, though, seemed to enjoy it all, and took it in good part. Well, what about the merchant?"

Crooke hesitated.

"He's dead!" he said quietly.

"Dead!"

"My hat!"

"Poor chap—and he wasn't over twenty-five, either!"

"Bai Jove, how uttably wotten!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus feelingly. "You have my deepest sympathy. Cwooke, deah boy. Our little diffewance of this evenin' is completely blotted out by this dweadful occuwanee. What did the poor chap die of?"

"He was in the Army," replied Crooke. "Killed in battle, you know, at La Bassee."

"Bai Jove, he died for his country! How wippin' of him!"

"Yes, rather!"

"It's in the paper, here," went on Crooke, passing the piece of newspaper round. "I'm a bit cut up, because Hills was a jolly decent chap. I'm blessed if I know what his wife will do. He's left a few debts, I believe, and the Government pension won't be sufficient to clear them off."

"His wife!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "Weally, this is a vewy sad case, Crooke. The poor gal must be in a feahful state!"

The juniors looked at the paragraph interestedly. There was no doubting the truth of it. And as many of them had seen Hills, they naturally felt the tragedy of it more keenly.

Crooke hesitated. He wondered whether it would be wise to launch the idea of a subscription immediately. After all, the money was not needed till the next night, and perhaps it would be better not to mention the matter until the morrow. It would certainly look more genuine, for he could say that the idea had just struck him.

Crooke decided to wait, especially a several of the fellows left the common-room while he was hesitating. But the cad of the Shell was feeling in much higher spirits; he was positive that the scheme would work out satisfactorily.

He was glad when bed-time came. The day had seemed the longest within his memory. And as he lay in bed, tossing uneasily from side to side, he found sleep impossible. Constantly the face of the sunburnt youth appeared before him, to change mysteriously to the bearded face of Lang.

At last, through sheer weariness, Crooke went off into a troubled sleep, and dreamed of burning barns in which he himself was trapped. Outside, laughing mockingly at him, stood the sunburnt lad and Lang. The fire got fiercer and fiercer, and the two mocking faces merged somehow into one. Then Crooke felt himself being smothered—suffocated by the smoke and heat.

And he awoke, in a perspiration, to find himself buried under the bedclothes.

After that his sleep was easier, and he remembered no more until the rising-bell went. He looked baggy and heavy-eyed, and as he dressed the other Shell fellows noticed the change in him.

"My hat, you look fearfully seedy, Crooke," remarked George Gore.

"I—I didn't sleep very well," said Crooke, in a low voice. "It's that paragraph in the newspaper, I expect. I—I've been dreaming about poor Hills."

"No good worrying," said Bernard Glyn. "The brave chap died for his country, as thousands of others have done."

"It's his wife I'm thinking of," said Crooke quietly.

"Oh!"

It was something new for Crooke to show such feeling, and the juniors looked at him rather curiously. They were rather pleased to see that the cad of the Shell wasn't altogether a rotter. If he was so concerned about the wife of his pater's chauffeur, it proved that he possessed a certain amount of decent feeling.

"My dear Crooke," exclaimed Skimpole, the brainy youth of the Shell, "the case is an exceedingly sad one, and I sympathise with you wholeheartedly. But, really, there was no necessity for your chauffeur to have been killed at all! If the War Office had listened to me early in the year—if they had consented to adopt my suggestions—this dreadful conflict would now have been at an end. The Germans would have been wiped off the face of the Eastern hemisphere—"

"Oh, chuck it, Skimmy!"

"My dear Manners—"

"I admit that the War Office is very much at fault," said Manners. "They ought to have admitted you into their sacred chambers long ago!"

"I am gratified—"

"You see, Skimmy," went on Manners, "if you had been able to explain your marvellous ideas to the Government personally, they would have realised your true worth, and would have placed you in the place for which you are most fitted."

"You mean, I presume, in sole charge of the War Office?" asked Skimpole, beaming.

"No, my son—in Colney Hatch!" replied Manners smoothly. "No one can possibly deny that you are not eligible!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Really, my dear Manners—"

But the dear Manners had fled.

CHAPTER 9.

Success—and Failure.

"**R**EALLY, I am quite surprised at the amount of feeling Cwooke is displaying," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, as he lounged elegantly upon the School House steps after morning lessons. "The poor chap appears to be quite cut up."

"Yes, it's a bit surprising, Gussy," said Jack Blake. "I didn't suspect, myself, that Crooke had such a thing as a heart. He must have been pretty fond of Hills, I should think."

"Bai Jove! Cwooke is appwoachin' us now," said D'Arcy, gazing across the quad. through his famous monocle. "He has got a sheet of pupah in his hand—impot pupah by the look of it."

Crooke faced Blake & Co.

"I say, you chaps, I've got a little scheme on," he began. "It's just struck me that as the widow of poor Hills is in a pretty rotten position, it wouldn't be a bad idea to get up a subscription."

"A subscription!"

"My hat!"

"I expect the pater's doing something for the woman," went on Crooke, "but as I knew Hills and his wife so well, I should like to do my little bit, too—or, rather, I should like St. Jim's to have a look in."

"A subscription?" said Herries slowly. "Well, it's a worthy object anyhow. How much did you want to raise? I can't contribute more than a tanner, because I'm nearly stony!"

"Well, I was thinking that ten quid would be a nice little surprise," said Crooke, hardly encouraged by Herries' generous offer. "What do you chaps think?"

"Well, a tannah isn't vewy much," said Arthur Augustus, who was usually rolling in wealth. "But I weally don't see, Hewwies, why you should contwibute the whole of the amount yourself!"

Herries gasped.

"The whole amount myself?" he repeated blankly.

"Yaas. Didn't you offah to contwibute a tannah?"

"You—you thumping ass!" exclaimed Herries. "I said a tanner!"

Arthur Augustus looked severe.

"A tannah!" he repeated scornfully. "I pwesume you

mean sixpence, Hewwies? I weally fail to undahstand why you make use of such vulgah expressions. And surely you can spwing more than a tannah—ahem!—I mean sixpence, deah boy?"

"You ass!" growled Herries, "I've only got tenpence-ha'penny!"

Blake chuckled.

"We're not all millionaires like you, Gussy," he said. "Still, I think I can manage five bob, if that's any use, Crooke."

"Thanks awfully," said Crooke.

Arthur Augustus took out his pocket-book, and a crisp fiver rustled in his fingers.

"Pway do me the honah of acceptin' this little donation, Cwooke," he said gracefully.

Crooke stared.

"A—a fiver!" he ejaculated. "Do—do you mean it, Gussy?"

"I twust you do not think I would tweat such a delicate mattah in a wibad spiwit?"

"No, of course not!" stammered Crooke. "But it's too much, Gussy! I shouldn't like to take this and leave you stony!"

D'Arcy waved his hand vaguely.

"I am nevah stonay," he replied. "Pway do not be such an ass, Cwooke—I have got a few coppahs in my pocket, and pewpahs a little silvah. That will be quite suffish, to last me until to-morrow!"

"What's going to happen to-morrow?" asked Blake. "Are you coming into a giddy fortune?"

"My governah has promised to post me a tannah to-day," explained D'Arcy. "It will weach heah to-morrow mornin' by the first post. So, you see, Cwooke, theah is nothin' vewy genevous in my contribution."

Crooke wasn't of the same opinion.

"That's just like you to say that, Gussy," he said, stowing the fiver away. "You're a brick! I'm going to shove the names of all the donors down on this sheet of paper, and send it with the money."

"Weally, Cwooke, I pwotest—"

"Protest all you like, Gussy; but you're going to get the credit for your generosity," replied Crooke.

Arthur Augustus subsided with a sigh. Digby wasn't exactly overflowing with filthy lucre, but he managed to rake out half-a-crown, and Crooke went off, highly elated at the result of his first solicitation.

"Rotten!" growled Herries. "Fancy having my name bunged down for a tanner! They'll all grin at it!"

"Let 'em jolly well grin, then," said Blake bluntly. "A chap can't give more than he's got, can he? And you must keep fourpence-ha'penny to jingle in your giddy pocket! I reckon you're the most generous of the lot of us, Herries, because you've given the greater portion of your wealth, and left yourself nearly broke!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

And Herries felt somewhat appensed.

Crooke went off to Little Side, where several groups of fellows were watching Figgins & Co. at practice. There was to be a House match on the next half-holiday, and the School House fellows were curious to see their rivals' form.

"Oh, we shall whack 'em!" declared Kangaroo of the Shell confidently. "We shall put a jolly good team in the field, anyhow."

"Best not to be too confident," said Talbot. "I think—Hallo, Crooke, you look jolly businesslike with that paper and pencil. What's the idea?"

Crooke explained, and a crowd of fellows gathered round, including the Terrible Three.

"I've got five pounds eight already," said Crooke. "It would be jolly decent if ten pounds could be raised. D'Arcy contributed a fiver alone."

"Good old Gussy!" chuckled Lowther. "He's always to the fore when it's a question of tin. I expect you worked upon his aristocratic feelings!"

"Well, we're not all weighed down with gold, or, rather currency notes," said Bernard Glyn, fishing in his pocket. "Still, here's a quid, Crooke."

"And here's a ten-bob note!"

"Five shillings be any good?"

"Here's another half-sov!"

Crooke did great business, and almost before he

realised it the fund of ten pounds was completed. He could hardly realise his good fortune. He had raised the tanner with scarcely any trouble at all.

"It's awfully decent of you all," he said gratefully.

"You don't know what a load it's taken off my mind. I—I mean," he went on hastily, "it will give me great pleasure in sending this money to poor Hills' widow."

And Crooke departed.

"I'm not so blessed sure about that giddy fund," said Gore, who hadn't contributed anything. "I shouldn't be surprised if Crooke sends a fiver and keeps the rest for himself!"

"Oh, rats!"

"Crooke's genuine enough this time!"

"Even Crooke wouldn't be such an awful scoundrel as all that!"

"Well, I wouldn't answer for him," said Levison of the Fourth. "If Crooke's in funds during the next few days we shall know what to believe."

"Oh, shut up!" growled Manners. "You took jolly good care that you didn't give anything, Levison."

And Ernest Levison subsided.

All the juniors who had contributed had no doubts about the matter. Crooke was certainly a cad, but in this instance he was performing a generous action. Nobody seemed to realise that Crooke himself hadn't contributed a penny. The money was to go to the widow of a soldier who had given his life for his country; that was quite sufficient for most fellows.

During afternoon lessons Crooke was quite cheerful, and the other fellows couldn't help noticing it. The haggard look still lingered upon his face, but it was not so apparent. Tom Merry hadn't overlooked the possibility that Crooke had fired the old barn while smoking there, but the Shell captain didn't give it much thought. After all, it was none of his business, and no damage had been done, anyhow, for the rotten building had been quite worthless. Indeed, the farmer was probably glad that it had been cleared off his land.

After tea Crooke prepared for his appointment with Lang. He couldn't very well ask for another pass, so he decided to go out before locking up, and return when his business was completed. It would only mean a couple of hundred lines, anyhow.

Quite a number of fellows were strolling in the quadrangle. It was a fine evening, but there was not enough light for much football practice. So some of the juniors were punting a football about in the quad, while others stood in groups and chatted.

