

THE FINEST SCHOOL ADVENTURES EVER WRITTEN!



BROUGHT TO LIGHT!



AN AWKWARD MOMENT FOR CROOKE!

(A Dramatic Scene in the Splendid, Long, Complete School Tale in this Number.)



The Editor's Chat.



Your Editor is always pleased to hear from his readers.
Address: Editor, The "Gem," The Fleetway House,
Faringdon Street, London, E.C. 4.

"THE FIGHTING SPIRIT!"

By Martin Clifford.

In this grand, long story of St. Jim's, Talbot and Marie Rivers play an important part. By some misfortune Rivers, the ex-crackman, loses his job and money, and, unable to find further employment, decides to return to that notorious occupation from which he had reformed. He urges the two to join hands with him. Although they do not agree to this, they persuade him to wait until Talbot is able to raise the necessary funds with which to start him straight again in business. The Founders' Examination offers a way out of the difficulty, although it is rather late to enter for it.

Talbot undertakes this task, and finds himself up against many difficulties.

This is one of your favourite author's finest yarns, so see that you do not miss it.

"KILLING THE WASPS!"

By Michael Poole.

The Wasps, a secret society formed by the boys of the Transitus Form at St. Katie's School, is killed, stabbed in the back by Mr. Roger Blunt, the Form-master.

No more could midnight revels be held, or pleasant little jaunts into the open after lights-out. There were bars to the windows, Jolly Roger had done that, and all for their own good, as he told them.

And the members of the deceased society, what do they do now? Do they put up with this?

"KILLING THE WASPS!"

will answer this question for you in next week's yarn.

THE CORRESPONDENCE COLUMN.

After long consideration I have decided that, in view of the extra expense entailed, all Notices will be charged sixpence each. It is my firm belief that supporters of the Companion Papers will freely recognise the growing necessity for placing the Correspondence Column on a business footing, and that the return to the former system of a small charge for insertions will add materially to the value and utility of this feature.

LAZY CORRESPONDENTS.

When in doubt write to the Editor about what is troubling you. That is all right, but there are cases where a humble editor cannot do anything, and one of these instances refers to correspondents who make use of the invaluable correspondence column, obtain the copies of the papers they want—and then forget to write back and send the money!

Sometimes it is just a question of laziness. I will admit that, but laziness can be carried too far, and usually is. I was set thinking about the whole matter by a cheery letter from Liverpool. This correspondent told me of his miserable experience some days ago. He had sent certain copies of the P. P. to

another reader. Then nothing happened. It was not a bit like a film play, in which everything happens all at once, and leaves you breathless. At last, after much trouble, the fellow at the other end seems to have woken up—possibly somebody took a corkscrew to him, you never know—and he returned two of the papers. That was all. Not a word of thanks—nothing!

This is what my chum, who was victimised, says about the subject:

"He cut me much of a chap, or he would have given an explanation, as to why he kept the papers so long. I don't like chaps that are underhanded. I like chaps to be straightforward and to deal square. You don't get on in the world by roguery. I would also like to say something about the Companion Papers. They are the best set of papers that were ever invented."

The only thing to be said here is that we all agree with the writer. You don't get on in the world by means of roguery. It is just that fact that requires fuller recognition in those few quarters where there seems to be a lingering notion that it is smart to be mean and to score off somebody else. It is not smart. There is something concerned here far more important than any question of getting on in the world. Far better to fail and keep honour bright. But as a matter of fact, everything else comes as well when there is the right spirit behind.

IN THE COUNTRY.

There are lots of different opinions about the country. Some people simply hate it and laugh at the notion that now summer is coming the country is the place to be in. Such folks prefer the nice, clean pavements of the town, with omnibuses handy, and plenty of shops, but for the country cannot be beaten, especially now that the hedges are shooting and the bulrush is out. It sounds precious dangerous, but the hedges do not offer any real risk, and the bull may rush out, but he means no harm. I can hear some of my chums saying this joke is too old, but it is a good, ancient wheeze, and I am not going to apologise for it.

It is the most natural thing in the world for the town dweller to hasten off into the open whenever he gets a chance. I believe the country people themselves know they have the best of things. They look happy, although they say they would rather live in town. You need not believe this story. I met a fellow the other day who had lived all his life in a tiny seaside village at the back of nowhere, and he said he would prefer London, but I expect it was mere swank. He had his sloping garden, which caught all the sun there was, and his ducks, and poultry and pigs looked fine. He had all a man can reasonably ask for, and he always seemed busy. When he wanted an evening out he took the ferry across the arm of the sea and saw his friends in a village over the way which

was not much bigger than his own. I am convinced that the majority of people do have a very kindly respect indeed for the country, even if they wince at lanes in which they find themselves ankle deep in mud.