"Well, I'm going down to the post-office to send off this tin," said Crooke carelessly to the Terrible Three. "Anything I can do for you chaps?"

"No, thanks."

Crooke decided upon a bold stroke.

"Perhaps one of you chaps would like to come down with me," he suggested laughingly. "I've heard some rotters saying that I mean to keep some of the fund for myself. Perhaps you'd like to come and see me send it off?"

"Don't be an ass!" said Tom Merry. "I think we can trust you to be honourable over a matter like this, Crooke."

"Yes, rather!"

Crooke winced a little, but the ruse had told. The Terrible Three were quite convinced that the cad of the Shell was acting straight, and they wouldn't have dreamed of accompanying him. Crooke had been pretty sure of this, or he wouldn't have risked it.

"You'd better buzz off," said Monty Lowther. "You won't be back in time for locking-up if you don't hurry."

"Yes, I'll go," said Crooke.

There was a sudden commotion at the entrance gates. Mellish of the Fourth came running up with something white in his hand.

"Where's Crooke?" he bawled

Crooke felt a sudden sinking sensation, and dreaded that something disastrous was about to happen.

He was right.

"Oh, there you are, Crooke!" exclaimed Mellish, with an unpleasant grin. "The postman's just been, and there's a postcard for you—from your mater."

The juniors gathered round.

"Well, there's nothing very exciting about a postcard

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from 'mater, is there?" asked Crooke sullenly. "Hand it over!"

"No fear! I've read it—"

"You young rotter!" exclaimed Tom Merry contemptuously. "What the dickens has it got to do with you, Mellish? If you don't hand it over at once we'll jolly well bump you!"

"Yaas, wathah!" exclaimed D'Arcy indignantly.

"I wegard Mellish as a spyin' wottah!"

"But you don't understand!" roared Mellish excitedly.

"I want to read it out to you."

"We won't listen to it!"

"Wathah not!"

"Give it to Crooke, you howling Peeping Tom!"

Crooke looked round desperately.

"It's my postcard!" he exclaimed. "Give it to me, Mellish! It's like your rotten nerve to read it! When I come back from sending off this tin I'll punch your head!"

"Don't let him go!" howled Mellish. "This postcard is about Sergeant Hills. The chap ain't dead at all! Crooke got up that subscription under false pretences!"

"Oh!"

"My hat!"

"That alters the giddy case!"

Hills not dead!

Crooke felt his heart sink. He realised that there was no escape; in justification of himself he would have to read the postcard aloud. For, to do him justice, he had really thought that Hills was dead.

"Make him read it!" shouted Levison.

"Keep your wool on!" growled Crooke, as composedly as possible. "You shall hear it!"

And they did.

It was merely a few lines from Crooke's 'mater to say that he may have seen a report of Hills' death in the newspapers. It was wrong, for Hills himself had written to say he was quite well, and was coming home on leave.

"There you are!" shouted Mellish triumphantly.

"What did I tell you? Crooke got up that subscription under false—"

"Rats!" exclaimed Tom Merry hotly. "Nothing of the sort! Crooke thought the chap was dead, as he saw the report in the paper, and he got up the subscription from a generous motive. But, of course, now that he knows the truth he'll hand out the subscriptions to their various donors; it's the only thing to do."

Crooke gritted his teeth, but managed to sustain a bold front.

"Of course I'll return the money," he said readily. "No need for all this fuss, though. How was I to know? I think Mellish ought to be bumped for making such a rotten accusation!"

"Yaas, wathah, and fwogs-marched as well!"

And Mellish was bumped—exceedingly hard. But while his yells were resounding through the quad Crooke was dividing up the ten pounds. The blow had fallen so suddenly that he hardly had time to think.

But one thought throbbled through his mind.

In half an hour he had to meet Lang, and he would be empty-handed!

CHAPTER 10.

In the Balance.

EMPTY-HANDED!

Crooke leaned against a tree in Rylcombe Lane, staring wretchedly before him.

The ten pounds had vanished for ever! He could not hope to raise a similar sum, whatever subterfuge

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he tried. The juniors would suspect that something was wrong if he mooted another scheme for raising money.

Fate seemed dead against him; his cup of misery and remorse was full to the brim!

He felt like crying out aloud. And all this terrible state of affairs had been brought about by his own foolish, vindictive action. If he had but let that ladder remain in position—

"Oh, what's the good of it!" groaned Crooke. "I've got to face the immediate future; it's no good wishing the whole business hadn't happened! It has happened, and that rotten blackmailer has got me in his clutches!"

He clenched his fists.

"What luck!" he muttered. "What ghastly luck! If the 'mater had only written a letter instead of a postcard! Hang Mellish—the spying hound! It was his fault for reading the card! What shall I do? Heaven knows I'm being punished for my action!"

The shadows were gathering rapidly, and the lane was already quite dusky. Crooke walked slowly towards Rylcombe, fearful of the interview to come. Suppose Lang should stick rigorously to his word? He would go to the police! He would tell the whole story—

"Oh, there you are, young shaver!"

Crooke started.

Lang hobbled out of the dark wood through a gap in the hedge, and stood in the deep shadow.

"I've been waiting," said the deformed man. "You've got the money, I suppose?"

"No," said Crooke dully.

"What! You haven't—"

"I couldn't get it!" said Crooke, in desperation. "I tried—goodness knows, I tried hard enough! But it was useless, and I haven't got anything—not even a quid!"

Lang stood for a moment in silence. Then he stepped closer to Crooke, and his voice, when he spoke, vibrated with anger.

"You're lying!" he snarled. "You think you can play with me! You haven't tried to get the money!"

"I have—I have!"

"And you think I shall remain silent!" went on Lang furiously. "I won't, young 'un! By gosh, I won't! You know what this means, I suppose?"

Crooke shivered.

"Not—not the police?" he gasped.

"Yes; the police!" rapped out the man. "There will be a sensation in Rylcombe when it comes out that a schoolboy of St. Jim's is responsible for the death of another boy! My evidence alone will be enough to convict you! The barn ruins will be examined, and—"

"Don't!" panted Crooke. "It was an accident!"

"Bah! Do you think I believe that? You did it deliberately, as every scrap of evidence goes to prove, and the criminal court will find you guilty!"

Crooke staggered.

Lang's words were only too true, he thought. The wretched Shell fellow's delusion was so deep-rooted that he never even considered the possibility of the sunburnt youth having escaped from that barn alive.

Hadn't Lang seen him fall back into the flames?

Crooke didn't think for a moment that Lang was "piling it on" for his especial benefit. In reality, Crooke wasn't in the man's power in the slightest degree, but he thought he was, and, consequently, he was in a pitiable state of blue funk.

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The terrible thought nearly made Crooke swoon. And Lang was secretly laughing at him all the time—which was not to be wondered at. He had no intention of going to the police. Indeed, he would have found himself in a fix if he had done so. He wanted some money from Crooke, and if he got it he would consider himself extremely lucky, considering that he had, in reality, utterly no hold on the junior.

"Well," he demanded at last, "what are you going to do?"

Crooke started out of his trance.

"I—I don't know!" he faltered. "Give me time, and I'll try and get the money!"

"I have wasted a day already!" snapped Lang. "It is my duty to inform the police of all I know! I am going!"

And he hobbled down the road.

Crooke gave a choking cry, and ran after him.

"Give me time!" he panted, clutching the man's arm.

"Give me until to-morrow evening! I will get the money by then!"

"To-morrow evening! I cannot wait——"

"You must—you must!"

Lang seemed to hesitate.

"Very well, young shaver; I will give you another chance," he said slowly. And Crooke heaved a sigh of relief. "Meet me here to-morrow evening, and bring the money."

"I will," said Crooke, breathing hard. "I will get it somehow!"

"If you come empty-handed again it will mean arrest!"

And the deformed man walked off rapidly, and was swallowed up in the dusky shadows.

Crooke remained staring after him for a few moments, too relieved to move. Another twenty-four hours! Much could happen in that time. He glanced at his watch, and realised that, if he hurried, he might get in before locking up. His interview with Lang had been earlier than he had expected.

He ran up the lane, and arrived at the gates just as Taggles was shutting them.

"Only just saved yer skin, Master Crooke!" growled Taggles.

Crooke didn't answer, and Taggles made some remark under his breath about "young rips." Crooke was feeling in better spirits, but he had to go through the whole business again, and this time it was impossible to invent a convenient fund. Still, he had twenty-four hours' respite, and that was something.

In the Shell passage he met Arthur Augustus D'Arcy just coming away from Tom Merry's study.

"Hallo, Cwooke, deah boy!" said the well of St. Jim's. "That was wippin' news you got this evening—what? I expect you were feahfully welieved to heah that Hills is alive and chippay."

"No," growled Crooke absently; "it was a rotten shock!"

"Gweat Scott! What did you say, Cwooke?"

Arthur Augustus stared at Crooke amazedly through his famous monocle.

"I—I mean it took a great load off my mind," stammered Crooke. "Hills is a decent chap, and I was jolly glad to get that postcard from the mater."

"I should wathah say so, deah boy. I was thinkin' of standin' a feed to celebrate the occasion, you know."

A feed—at such a time as this!

Crooke shook his head.

"No, Gussy; I shouldn't do that."

"And, pray, why not?" asked D'Arcy. "I am in gweat funds, Cwooke. I have got the firah you weturned, and the tennah that will be in the letter-wack in the mornin'."

Crooke started.

He didn't hear the rest of Arthur Augustus's sentence, although that elegant youth went on talking. There would be ten pounds in the letter-rack in the morning! The thought seemed to burn into Crooke's mind.

He forgot D'Arcy—forgot everything except that one fact—and he walked away to his study, leaving Arthur Augustus talking to the bare walls.

"As I was sayin', Cwooke—— Bai Jove, wheah are

you goin'?" D'Arcy stared after Crooke's retreating figure. "Cwooke, you boundah, I was speakin' to you!"

Crooke went into his study.

"Well, I nevah!" ejaculated D'Arcy indignantly. "The wude wottah! I had no ideah Cwooke was so uttably lackin' in mannahs!"

And Arthur Augustus went off, with his nose in the air.

It wasn't that Crooke was lacking in manners; it was because he was so absolutely obsessed with the idea in his mind that he quite forgot D'Arcy's existence. His study was in darkness, but Crooke didn't light the gas.

He paced up and down feverishly.

"Why not?" he muttered. "Why not? Fate seems to be playing into my hands—why shouldn't I take advantage of it? It could never be discovered. D'Arcy would think that the letter had gone wrong in the post, or that it had never been sent. He's such a careless ass that he might not even write to his pater!"

There would be ten pounds in the letter-rack in the morning!

It would be the simplest thing in the world for Crooke to get down early and annex the letter without being observed. It would be a means of getting the necessary money in one bold stroke.

Somehow, in the present circumstances, it didn't strike Crooke as being dishonest. He simply had to get the money somehow, and here was a way all paved for him. Crooke was desperate—terribly desperate—and only thought of getting the ten pounds into his hands. By what means didn't matter in the least, so long as his safety wasn't in jeopardy. With Lang's awful threat hanging over his head, all other matters seemed trivial.

His very safety was in the balance. If he didn't take the money from the letter-rack there was no further hope. Lang would tell his story to the police. If he did take the money, then Lang would be satisfied.

And there would be no risk, or very little. Besides, Crooke argued, he could pay the money back to D'Arcy. Once this terrible business had blown over, he would save up until he had got ten pounds; then he would send it to D'Arcy anonymously.

It was the only way out, and he would do it.

CHAPTER 11.

The Face in the Wood.

LANG! Clang!

The rising-bell awoke the stillness of the Shell dormitory, and, incidentally, the inmates. There was much yawning and turning over in bed.

"Oh, rats!" yawned Manners. "Time to get up!"

"Tain't fair, makin' us turn out so rotten early!"

Crooke, who had been sleeping uneasily, jumped out of bed before any of the other fellows had considered the matter. It was such an unusual proceeding for Crooke to be out of bed first that the juniors stared.

Monty Lowther sat up.

"Well, my only topper!" he ejaculated sleepily. "Who said the age of miracles had passed? Crooke's actually getting up first! Wonders will never cease!"

"What's the matter, Crooke?"

"Must be walking in his giddy sleep!" said Kangaroo.

"I say, Crooke, you've got things the wrong way about! You're usually last out—not first! You've made a bloomer this morning!"

Crooke grunted. All this comment wasn't exactly welcome.

"I can get up if I like, I suppose?" he growled. "I don't feel very well, and—I want to get some fresh air in the quad. It's a ripping morning!"

"Yes; you look a bit seedy," said Tom Merry, turning out.

Crooke dressed quickly, and left the Shell dormitory. After he had washed, he hurried downstairs. He meant to take the letter out of the rack immediately. By this time he had grown so accustomed to the idea of it that he almost looked upon it as his own letter. It didn't seem to strike him that he would be acting the part of a thief. It seemed quite a small matter in comparison to the disaster which he imagined threatened him.

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As he entered the hall, he clenched his fists anxiously. Lumley-Lumley was there, chatting with Reilly.

So the Fourth had turned out in good time this morning—D'Arcy might be down at any minute!

Crooke's anxiety grew keener.

So long as this pair remained here he couldn't attain his object. They were standing near the letter-rack, and it would be impossible for him to take D'Arcy's letter without being observed.

Why didn't they go?

He walked about anxiously.

"What the dickens is the matter, Crooke?" asked Lumley-Lumley. "I guess you're jolly fidgety this morning."

"Sure, ye're like a cat on hot bricks, Crooke darlint!" said Reilly.

"Oh, rats!" growled Crooke. "I'm all right!"

"Well, don't bite our heads off!" said Lumley-Lumley. "I guess you're not well—you look pretty white about the gills. I'm coming out into the quad, Reilly."

"Faith, an' I'll come with ye!"

And the pair, to Crooke's great relief, went out, leaving him in sole possession of the entrance-hall. He looked round hastily, and crossed to the letter-rack. In less than a minute he would be able to achieve his object.

He looked eagerly into the "D" pigeon-hole. There were several letters there, and he hurriedly looked through them. Could it be possible that D'Arcy's letter hadn't come? There was one for Digby, one for—

Ah!

Crooke singled out a letter addressed to Arthur Augustus, and the crest on the flap told him that it had come from D'Arcy's pater, Lord Eastwood. It was sealed, but not registered. All the better. D'Arcy would think it had got lost in the post, and there would be nothing to prove the contrary.

Crooke stuffed the other letters back into the pigeon-hole, and his eyes shone with triumph. Nobody would know—nobody would suspect—

"Bai Jove! Have you got a wemittance, too, Cwooke?"

Crooke turned ashen.

Arthur Augustus was coming downstairs, and he was looking at Crooke inquiringly over the balustrade. The letter was in the Shell fellow's hand, in full sight. He had been so engrossed in his thoughts that he had not heard D'Arcy's approach.

"I—I—"

Crooke couldn't get any further; the words seemed to dry up in his throat. For a second a wild thought entered his head of stuffing the letter into his pocket and bolting. But D'Arcy had seen it, and when he found his own letter missing, would suspect.

"I twust you have not received bad news, Cwooke?" asked Arthur Augustus. "You are lookin' wathah bowled ovah, you know."

The distracted Shell junior cleared his throat.

"It's—it's nothing, Gussy," he said huskily. D'Arcy was beside him now; there was no time to act, even if he had wanted to. "I—I was expecting a remittance, but it hasn't turned up."

"How uttally wotten!"

"This is your letter, Gussy," said Crooke, handing Arthur Augustus the package. "I—I took it out by mistake!"

"Thanks, deah boy!"

Arthur Augustus was quite unsuspecting, and he didn't connect Crooke's curious behaviour with the letter. Crooke was worrying over something, that was certain; but probably it was a personal matter. And D'Arcy was the last fellow in the world to pry into other people's business.

Crooke went off into a quiet corner of the quadrangle, here he was unobserved, and tried to calm himself.

He had failed!

And it was all owing to Lumley-Lumley and Reilly of the Fourth! But for their presence in the entrance-hall, he would have been gone by the time D'Arcy came down.

He gritted his teeth.

"What luck!" he groaned. "Everything is dead."

against me! The fund failed at the last moment, and this has panned out the same! Oh, it's no good! I can't get the money. I shall have to resign myself to—"

He couldn't bring himself to think about it, and was glad when the breakfast-bell rang. Not that he was hungry. Indeed, he merely toyed with his food, and ate hardly a mouthful. His Form-master regarded him curiously. What had come over Crooke lately? His paleness and nervousness was even more pronounced this morning. Even Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell, noticed it, and commented upon it.

"Are you feeling unwell, Crooke?" he asked.

"I—I'm a bit seedy, sir," stammered Crooke, alarmed to find that he was attracting attention. "It's nothing, sir. I shall be all right after breakfast."

"You will not be all right if you do not eat," said Mr. Linton drily. "Come, Crooke, we don't want you to be ill."

Crooke forced some food down, but it was an effort. He was so utterly wretched—his mind was so full of his impending peril—that he hardly appeared conscious of his surroundings. He appeared to be almost in a trance.

In the classroom, during morning lessons, he did his work mechanically. What did it matter—what did anything matter? By nightfall he would be in a police-cell!

He was oblivious of the lesson; a dull murmur sounded in his ears, which he somehow knew to be Mr. Linton's voice, but his mind was too chaotic to understand the actual words that were being said.

"Crooke!"

Mr. Linton rapped out the name sharply.

Crooke did not even hear. Clifton Dane, who was sitting beside him, gave him a nudge, but he took no notice. But Dane could do no more; Mr. Linton's eagle eye was upon him.

"Crooke!"

Still Crooke did not reply, and Mr. Linton strode forward and rapped the desk with a pointer. Crooke came to himself with a jump. He looked at Mr. Linton in alarm.

"Ah, you have been considerate enough to wake up!" said Mr. Linton grimly. "You are apparently too engrossed with your own thoughts to attend to me, Crooke. As you appear to be at a loss upon the point, I may as well inform you that I am endeavouring to teach you Latin."

"La-Latin, sir?"

"Precisely!"

"I—I didn't know, sir!"

"That is extremely unfortunate, Crooke—"

"I—I'm not feeling very well, sir," interrupted Crooke. "I'm sorry if I haven't been attending. I—I think it's a bilious attack, sir—or something like that. I didn't mean to be inattentive, sir."

Mr. Linton looked at Crooke keenly.

"Yes, I remember now, that you were rather unwell at breakfast-time," he said, in a kinder voice. "I am sorry, Crooke, if you do not feel well. I will excuse you if you think the air of the Form-room a little stuffy. A walk in the open air may do you good."

"Thank you, sir!"

And Crooke left his place, and went out.

"Shamming!" muttered George Gore. "He wants to smoke, I expect."

"Gore!"

"Ye-es, sir!"

"You were speaking, Gore. Take fifty lines!"

And the Shell went on with its lessons without Crooke—and without further comment from Gore.

Crooke fetched his cap, and went out into the quad. It was a fine morning, and everything was quiet. Not a soul was about at that time. Taggies, who came out of the Head's garden with a wheelbarrow, stared at the junior, and muttered something to himself.

But Crooke didn't even see him. He walked out of the gates, and down the lane. He wanted to be alone, he wanted to think—think! What should he do? What could he do?

Nothing but wait for the worst!

He walked on unseeing. During the evening he had to meet the deformed man. He could not possibly hope to be granted another respite, he told himself. It would be the end—the end of everything for him!

He thought he heard a sound by the side of the road, in the woods, and turned his head. No, there was nothing there; nothing but the hedge and the trees. Nothing—

Crooke started back with a choking cry.

A face was looking at him—the face of the sunburnt youth he had fought in the barn!

"Good heavens!" gasped Crooke.

But even as he started forward the face disappeared, and when he reached the hedge there was no sign of a soul. Not a sound disturbed the calm of the morning except the slight breeze in the branches.

Crooke started back into the lane, and his face was white.

"I imagined it!" he muttered thickly. "My nerves as rotten as dirt!"

He was shivering, in spite of the warm sun, and looked round in a frightened fashion. But nobody was near, nobody was within sight. Yes, he told himself, the face had been—but a figure of his agonised imagination; and he hurried from the spot as though it were plague-stricken.

CHAPTER 12.

Desperate Measures.

THE day passed terribly slowly for Crooke. How the time went he scarcely knew. He had forced himself to be attentive during afternoon lessons, for fear of being considered really ill. In that case he would have to be bundled off into the sanatorium, and would thus have been prevented from keeping his appointment with Lang.

He wanted to see the man, although he had no money to take him. There was a bare chance that Lang might be willing to wait another day; and while there was even a tiny thread to support him, Crooke clutched at it.

After tea, he more or less resigned himself to what seemed the inevitable. There was no possibility of getting the money now, so why should he make his head ache thinking over wild, impracticable schemes?

He waited, pale-faced, for the appointed hour. His brain seemed benumbed by the chaos of thoughts that tortured him.

Out in the quad he walked about, alone, and, to use Herries' expression, he was like a "giddy bear with a fearfully sore head." If anybody spoke to him he only answered in snappy, gruff tones; sometimes he didn't answer at all.

He didn't see Arthur Augustus D'Arcy leave Dame Taggles' tuckshop with Blake, or he might have observed that the elegant junior carried the fatal tenner in his aristocratic hand.

"It is weally most inconsiderate of Mrs. Taggles," said Arthur Augustus. "I considah that she ought, as a matal of pinciple, to keep change for a tennah in her shop."

"Don't be a silly clump, Gussy—" "I refuse to be called a sillay clump—" "Oh, keep your wool on!" said Blake. "But, after all, the old girl isn't in a large way of business, and she can't afford to have so much tin about her. What's the violent hurry for change, anyhow?"

"Theah is no violent huwvy, Blake," said Arthur Augustus, as he and Blake stood by the School House steps. "But I am stonay except for this papah money. It is wotten to have no loose cash in one's pocket. I have a fivah, but Mrs. Taggles was unable to change even that, eithah."