It is certain, too, that the individual who makes his living by tramping the wilderness with a fiddle for company gets some of the best out of life. I met such a chap the other day. He was a philosopher—a well-read, venerable sort of a party, and he had a real good touch when it came to improvising melodies on the violin. We know what Congreve said about music:—

"Music has charms to soothe the savage breast,

To soften rocks, or bend the knotted oak."

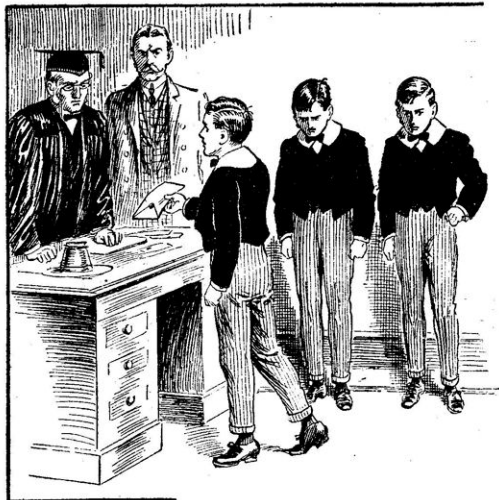
However that may be, there are some kinds of music which are always welcome, even if a street organ, or a gramophone with dyspepsia, or a concertina which has got the hump strike one as unwanted. Now, the country has really just as much variety as town. You might just skip this paragraph, it bores you. Don't get saying that "Chat" is a plague because of a few seasonable words about the summer-time in the country.

The fellow who takes an interest in birds and flowers enjoys every minute he spends in the woods and fields and lanes. After the winter has gone, it is quite a cheery, acceptable thing to hear the "pink-pink" of the chaffinch, and to see the yellowhammer, with his haughty-looking crest and his wondrous colouring, perched on the low branch of an oak and carefully inspecting the world.

We cannot all be naturalists. There is no time. Perhaps it is just as well, for there are other branches of learning which call for attention, but it is impossible not to admire the fellow who finds treasures in every bank—I mean a pleasant, mossy sort of old bank, not the dreary place where they hoard up the cash. The naturalist stops and inspects such a bank. He finds a beetle—which he calls a Coleopt, or something like that—and then he discovers new specimens for his conchological collection.

The student of shells has a subject which will keep him busy all his life, if he cares about the matter enough. Most of us have little enough idea of the immense variety of snails. The ordinary chap thinks a snail is a snail—the *Helix Aspersa*, with his grey house on his back. He takes his little grey home with him west or east, or anywhere else, and is as happy as the day is long until a smart blackbird gets him, or the gardener comes down heavy with his hob-nail boot.

Your Editor



CHAPTER 1.

Detectives in Council.

"THE first thing to do is to get together all the evidence that may bear on the case," said Kerr, of the Fourth Form and the New House at St. Jim's. "Isn't that so, Levison?"

Kerr, Talbot of the Shell, and the three occupants of Study No. 9 on the Fourth Form passage, Levison major, Cardew, and Clive, had met in Study No. 9 to discuss a matter of considerable importance.

That matter was the loss of a valuable manuscript, which had been sent to Talbot by his uncle, Colonel Lyndon. The MS. was said to be a hitherto unknown story by Edgar Allan Poe, the great American writer, and the colonel had wanted the opinion of Professor Aloysius Filding, then staying at St. Jim's as the guest of the Head, and delivering a short course of lectures on English literature during his stay, as to its authenticity.

But when Talbot had arranged to take the manuscript to the professor in the Head's study it could not be found.

Skimpole, who, with Gore, shared Talbot's study, had had it, and had put it in a drawer in the table. Someone had taken it from that drawer, it seemed—if Skimpole had really put it there. He believed that he had, of course; but Herbert Skimpole's memory was very unreliable.

Had it been consistently good—it was good about some things, but not about others—the detectives whom Talbot had called in to help him would have had something more definite to start upon than they had at present.

But Skimpole had quite forgotten Racker's visit to return his lost glasses. Kerr, Cardew, and Levison were the detectives in question.

Clive was too modest to flatter himself that he had any detective powers. But Talbot did not mind his knowing about the affair, and with both Cardew and Levison in it he could hardly have been kept out.

"Of course, it is evidence we want,"

said Levison, in reply to Kerr. "But this is what has struck me, Talbot. Is the MS. in existence any longer? I mean, mayn't it have been destroyed by accident? Got into the waste-paper basket, or something like that?"

Talbot shook his head.

Matter of fact, we haven't such a thing as a waste-paper basket in the study at present," he answered. "Gore did ours in some weeks ago, shoving it over Skimpole's head. You ought to have seen Skimpole coming up through the bottom of it, with two pairs of specs on his lofty brow, and an unearthly expression on his intelligent dial!"