Blake scratched his head thoughtfully, and while he was doing so there was a scuffle in the entrance-hall, and Wally D'Arcy of the Third came rushing out. He flew down the steps, and cannoned violently into Arthur Augustus, knocking the celebrated monocle out of his eye.

"Weally, Wally—"

"Well, it was your own fault, Gussy!" said D'Arcy minor cheekily. "You shouldn't get in the thundering way! Never saw such a bloomin' slow-coach!"

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Arthur Augustus looked shocked.

"Bai Jove, what frightful language!" he ejaculated. "Weally, Wally, I am surprised to hear you usin' such vulgah words—"

"Oh, don't you start, Gussy!" said Wally. "I'm in a hurry; I'm going down to the village before locking-up!"

"Bai Jove, the dooce you are!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus. "Then, pewwaps you will do me a favah, Wally?"

"All depends what it is," said Wally doubtfully. "Nothin' much, deah boy. I want you to change a tennah. I'll give you a tip when you come back, and treat you to a feed if you like!"

Wally grinned. "What-ho!" he said. "I'll do as many favours of that sort as you like, Gussy. Hand over the giddy spendulicks!"

"Weally, you young wascal!"

D'Arcy handed over the ten-pound note, and Wally went off across the quad, waving it in his hand and whistling cheerfully. At the gates he met Crooke, who started when he saw the tenner in Wally's hand.

"What are you doing with that?" asked Crooke, eyeing it greedily.

Wally sniffed.

"No bizney of yours!" he replied. "As you're so jolly inquisitive, though, it's Gussy's, and I'm going to change it in the village—see?"

Wally passed out, and went down Rylcombe Lane at a trot. Crooke stood staring after him as though transfixed. Ready to clutch at a straw, in the last stage of desperation, the sight of the ten-pound note had set him afire.

Ten pounds! Just what he wanted! And Wally of the Third would presently be returning from the village with that sum—and he would be alone!

The temptation was irresistible. And Crooke, in his present state of mind, had decided upon a course of action almost before Wally had passed out of sight. The chance of getting the money he wanted had been almost thrust upon him, and he was too weak to resist. It was almost as though Fate had come to his aid at the eleventh hour.

If he could only get the money all would yet be well! And he could get it—easily!

At any other time, under normal circumstances, Crooke would have been shocked at the idea which formulated itself in his mind, cad and bounder though he was. But now everything was different. The wretched junior saw things warped and contorted, to fit the terrible predicament he was in—or thought he was in.

"By George!" he muttered to himself, with feverishly gleaming eyes. "At the last minute, when I had given up hope, a chance comes along! I can do it easily, without the slightest risk, and without harming a soul! And

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once I've got it I shall be safe! Safer than if I had taken the letter from the rack this morning—for the money will be cash now, and it can't possibly be traced!"

A light of triumph shone in Crooke's eyes.

He would be saved at the last minute. New life seemed to be instilled into him, and he moved across the quad briskly, and with colour in his cheeks. The act he contemplated did not strike him as being the act of a highway robber. To him it was a way out of his terrible difficulty—just that, and nothing more. Truly, Crooke was in a pitiable, desperate plight. He was more to be pitied than blamed.

He disappeared into the School House, and when he came out he carried a bundle under his arm. Thick clouds had gathered, and the sky looked threatening. The quadrangle was dim and prematurely dark. All the fellows had gone in, for a chill wind whistled round the old buildings.

Crooke walked across the gates boldly, and passed quickly out into the lane. He knew that he had not been seen, and his heart beat with joy.

He hastened down the lane, looking a little anxiously towards the village. Wally would be returning at any minute, and everything depended upon one fact. If Wally was alone the plan would be workable. If not, then Crooke's preparations had been for naught. Close by the hedge he unfolded his bundle, and it revealed itself as a black cloak, a huge wideawake hat, and a cheaply-made "property" false beard and moustache. They were part of the equipment of the Fourth Form Dramatic Society, and Crooke had borrowed them for the occasion.

He rapidly donned the beard and moustache, and then attired himself in the cloak and hat. The change was really remarkable, and Crooke looked a villainous character indeed. In broad daylight his appearance would have been ridiculous; but in the dusk of the gathering night it was quite a different matter.

Only just in time!

As he crouched against the hedge he heard rapid footsteps, and, peering out, he saw a slight form approaching at a trot. Without a doubt, the figure was that of Wally D'Arcy. Crooke grasped a stout piece of rope which he had brought, and held himself in readiness. His heart was beating furiously, but he was in deadly earnest.

Wally came nearer and nearer, until he arrived at the fatal spot.

Then, like a highway robber of ancient times, Crooke sprang out. Before Wally knew what had happened Crooke was upon him, and had pinned his arms behind his back. Wally let out a yell, and stared into his captor's face in startled fright.

"Not a sound!" hissed Crooke. "If you shout, you die!"

"You—you rotten thief!" roared Wally. "Let me go! Let—"

"Silence, you young hound!"

Wally was at a great disadvantage. He was smaller than Crooke—much smaller—and the latter was possessed of the strength of desperation. Almost before Wally knew it, his arms were tied behind his back.

Crooke held the Third-Former as though in a vice. Then, in spite of Wally's kicks and yells, he thrust his hands into the bag's pockets.

"Don't touch that money!" panted Wally desperately. "Keep quiet, hang you!"

Crooke's fingers closed upon a collection of coins, and he drew them out and transferred them to his own pocket. It was a difficult task, for Wally was struggling furiously. But at last it was accomplished, and Crooke knew, by the feel of the money, and by the fact that all Wally's other pockets were empty, that he had got the whole sum.

With a sudden twist, Crooke threw the bag upon his back, and then hastily tied a length of rope round his lashing feet. He didn't hurt Wally in the least, although the bag yelled in the most agonising manner. But his

yells were uttered in alarm and with the hope that rescue would come before the scoundrel escaped with the money.

But Crooke had finished. He had got the money, and he had made sure that Wally would be unable to reach St. Jim's before he himself arrived. With panting breath he bolted through a gap in the hedge, and disappeared in the darkness.

His aim was accomplished—he had got possession of the ten pounds!

Success at last!

CHAPTER 13.

Capturing the Desperado!

SUCCESS!

The word sang in Crooke's ears.

Without hurting a hair of Wally's head he had got the money. And D'Arcy minor had not the slightest suspicion of the true identity of his assailant. The latter had disappeared through the hedge, and would never reappear!

The ten pounds was in Crooke's possession, and he would never be suspected. There was not even the remotest possibility of his being suspected.

As Crooke bolted back to St. Jim's by way of the playing-fields, he removed his disguise, and chuckled with sheer triumphant joy. The junior was almost hysterical, as a matter of fact, for the worry of the last day or two had affected him greatly. And this final triumph, coming after hours of black despair, seemed too good to be true.

He arrived at the quad by a roundabout route, after climbing the walls and diving through hedges. But Wally had not arrived; Wally was still in the lane, freeing himself from his bonds.

Crooke sneaked into the School House, and put the theatrical "props" away in the box-room from which he had taken them. Skimpole had seen him enter, and one or two other juniors, but, as he had come from the direction of the gymnasium, they suspected nothing. They thought—if, indeed, they thought about the matter at all—that Crooke had been doing some exercises in the gym.

But Crooke was not at all an important person in the School House, and his comings and goings interested nobody.

Having got rid of his disguise, he lounged down into the entrance-hall. He had counted the money, and had found exactly ten pounds in gold and silver. It was in his pocket as he strolled into the hall, and his hand was upon it. His cheeks were flushed, and his eyes shone as though with fever.

He was anxious, now for Wally to return. He had not secured the ropes tightly, and had counted upon Wally freeing himself after a little effort.

And Crooke was not wrong.

In less than three minutes a rush of footsteps sounded out in the dusky quad, and the next minute Wally burst into the hall. The fog was smothered in dust, and his face was grimy. He looked wrathful and excited, and his breath came heavily.

"Oh! Where's Gussy?" he gasped. "Oh crumbs!"

Crooke stared.

"What the dickens is the matter with you?" he asked curiously.

"I've been robbed!" yelled Wally furiously. "Robbed in the lane! Ten quid gone! Oh, my only sainted aunt! Where's Gussy?"

"In his study, I expect—"

Wally dashed upstairs, and burst into Study No. 6 like a young whirlwind. Blake & Co. were at home, doing their prep, and they gazed at the excited newcomer with stern disapproval.

"Look here, Wally," said Blake warmly. "We don't allow kids to come bashing into our study as if—My hat! Have you been wiping up the lane with your giddy person?"

Arthur Augustus looked shocked.

"Wally, Wally, you are in a frightfully disgustin' state!" he exclaimed, with a sniff. "I shall weally have

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to give you a severe talkin' to. You were always a gummy young beggah, but weally this is the limit! You are smothered in dirt, bai Jove!"

Wally glared excitedly

"I—I was set upon in the lane!" he roared. "Dry up and listen, you silly asses!"

"Weally—"

"Shut up, Gussy! I was set upon in the lane, rolled in the dust, and bound. What do you think of it?"

"Bai Jove! Those Gwammah cads are goin' it a bit too stwong!"

"Grammar cads!" yelled Wally. "It was a robber!"

"A wobbah!"

"Oh, draw it mild, Wally!"

"I tell you I've been robbed!" howled Wally, hoarse with excitement. "I had that ten quid in my pocket, Gussy, and it's all gone, every penny! The awful scoundrel was as strong as a giddy ox, and he wore a black cloak, and was bearded. That's all I know. But it was too dark to see details. Your ten quid's gone, Gussy, but it wasn't my fault."

"Bai Jove! I'm not blaming you, deah boy!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "Nevahtheless, your stowly is weally wathah tall!"

"Tall!" shrieked Wally. "It's the truth!"

"Must have been some silly ass japing you," said Blake excitedly. "Figgins & Co. very likely."

Wally gasped.

"You—you— There was only one chap, and he was a man—a big chap, with the strength of a giddy lion! And do you think Figgins & Co. would have gone through my pockets and half-inched the ten quid?"

"Done what to the ten quid, Wally?" asked Arthur Augustus.

"Half-inched it, you ass!"

"Bai Jove! I fail to compwehend—"

"Half-inched!" roared Wally. "Pinched! Can't you understand plain English, Gussy?"

"Weally, Wally, I wish you wouldn't use such fwightfully vulgah expressions. I am vewy much afraid that Joe Fwayne has been teachin' you—"

"Oh, blow Joe Frayne!" said Wally impatiently.

"What are you going to do about it? When I started from the village I had your ten quid in my sky-rocket. That means pocket, Gussy, to save argument. What are you going to do?"

"Perhaps the awful rotter is still hanging about in the lane," suggested Herries.

"Rather unlikely," said Blake doubtfully. "Still, it's a chance. I expect the chap's a tramp, and he may hang about in the hope of setting upon some other junior; make an evening's business of it sort of thing. What price we go and investigate?"

"That's what I want you to do!" ejaculated Wally impatiently. "You'll never see the colour of your money, Gussy, if we stop here jawing!"

"Pway let me take the lead, deah boys," said D'Arcy. "I wathah pwide myself that I was cut out to be a detective."

"Rats!"

"Weally, Blake—"

But Blake didn't wait to hear his elegant chum's protest. He and the others piled out of Study No. 6, and hurried down the passage. At the corner they ran into the Terrible Three, who looked at their excited faces in astonishment.

"What's this—a fight on?" asked Monty Lowther. "Who's been murdering Wally? I'm surprised at you, Gussy, for allowing your minor—"

"No time to waste with you Shell-fish," growled Blake. "Wally's been robbed—robbed of ten quid in the lane just now!"

"My hat!"

Blake explained in a few words.

"Well, I'm blessed!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Things are getting pretty warm at St. Jim's!"

"Looks to me as if he knew you had ten quid on you, Wally," said Manners. "Very likely he saw you change it in the village, and followed you up. Anyhow, let's get out into the lane; not that I think it'll be much good."

All the juniors were of the same opinion. It wasn't likely that the desperado would remain conveniently in the lane while the alarm was given, just so that he could be captured. Still, it wasn't like Tom Merry & Co. to give in without doing something. Even if their quest was fruitless there would, at least, be some satisfaction in knowing that they had done their best.

So, in an excited crowd, they passed out of the entrance-hall into the quad; passing Crooke with never a glance at him. And yet the missing ten pounds was reposing comfortably in Crooke's pocket. He chuckled to himself with sheer hysterical glee. He was safe! They would never suspect him.

They certainly did not suspect Crooke at the moment. In an excited crowd they passed out of the entrance-gates into the gloom of the lane. It was not yet quite dark, but the narrow road was very dim.

"Wathah a hopeless quest, I'm afraid, deah boys!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "I'm not vewy upset about the tennah, but I should weally like to give the howwid wuffian a feahful thwashin'!"

"Shush!"

"I uttably wefuse to shush—"

"There's somebody ahead!" whispered Digby excitedly.

"Bai Jove!"

"Dig's right," whispered Blake. "Look! He's lounging by the stile; and he's bearded, too! It's the giddy robber merchant, as sure as a gun! Now, then, all together! He doesn't suspect anything yet, and we mustn't give him the chance to escape."

"Wathah not! Pway let me take the lead."

"Shut up, Gussy! You're dead in this act!"

"Weally—"

"Now, on the ball!"

And Tom Merry & Co. dashed forward with many excited shouts. The stranger standing by the stile started back in alarm, but before he could move an inch the avalanche of juniors was upon him.

"By gosh! What the—"

He disappeared beneath a pile of waving legs and arms.

"Victory, bai Jove!"

"Got him!"

They had certainly got him; but unfortunately they had got the wrong person. They had captured the man who was waiting to receive the ten pounds—not the desperate villain who had stolen it.

For the prisoner was none other than Lang, the deformed man!

CHAPTER 14. Shadowing Crooke.

"CAPTURED, by George!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Lang was yanked to his feet, and he stood shivering with apprehension. He naturally thought that Crooke had confided his secret to others, and that the juniors had taken matters into their own hands. Lang, as a matter of fact, turned quite green with fear, and almost gave himself away.

"I didn't mean any harm!" he stammered nervously.

"It—it was only a joke. But I didn't think Crooke would—"

"Crooke?" ejaculated Tom Merry quickly. "What do you know about Crooke?"

"I—I—"

Wally D'Arcy pushed his way forward, and peered closely at Lang.

"This ain't the chap!" he said disgustedly. "You silly asses, you've collared the wrong johnny!"

"What!"

"I've never seen this man before!" roared Wally.

"Let him go, you chumps!"

"Bai Jove!"

Tom Merry forgot Lang's reference to Crooke in this new revelation.

"Are you sure, Wally?" he asked.

"Sure!" snorted Wally. "Do you think I'm a silly ass like Gussy?"

"Weally, Wally—"

"This chap's a stranger to me," went on Wally excitedly. "The man who attacked me was bigger, and wore a cloak, and had a whacking great black beard!"

Arthur Augustus looked distressed.

"Weally, this is most unfortunate!" he exclaimed. "We have made a fearful blundah. We must offah our humble apologies to this gentleman."

Under the circumstances, there was nothing else to be done. Wally was so emphatic that Tom Merry & Co. could not very well continue to hold Lang a prisoner. So they reluctantly released him.

"We're awfully sorry, sir," said Tom Merry. "You see, one of the fags has been robbed, and we mistook you, in the dark, for the robber!"

Lang breathed a sigh of relief, and murmured that everything was quite all right, and Tom Merry & Co. took their departure. They were rather crestfallen at the failure of their enterprise. There was no chance of catching the real desperado now, so they wended their way back to St. Jim's.

Tom Merry was more thoughtful than the rest, but he was not thinking of D'Arcy's missing ten pounds. He was thinking of the stranger they had just left, and of the slip he had made in mentioning Crooke. What relations existed between the man and the Shell fellow? Perhaps he was the cause of Crooke's strange behaviour lately, Tom Merry thought. Anyhow, he was acquainted with Crooke, and was, it might be presumed, waiting at the stile with an object.

And the stile was a recognised meeting-place.

Was the man waiting for Crooke?

Tom Merry thought it very probable, and, to his mind, rather suspicious. He had thought, but he wasn't quite sure, that he had seen the stranger's beard move a trifle. If that had actually occurred, then there was something decidedly queer going on. Men with false beards didn't usually have dealings with St. Jim's juniors.

Tom Merry thought it worth while to keep his eyes open.

It was now within twenty minutes of looking-up time, and the little crowd of juniors trooped disconsolately across the quad to the School-House.

"You'd better buzz off to your own quarters, Wally," said Arthur Augustus. "I am afraid that the tennah it utahly lost. It is wotten, of course, but these little things will happen, you know!"

"Little things!" growled Wally. "Ten quid! Well, I must say you've taken it decently, Gussy; but I wasn't to blame, was I?"

"Of course not, deah boy. Fway don't wowwy yourself in the least!"

And Wally departed cheerfully. After all, it wasn't his loss.

Crooke was still in the hall, and he looked at the dejected juniors, and chuckled delightedly. He appeared so hilarious, in fact, that Tom Merry & Co. glared at him rather aggressively.

"Well, did you find the giddy robber?" grinned Crooke. "Was he ~~eking~~ in the lane? Ha, ha, ha!"

"Funny, ain't it?" growled Blake. "Blessed if I can see anything to cackle at! You'll get a thick ear, Crooke!"

Crooke roared.

"I'll bet you'll never find that ten quid again, Gussy!" he chuckled. "It's gone like a beautiful dream!"

Tom Merry eyed Crooke closely. The cad of the Shell looked altogether different to-night, somehow. Only at tea-time he had been pale and ill-looking. But now a vast difference had come over him. His cheeks were flushed almost unhealthily, and his eyes seemed to burn in a strange fashion.

"It's jolly queer!" Tom Merry said to himself. "Why should this change have come about so quickly? I've never seen Crooke like this before; he seems almost hysterical! Blessed if he isn't glad that Gussy's lost his ten quid! If it was Figgins, I might think that he'd been playing a joke—"

Tom Merry started.

In a flash the whole train of circumstances shaped themselves in his mind. Could it be possible that Crooke himself had attacked Wally? Ten pounds!—It was

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exactly the sum that Crooke had raised for the widow's fund; and he had behaved in a very peculiar fashion upon the receipt of the postcard from his mother, as though he had been bowled over.

And there was the man in the lane, waiting at the stile. He had mentioned Crooke's name! Tom Merry felt sure now that the man's beard was false. Altogether the whole situation was suggestive of something underhand and sinister.

Perhaps Crooke was in the man's power, and for this reason had looked so utterly miserable lately. Crooke probably wanted ten pounds to give to the man, and now, having got it from Wally, he was consequently joyful, and would presently be going out to hand over the cash!

It was all conjecture, but there was a way of turning it into actual proof. If Crooke were watched and followed, his villainy could be unmasked. It was a terrible suspicion, for exposure would have meant instant expulsion from St. Jim's.

Tom Merry looked grim as he walked up to Study No. 6 with Blake & Co. He knew that Crooke was a cad and a rotter, but it was an effort to bring himself to think that he was a thief as well!

But the circumstantial evidence was overwhelming.

And Tom Merry did not mince matters.

Once the door of Study No. 6 was closed, he faced his chums, and told them of his suspicions. They were flabbergasted, but could not fail to see the truth of Tom Merry's words.

"Look!" gasped Manners, who was standing by the window. "Crooke's just gone out. I saw him as plain as anything as he passed the lighted window of the common-room. You're right, Tommy; Crooke's off to meet that chap!"

Tom Merry turned to the door.

"Then we'll follow him!" he exclaimed briskly. "Mind, you fellows, not a word to anybody else. We'll keep this to ourselves for the present, anyhow."

"I'll come with you, Tom Merry!"

"No, you won't, Gussy!" said Tom Merry flatly. "This is a ticklish bizney, and you're rather too excitable for me. Blake and I will go, and you chaps can follow on some distance behind, to be at hand if you're wanted."

And Tom Merry and Blake rushed off, leaving Arthur Augustus D'Arcy protesting vigorously that he was really the only fellow capable of handling such a delicate mission. But, as nobody was listening to him, his breath was wasted.

CHAPTER 15. Quite a Surprise!

"HIST!"

Tom Merry and Blake crept silently down the lane in the wake of Crooke of the Shell. They could just see him in the dim gloom striding towards the village, a hundred yards or so ahead.

"Perhaps it's a giddy mare's-nest, after all!" breathed Blake. "Crooke may be only going to the village."

"Shut up!" muttered Tom Merry. "He's just opposite the stile. There! He's stopped, and the other chap's joined him!"

"By gum, you're right!"

Like shadows the two juniors crept forward upon the grass border of the lane. They made no noise, and Crooke and Lang had no suspicion of coming disaster. Yet had they only known it, Tom Merry and Blake were almost within earshot, and were followed up behind by their five chums.

"You've got it?" a strange voice was saying eagerly. "Good for you, young 'un! Hand it over, and I'll clear right off and leave you in peace."

"Ten pounds!" Crooke said. "I had a terrible job to get it, Lang. But here it is, and I expect you'll be satisfied with it—what?"

Tom Merry and Blake looked at one another grimly. And the pair sprang out from their retreat, and rushed pell-mell towards the stile, yelling furiously. An answering chorus of shouts came up from the lane, accompanied by a quick patter of feet.

"On 'em!" roared Blake excitedly.

He simply threw himself at Crooke, and Tom Merry grasped Lang. The pair were so utterly taken aback that they scarcely desisted. Crooke's face went deathly pale as he realised the awful results of this catastrophe. The whole truth would come out now.

It would. But the real truth was quite different to Crooke's idea of it!

"Bai Jove! Hold the boundahs!" came an excited voice from the darkness. "To the wescue, deah boys—to the wescue!"

But Blake and Tom did not need "wescuing." Crooke and Lang were too limp to resist, and by the time the others came up—just when they had gathered their wits to make an effort—it was too late.

"Oh, heavens," muttered Crooke wretchedly, "it's all up now!"

"Look here," said Tom Merry sharply, "this mystery is going to be cleared up! There's been something jolly wrong with you, Crooke, for the last day or two, and I believe this scoundrel is responsible. You're a bit of a rotter, Crooke, but I don't think you'd willingly be a thief."

"It was the only way!" Crooke panted. "Yes; I was forced to do it!"

Tom Merry turned to Lang.

"What's the meaning of all this?" he asked sternly.

"I—I—Lor, love a duck!" gasped Lang. "It's all up now! I've let myself in for it proper!"

Crooke stared at the man as though dazed. His voice was different, and it sounded familiar somehow. What could it mean?

Tom Merry produced an electric torch from his pocket and flashed it upon Lang's face.

"You can do without that beard!" he said grimly.

And with one jerk he ripped off the man's hat, and then tugged at the beard. It came off in his hand, and revealed a sunburnt, boyish face, with rather shifty eyes.

"My only hat!"

"G'weat Scott!"

Lang grinned sheepishly.

"Lummy," he exclaimed, "that's done it!"

Crooke gave a hoarse cry. He started forward, and his face was alight with incredulity and unbounded relief. Lang was none other than the boy he had fought in the barn!

"You," gasped Crooke huskily—"you!"

"Yes, mate," said the youth. "It's me, right enough!"

"Good heavens!"

"Thought I was dead, didn't yer?" went on Lang.

"But I ain't! Crikey, what luck! Ten more minutes, and I should have been clear off with that ten quid!"

Crooke passed a hand before his eyes, and a light of understanding dawned upon him.

"Then—then it was you all the time?" he asked, in a voice that expressed sheer joy.

"It wasn't nobody else, mate. And my name is Lang. That bit's right, anyhow. Oh, I'm alive all right! And you thought I was fool enough to stop in that old barn!"

"Thank Heaven!" exclaimed Crooke. "I've been labouring under a delusion all the time!" His voice changed, and a hard look came into his eyes. "So you were bluffing me all the time?" he went on wrathfully. "You were demanding money from me under false pretences!"

Lang grinned.

"Well, I must look arter myself," he said coolly. "It's just luck. If you'd have come sooner I should have got that ten quid, and it would have lasted me for weeks! Still, it's no use worrying, and the question is, what are you going to do? 'And me over to the cops?"

Tom Merry & Co. had been listening to this conversation in silent amazement. What did it all mean? They determined to know at once.

"Look here, Crooke," said Tom Merry, "you'd better explain. We've got a pretty serious charge against you, you know, and unless you can justify yourself thoroughly—"

"Oh, I can explain!" said Crooke quietly. "What a relief! My hat, I feel years younger! And I thought—Great Scott, what an ass I've been!"

"Pway wefwain from talking in widdles, Cwooke!" said

Arthur Augustus. "We're not heah to listen to coun-dwuns. We are heah for an explanation, and I must request you to get on with the washin'!"

So Crooke, in a broken voice, related the adventure that had happened in the old barn during the last half-holiday.

The juniors listened with great interest.

"Well," said Tom Merry, "what I want to know is—what relations have existed between the pair of you since the fire?"

Lang grinned. He was a pretty cool young rascal.

"Well, you see," he explained, "it struck me that Crooke would think I was killed, seein' as nobody saw me get out of the barn. So I thought out a wheeze of gettin' some money without working for it!"

"And so you disguised yourself?"

"That's it, mate."

"I had a fright this afternoon," went on Lang. "Crooke spotted me in the wood, and I thought it was all up, sure as Fate. But he came along to-night with the ten quid, and I almost dropped with surprise."

There was a moment's pause. Tom Merry & Co. regarded the sunburnt youth with grim looks.

"Well," said Tom Merry at last, "you've admitted yourself to be a pretty despicable rotter, and I've a thundering good mind to thrash you! But you went through a rotten time in that barn, I expect, so we'll let it pass."

"Yes; I suppose you're right," admitted Lang. "All the time I've been doin' it I've felt pretty mean. Still, ten quids don't come my way every day!"

Tom Merry hesitated.

"Well, I suppose we'd better let him go, you fellows?" he asked. "He's gained nothing, after all, and we don't want to make a fuss."

"Yaas; let the young boundah go," said Arthur Augustus. "But pway relieve him of my tennah first!"

"Lucky ag'in!" growled Lang. "I thought you'd forgotten it!"

He was relieved of the money, and then allowed to depart. All things considered, he got off very lightly, for his deception had been of a curiously callous nature. Crooke stood, with his head down, utterly limp.

"I took that money, D'Arcy," he said slowly, "but I didn't want it for myself, as you know. I thought that if I didn't get it I should be handed over to the police for—for murder! Oh, I was in a terrible state! You can imagine my anxiety. I was desperate—awfully desperate—and didn't look at things in the ordinary light. I thought that the ten pounds would be my salvation, so I took it. I—I'm sorry!"

The juniors looked at Crooke pityingly.

Knowing all the circumstances, they understood perfectly. Crooke must have been through simply an appalling time.

Blake looked round.

"Well, the whole thing's finished with now," he said. "I vote we keep it to ourselves and forget all about it. Crooke's been through enough, goodness knows!"

"You—you mean it?" gasped Crooke eagerly.

"Of course," replied Tom Merry. "You've been labouring under a delusion. Crooke, and you are more to be pitied than blamed. I, for one, am willing to let matters rest as they are."

Crooke hesitated.

"But—but what about D'Arcy?" he asked falteringly. "It was his money."

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus generously.

"Pway don't let that wowwy you, Cwooke. Undah the cires, I beah you no ill-will at all. Shake hands, deah boy!"

And Crooke grasped D'Arcy's hand fervently.

His delusion was exploded, but it had left him on better terms with the juniors than he was formerly. It had been a lesson to him, but how long it's effect would last was quite another matter.

THE END.

(Our Grand Spring Double Number will be published next Wednesday! Look out for the 50,000-word tale of Tom Merry & Co., entitled WINNING HIS SPURS! There will be a big demand, so it is essential that you should order well in advance, or your newsagent will be sold out!)

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THE FIRST CHAPTERS OF OUR GRAND NEW SERIAL STORY.

OFFICER AND TROOPER.



An Enthralling New
Story of Life in the
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Specially Published for
Patriotic British Boys.

By
BEVERLEY KENT.

SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS INSTALMENTS.

Bob Hall, a fine, strapping young fellow, succeeds in joining a famous Hussar regiment, known as the Die Hards. After Bob has been in the regiment for some time his never-well cousin, Captain Lascelles, joins also. Bob finds that so far from being friendly, Lascelles is constantly endeavouring to get him into trouble, with the object of having him dismissed from the Service in disgrace. Bob, however, with the help of his many friends, is successful in defeating the villain's schemes. Bob comes into contact with the Earl of Dalkey, who finds that Bob is some connection of his family, and promises to have investigations made. It transpires that Bob is heir to a large fortune, of which Lascelles is in enjoyment. After plotting the downfall of two other officers in the regiment, and being exposed by Bob, Lascelles is compelled to send in his papers and resign his commission. Bob, now promoted to the rank of sergeant, goes to London to search for a non-com. named Bryant, who has stolen some canteen funds and decamped. Bob is shadowed by men in the pay of Lascelles, and lured to a house in the East End. The police raid the house, Lascelles and his confederates escape, and leave Bob unconscious. When he comes to, he finds himself in hospital, and is further surprised to see, coming down the ward, the figure of the Earl of Dalkey, who, as Bob is convalescent, invites him to his house. Presently Lascelles, who has arranged to marry Lord Dalkey's daughter, appears; but Bob, under threat of exposure, compels him to leave the house. This done, Bob and Sergeant Gibson—a friend of his—endeavour to get on the track of the sender of the telegram which decoyed our hero to the East End.

(Now go on with the Story.)

The Finding of Bryant.

Bob Hall and Sergeant Gibson journeyed down to the Mile End Road, and entered the post-office. When there, Bob produced the telegram and handed it across the counter.

"That was sent to me," he explained. "Do you remember anything about it, and can you give me a description of the sender?"

The clerks in charge examined the telegram curiously.

"Hallo! I remember!" one cried suddenly. "The chap's been in and out of here since then looking for a soldier. He came a couple of days ago, and—"

"Do you mean the chap who lost his umbrella, and kicked up such a rumpus about it? He said we stole it! A nasty, sneering sort of chap as—"

"That's the one!" the first speaker assented to his companion.

"Then he met that soldier chap as the latter was coming in through the door yonder, and both of 'em went off together. He hasn't been here since; but— Hallo! Here he comes!"

As the speaker stopped abruptly, the tall, dark stranger who had dogged Bob's footsteps the night the latter arrived in London now entered the post-office, and crossing to the counter, he handed over a postal-order for payment.

Bob nudged Gibson, and both of them silently watched the man. The clerk in charge paid the money, which the stranger swiftly pocketed, and then hurried away. Gibson and Bob slipped out into the open air and watched

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Every Saturday.

him as he stealthily hastened along the street, keeping close to the houses.

"Come on!" the lad cried eagerly. "Don't let us lose sight of him, whatever happens! If we run him down, we'll come on the track of Bryant!"

Turning down a side-street, the man hastened along, and so, by many malodorous windings, he came at last on to a wider thoroughfare, which he crossed, and left behind, again entering into a bewildering maze of alleys and courts. That he was no stranger to the district was evident from the manner in which he unfalteringly pursued his way, yet his appearance was so at variance with his surroundings that people turned and stared at him as he passed.

At last he entered, and disappeared through a doorway, and Bob and Gibson stopped on the instant.

"Shall we go in?" the lad cried eagerly.

"Better wait a few moments," Gibson suggested. "Probably he'll soon come out again with Bryant. We'll cross the street and watch the door. Then they can't escape us."

Concealing themselves in the shadow of a courtyard, the two friends waited in suspense for five minutes, when the stranger hurried back the way he had come, without looking to the right or left.

"Now's our chance," Gibson murmured. "Cut across the street, Bob. We'll be a match, I guess, for any chap as tries to stop us."

Before they could be prevented the two friends were across the narrow hall of the house and swiftly mounting the stairs. They paused and knocked at the door on the first landing, and, no answer being given, Bob turned the handle. The door was locked.

Swiftly mounting to the next landing, they knocked again, and again their summons was greeted with silence. Again Bob turned the handle; this time the door yielded, and he entered the room. The floor was carpetless, a small bed ran along against the farther wall, there was an old deal table and a single chair for furniture, and Bryant, sitting on the chair, was leaning with his head on his hands across the table, a picture of abandonment and despair. Bob stood still and gazed at him.

Could this be the gay hussar, the smartest non-com. in the Die Hards, the man who kept the mess alive with fun and frolic? His clothes were stained and muddy, a week's growth bristled on his chin, he slouched like a rustic who had never been drilled, his bearing was so dulled that he still thought himself to be alone. He looked as if hope had left him for ever, and as if life had nothing now to offer but misery and disgrace.

"Bryant!"

As Bob called his name, the unhappy man started to his feet, upsetting the chair, which rolled to one side. The startled eyes, rimmed with dark shadows, gazed terror-stricken at Bob; the features, pinched and wan, seemed to grow sharper in outline; the tight-drawn lips disclosed the set teeth; the hunted criminal drew his breath in long, hoarse gasps that told that exposure had crippled his lungs. He gazed from Bob to Gibson, and then with a groan he staggered backwards and rested for support against the wall.

"You've come!" he gasped. "I knew you would. Something told me that you'd track me down, that I'd never escape. Only another few hours and I would have been on the ocean on my way to a new country to start a new life, and now—now—" He stopped and looked around despo-

rately, as if vainly seeking a means of escape. "How did you find me out?" he groaned. "Could you not have pity and have left me alone?"

"You had no pity on me," Bob replied gently. "You ran away and left the burden of your crime to fall on my shoulders. To clear my own character I had to follow you. I never did you harm, Bryant, nor do I want to injure you now. There, sit down! You have yourself to blame for the trouble you're in; but no chap in the Die Hards wants to trample on a man who's come to grief."

As Bob spoke he put the chair on its four legs again, and, crossing over to Bryant, he took him by the arm.

"Take a pull on yourself," he suggested. "You look as if you've been half-starved. Perhaps if you have some food you'll be better able to face the music. My friend yonder will go out and get you grub, if you say the word."

"I don't want grub; it's not that," Bryant replied huskily. "I've had food, I've got money, I—"

"That man who was here a few minutes ago keeps you supplied in cash, then?" Bob suggested.

Bryant started. "What do you know about him?" he gasped. "Was it he who told you I was here? The cur! He promised to befriend me, and—"

"Why should he befriend you?"

"Ah, you don't know, I see!" the wretched culprit groaned. "I suppose you think I got my accounts wrong just because I wanted money to have a good time. You fancy I'm like all other rogues who've got no conscience. I tell you, I'm not!" he continued hoarsely. "I'm a straight chap naturally, and I like to run straight. All the years I've been in the regiment my only thought was to get on fairly and squarely. I liked the life, I liked soldiering, I took a pride in the regiment. I worked hard, as you know, and I never kept bad company. I'd be a proud and happy man to-day if it wasn't for a cur who talked me round."

"But what had that man to do with you? He's not a soldier, anyhow!"

"No, not likely! I never saw him till a few days ago, and I hated him from the first moment he spoke to me, but I was desperate. I—I was starving then, and I could not escape the police. They were closing in around me and I knew it, and then this fellow came along and offered to save me. He made his terms, though, the villain, and I had to close with 'em."

"Why should he want to help you, and what terms could he make?" Bob insisted.

Bryant hesitated, and wiped his dry lips with the back of his hand.

"He is the agent for a greater scoundrel, and that last villain who ruined me is in my power," Bryant replied. "It was he who tempted me to rob the canteen. He wanted some of the ready-money badly, and had influence, and he gave me promises as made my mouth water. I thought he would repay me, and that so I could easily square the accounts. The money could not be much to a man like him, I reckoned, and, so I yielded, and I came to grief. And it was because I held a threat over this scoundrel as ruined me, that his agent came along with an offer to ship me out of the country."

"And the man's name?" demanded Bob. Bryant looked curiously at his old comrade. "You know him," he replied huskily. "His name is Lascelles."

Forced to Flee.

"It was Lascelles who ruined you! The villain's hand is in every evil," Bob remarked solemnly. "He deserves no pity, and he'll have none."

The lad turned as if to walk away. His face was terribly stern. Suddenly he remembered himself and wheeled round.

"Bryant, you and I are comrades, and I'm disposed to trust you," he said, laying his hand on the other's shoulder. "There's a warrant out for your arrest, but I came to London for no purpose except to clear my own name, so I needn't hold you—I'll risk it, anyhow. If we give you the necessary money, will you go straight back to Edinburgh and surrender yourself? That's your best chance, you know. If you do that a court-martial will deal more leniently with you, perhaps; also, I shall be able to help you."

The wretched man's face was working convulsively. "You're a good chap!" he gasped. "Yes, I'll go, and thanks."

"All right. Meantime, I'll wire to the regimental sergeant-major, telling him to expect you. Now, come along out of this, the place is enough to give a chap the hump." That evening, Gibson and Bob managed to smuggle Bryant out of London, and then they discussed the next step they

should take, for a hint that Bob had given had led the recruiting-sergeant to believe that the lad was resolved to prolong his stay in the metropolis. He asked Bob if this conjecture was correct.

"Yes, you're right," the lad grinned. "What's more, I've wired to Lieutenant Haines to come down here, and I'm sure he will."

"You wired to him! Why?" Gibson inquired, in amazement.

"Because I can't settle Lascelles' hash by myself," Bob replied grimly. "I want help, and Haines is the man, for he knows Lord Dalkey. Now, come along till we keep an eye on Lascelles. I've got a foreboding, old chap, that he's up to some desperate mischief."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because I've had a fairly long experience of him, and I know that his word counts for nothing. I'm going back to Park Lane, but you can wait for me there, for I won't be long. The butler is not a bad sort, and I want to ask him a question."

Gibson waited outside the earl's magnificent mansion whilst Bob went inside; and in a few minutes the lad emerged, his face flushed and his eyes bright.

"It is as I expected," he whispered. "Lascelles called this afternoon, despite his promise to us. He stayed over an hour, and when he left he looked radiant. We can do nothing till Haines arrives by the mail, so let's have some grub. I fancy I guess the game my villainous cousin means to play; he's absolutely cornered for money, and I know that Lady Miriam has a fortune of her own, to say nothing of the money and estates the old earl will leave her."

"Then you think—"

"I'm going to make sure before I speak," Bob interjected. "If what I suspect is true, I'll hit hard and strong. Yes, Lascelles has gone too far, and though no chap likes to crush another, yet the time has come when he must be shown up before the world. He's a pest to decent people, and either he must clear out of England or go to gaol. Come along!"

It was two days later, and Lascelles was up betimes. Seated with him at the breakfast-table was the villain who had followed Bob, and also a subservient-looking lawyer.

"So it's all right, you're certain of that, Gaspard?" Lascelles grinned, as he filled his plate.

"Quite certain, captain," the lawyer replied. "I've made every investigation, and proved to my legal satisfaction that the young lady is worth a thousand a year in her own right."

"That's something, anyhow!" Lascelles granted. "The money's in the funds—eh? It can be drawn out without difficulty, I s'pose? A thousand a year! That means twenty thousand capital at least. Well, Barker, I hope to send you five thou in a week's time. Ha, ha, ha! Pay off those curs who've been pressing me most, and whose names you'll find on the list I gave you; also keep an eye on the old earl, and make things smooth if you can. Now we'd better make a move, for it wouldn't do to keep the bride waiting."

With a smirk on his face, the callous scoundrel arose, and the toadying lawyer helped him into his fur coat. Then the three left the room, and hailed a couple of taxis. As Lascelles drove away in the first one, the others followed behind.

Lascelles alighted at the corner of a quiet street, and, dismissing the taxi, he slowly sauntered down, his confederates keeping at some distance behind. As he drew forth his watch to note the time, a brougham came in sight from the far end, and, with a chuckle of delight, the scoundrel quickened his pace. He didn't notice that the brougham was followed by a cab.

Raising his cane in a command to the coachman to stop, Lascelles stepped to the kerb and opened the door of the vehicle. Lady Miriam, pale and trembling, took his hand and alighted.

"I've kept my promise!" she gasped. "I'm risking all for you. I'm owing my father's anger and—"

"Have no fear," the polished scoundrel murmured. "He will forgive us. The registrar is waiting, and as soon as we're married we will leave England for a few weeks until the earl relents. That he will do so in time is—"

"Hallo, Lascelles! You here? How do, Lady Miriam?"

Lascelles turned his head swiftly, and his face grew ashen grey. Standing on the pavement, only a yard away, was Haines, his hat raised in salute to the lady, his sunny young features wrinkled with a grin, but his eyes sharp and alert. Lady Miriam clutched Lascelles by the arm in a strong effort to master her agitation.

(Look out for a specially long instalment of this grand yarn in next week's GEM, our grand Spring Double Number, on sale on Wednesday next. Don't risk disappointment, but order in advance, or your newsagent is almost sure to be sold out.)

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THIS WEEK'S CHAT

Whom to Write to —

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NEXT WEDNESDAY'S GRAND DOUBLE NUMBER.

The welcome news that a Double Number of the good old "Gem" has arrived at last will, I am sure, be hailed with keen delight by every lover of our famous little journal. Hitherto, I have been somewhat unfortunate in my efforts to secure Double Numbers at regular intervals; but now that the long-looked-for treat is an accomplished fact, I may say that I have "gone all out" to secure an absolutely great number.

In accordance with my readers' wishes, I arranged for Mr. Martin Clifford to devote a good deal of time to the compilation of a double-length story of that universally-adored character, Talbot; and the famous "Gem" author has responded to my request in a manner which can only be described as magnificent.

Next week's 50,000-word story, entitled

"WINNING HIS SPURS!"

is beyond all question the most brilliant, the most fascinating, the most admirably-conceived piece of work Mr. Clifford has ever produced. My readers will simply revel in the rousing incidents and rich humour of this superb story; and I am not ashamed to confess that I was myself completely carried away by the altogether entrancing style which asserted itself from the commencement to the climax. From chapter to chapter the interest never flags; and I feel pretty confident that very few of my chums will be able to lay the story aside until finished, chime the midnight clocks never so loudly.

The story introduces Talbot, his girl-chum Marie Rivers, and Hookey Walker. The latter has stated his intention of reforming, the old gang having been dissolved; and although Talbot takes the man's word, Tom Merry sets no store by it, and as a result the two chums grievously quarrel. Tom Merry's faith in his old friend begins to waver, and the gulf between the two Shell fellows grows wider and wider until the truth becomes clear, and it is made apparent that Hookey Walker was really sincere in his expressions of reform. The parted chums are happily reconciled, and Talbot is instrumental in frustrating the designs of a crew of Zeppelin raiders, thus covering himself with glory, and succeeding beyond all question in

"WINNING HIS SPURS!"

Most Gemites will remember that a copy of that famous schoolboy journal "Tom Merry's Weekly" appeared in the Christmas Number of "The Magnet." My conscience was sorely smitten by this act of seeming injustice, for my "Gem" readers appeared to have been quite out of it. However, I have now made arrangements for a return compliment, and in next week's "Gem" a detachable copy of

"THE GREYFRIARS HERALD"

will be reproduced. This admirable little journal—the weekly production of Harry Wharton & Co., of Greyfriars—will be found highly entertaining, and every reader of "The Gem" should see that he—or she—secures a copy.

Another splendid instalment of

"OFFICER AND TROOPER"

will appear, and the programme will be made complete by a

PLAN OF ST. JIM'S AND DISTRICT.

This feature will supply a long-felt want, and is assured of a cordial reception. The artist has executed a somewhat

difficult task judiciously and well, as my chums, when next Wednesday's great number is in their hands, will cheerfully admit.

I feel that I can place our superb Double Number before my readers with perfect confidence, and know that they will leave no stone unturned in their efforts to still further increase the wonderful and widespread popularity of their favourite weekly.

I might also add that the appearance of future Double Numbers will depend almost entirely upon the success of next week's great venture; so it behoves every one of my chums to do their Editor and themselves a good turn by passing on to a non-reading friend a copy of

NEXT WEDNESDAY'S GRAND DOUBLE NUMBER.**REPLIES IN BRIEF.**

C. Oldroyd (Bristol).—I am much obliged to you for your loyal letter.

"A Regular Girl Reader" (Hornsey).—The double number story of Talbot was arranged by common consent of my readers, and I am surprised at the attitude you have taken up. I cannot agree with you that the inclusion of Talbot gives our stories a bad tone.

B. A. T. (Dumbartonshire).—The feature you mention is appearing shortly.

P. R. B. (Tidworth).—The young lady in question did not give her full name and address, and even had she done so, I would not be at liberty to divulge it without her permission.

L. W. S. (Sydenham).—Yours was a very sensibly-written letter. The fact that Levison's reform was merely a "flash in the pan" ought not to distress you. All our characters cannot be stainless.

W. A. Sutton (Leamington Spa).—Sorry, but I am not authorised to start such a fund as you suggest.

"New Forest Lass."—Many thanks for your ripping letter and loyal sentiments. I am glad to hear how you profited by our Correspondence Exchange. Best wishes.

J. Vickers (South Lambeth).—I do not think the feature you suggest would find favour with the majority of my readers.

"Interested" (Paignton).—On receipt of your full name and address I shall be happy to insert the announcement you mention.

Walter Haddow (Glasgow).—Many thanks for your letter. I am much indebted to you for your efforts to still further popularise my papers. Storyettes should in all cases be sent in on postcards.

Yendis Retlaw (Toronto).—There is certainly something to be said from your point of view, and I will bear your remarks in mind. Many thanks for your good wishes, which my staff and I cordially reciprocate.

R. L. Arnold (South Australia).—Your letter and photograph came safely to hand. "Loyal and True," a story of the Indian junior at St. Jim's, will probably have appeared by the time this reply reaches you. All good wishes.

C. W. C. (Colchester).—Talbot and Blago are both fifteen years of age.

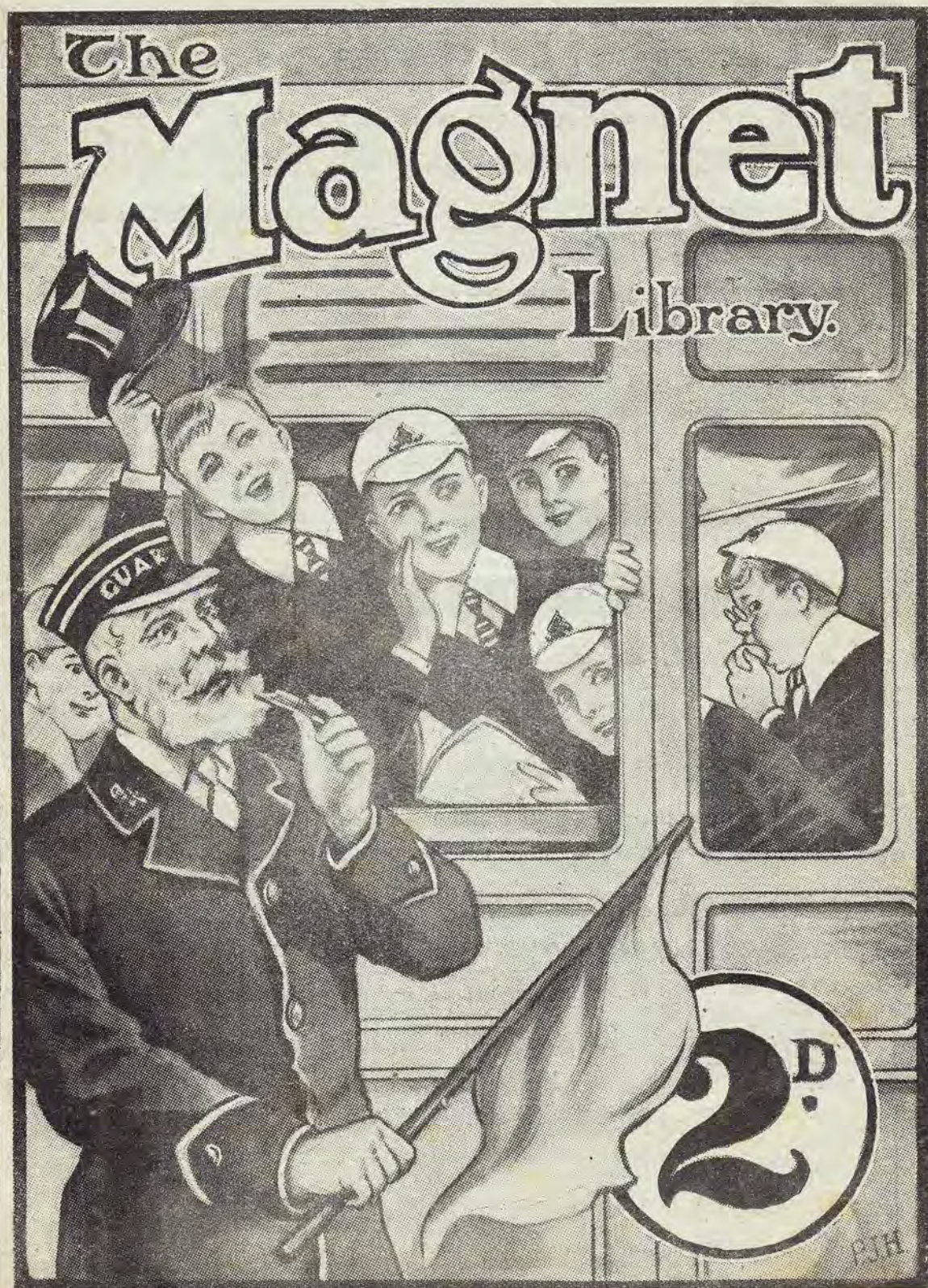
Ralph B. Church (Cape Town).—Thank you for your interesting letter. I am sorry I cannot insert your announcement, the Correspondence Exchange having been suspended.

"An Old Nantwich Reader."—Your suggestion was a good one, and I think you will agree that I have adhered to it pretty well.

R. Batty (Selby).—Thanks for your efforts to obtain new readers. Hammond's Christian name is Henry.

THE EDITOR.

**OUR COMPANION PAPER NOW
ON SALE.**



A Cash Prize for Every Contributor to this Page.



TOLD OFF.

The anti-smoker, filled with zeal for his cause, was passing along the street one day, when he espied a man idly lounging against a wall and smoking a huge cigar. Going up to him, he said:

"My man, do you ever stop to calculate how much money you waste on smoking the vile weed?"

"Can't say I do," responded the man.

"Has it ever occurred to you that if you saved the money you waste on smoking, you might be the owner of that great flourishing factory over there?"

The smoker became interested.

"Do you own that factory?" he asked.

"No," replied the anti-tobacco faddist.

"Well, I do!" said the man.—Sent in by N. Edmonds, Streatham, S.W.

CAME CHEAPER.

There had been some technical classes started in connection with the parish school, and when the vicar called at the home of one of the pupils, the boy's mother expressed her delight at the institution.

"Do you know, vicar," she remarked, "since 'Enery took up that there plumbing and gasfitting at them classes it ain't cost us a single penny for gas."

"Dear me!" replied the much-gratified vicar. "And how is that?"

"Why, he went an' moved our penny-in-the-slot meter from the kitchen to outside the front door," the woman replied.

"But don't you have to put the pennies in just the same?"

"Oh, no!" was the reply. "Other people does that for us. You see, 'Enery wrote 'Chocolates' on the top of it."—Sent in by Frank Hilton, Kennington, S.E.

INGENUITY.

Two Scotsmen were staying at an inn, and one of them happened to drop a shilling on the floor. They had both searched for a time without finding it, when one of them was struck with a brilliant idea.

He called the waitress in and explained:

"Betty," he said, "we've dropped two bawbees on the floor. Will ye see if ye can find them?"

Betty went down on her hands and knees, and after a time discovered the missing coin under the fender.

"Thank ye, my lass," said

the Scotsman. "Ye can keep

the other one when ye find

it."—Sent in by Albert

Wright, Fleetwood, Lancs.

A CLOTH-BOUND MENU.

"I say, waiter," exclaimed old Titewad, who had entered a rather faded-looking restaurant, where he thought the food would be cheaper. "I cannot see any menus. Where are they?"

"We don't have any, sir," replied the waiter wearily. "But I can tell you every thing that's on."

"You must have a marvelous memory," said Titewad, in astonishment.

"Not at all, sir. I only 'as to look at the tablecloth."—

Sent in by Miss A. Upson, Poplar.

THE FIRST NUMBER YOU THINK OF.

"I say, Charlie, come here!"

"Well?"

"Think of a number."

"Yes."

"Double it."

"Yes."

"Add on twenty."

"Yes. Go on."

"Halve it."

"Yes."

"Take away the number you first thought of."

"Right! I've done that."

"Leaves ten."

"No, it don't."

"Of course it does! It must do. What number did you think of?"

"This week's number of THE GEM. It's jolly fine! You ought to read it."—Sent in by J. Migdoo, Regent Street, W.

NOT SWEDISH DRILL!

Panel Doctor: "Next, please! Ah, now, my man, what's the matter with you?"

Insurance Patient: "Oh, doctor, at times I have an awful pain in my left shoulder!"

P. D.: "Um—yes! When do you feel the pain?"

I. P.: "When I bend my body forward, stretch my arms horizontally, and impart to them a circular motion."

P. D.: "Do you drill too much?"

I. P.: "No; only twice a week."

P. D.: "Then what is the need of doing those ridiculous antics?"

I. P.: "I don't know any other way of putting an overcoat on, doctor."—Sent in by Miss A. Upson, Poplar, E.

TAKEN DOWN A PEG.

Jimson, a practical-joke maniac, thought he would play a trick on a man who was just going out of the tea-shop.

"I say, sir!" he shouted. "Just a moment."

The stranger turned back just as he reached the door, and came back to the practical-joking one, who whispered in his ear:

"How far would you have been by now if I hadn't called you back?"

The victim, in no way disconcerted, straightened himself up, and said, in a tone of voice loud enough for every customer in the shop to hear:

"No, sir. I won't lend you five pounds! I haven't got it on me. And even if I had, I wouldn't lend it to you until you pay me what you borrowed two months ago!"

Jimson has now got rid of the playful habit of calling people back in public dining-rooms.—Sent in by Arthur E. Perry, Tunstall, Staffs.

VERY LIKELY!

Teacher: "Tommy, what were the thoughts that passed through Sir Isaac Newton's mind when the apple fell on his head?"

Tommy: "I 'specks he was jolly glad it wasn't a brick!"

—Sent in by L. Glashnick, Bermondsey, S.E.

As the "GEM" Storyette Competition has proved so popular, it has been decided to run this novel feature in conjunction with our new Companion Paper,

THE BOYS' FRIEND, 1d.,

Published every Monday,

in order to give more of our readers a chance of winning one of our useful Money Prizes.

If you know a really funny joke, or a short, interesting paragraph, send it along (on a post-card) before you forget it, and address it to: The Editor, THE BOYS' FRIEND and GEM, Gough House, Gough Square, Fleet Street, E.C.

Look out for YOUR Prize Storyette in next week's GEM or BOYS' FRIEND.