"Where do you put your waste-paper?" asked Kerr.

"Gore and I chuck it on the fire. We don't make much. Skimpole never makes any. Nothing Skimpole has written is waste-paper—it's always valuable."

"You're inclined to bar out the destruction theory, then, Talbot?" drawled Cardew.

"I am, if only because it leads nowhere. To accept it would be to give up trying—and I'm not going to give up trying, even if you fellows think it hopeless. I value your help, and I want it, but I should go on without it. That MS. simply must be found!"

Reginald Talbot looked very determined as he spoke thus.

"Dear man, we don't mean to chuck it," said Cardew soothingly. "I'm in it for as long as you like, anyway. But we've got to consider possibilities, even the possibilities that occur to the pessimistic mind of the dear Ernest. Personally, I don't a bit believe it's gone west. Someone's boned it, an' there aren't many boners at St. Jim's—a fact which ought to narrow down the field of investigation."

"You're going the wrong way to work, Cardew," Kerr remarked quietly.

"As how, wise one?"

"You're more than half made up your mind already who is guilty!"

Cardew shrugged his shoulders.

"I should have, I confess, but I can't see a motive."

"That's just what beats me," said Levison.

BROUGHT TO LIGHT!

By

MARTIN CLIFFORD.

A Magnificent, Long, Complete Story Dealing with the Adventures of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's.

"Let's find out who could possibly have done it, and then search for a motive," Kerr said.

"But there doesn't seem to have been anyone at all who could have done it," objected Clive, who had listened intently without speaking till that moment.

"The thing was done, so someone must have done it," Kerr answered. "And we've got to presume that the MS. disappeared from Talbot's study. So the first question is—who knew anything at all about it?"

He looked at Talbot.

"Baggy Trimble was the first who saw it," Talbot said, speaking slowly. "Manners took it from him and brought it to me. The fat rotter had opened it, pretending to believe it was addressed to him."

"That's correct," said Cardew.

"Ernest and I were there at the time."

"Nobody else?" asked Kerr.

"Nobody else, m'lord," replied Cardew.

"Trimble, Manners, Levison, Cardew," said Kerr, writing the names on the pad before him. Then he struck out three of them. "I can only find one fellow to suspect out of that lot."

Cardew arose and bowed low and gracefully.

"On behalf of Ernest an' myself, I thank you, most excellent judge!" he said.

"Ass!" snorted Levison.

"Go on, Talbot," said Kerr.

"Manners brought the letter and the MS. to me. Gore and Skimpole were there."

"Gore, Skimpole," murmured Kerr. He wrote the names. Then he struck out the second.

He looked up sharply.

"Talbot, are you dead sure of Gore? Don't mind saying; it goes no farther."

"As certain as I am of myself," answered Talbot, without hesitation.

"Gore—well, Gore's my pal, Kerr. He may not always have been straight—"

"He wasn't," said Kerr drily.

"But he is now!"

"I believe you, old man."

"If Gore comes under suspicion because of his past you can count me out

of the detective force," spoke Levison, flushing. "I'm also under suspicion."

"Rot!" snapped Talbot.
"Are you not my pal?" murmured Cardew.

"Ahem! If you'll excuse my saying so, that isn't quite so high a testimonial as being Talbot's, Cardew," said Kerr.
But the twinkle in his eyes robbed the speech of any possible offence. Cardew had done reckless, foolish things; he had been in hot water again and again, and had often pulled Levison and even Clive in with him. But Kerr was sure of Cardew's essential straightness down at bed-rock; and Cardew was aware that he was sure of it.

"You're silly, Levison!" said Talbot. "All that I'd say for Gore I'd say for you, and more at the back of it. And I'd come to either of you for help if I needed it."

"Thanks, Talbot! I'll stop being silly, if I can. But it isn't all violets being a reformed character, you know."

"Proceed, Talbot! We're talking too much, and not saying enough," struck in Kerr.

"Manners and Gore had a bit of a yarn about the MS. in the Common-room," Talbot continued.

"Who else was there?" inquired Kerr.
"That's doubtful. I mean, it's not certain that anyone heard. Two fellows were standing before the fire when Gore went in—Racke and Crooke."

"They would hear, you bet!" said Levison.

"It isn't certain that they didn't go out before the conversation began," objected Talbot.

"Wait a moment!" said Kerr. "Was this the evening when Figgy and Fatty and I came over to consult you fellows about the Reddy-Ratty bizney?"

"I think it must have been."

"Then Racke and Crooke were still there. I can answer for that. When we came in with Tommy and Kangaroo there were four fellows in the room—Manners, Gore, and those two. I can't help noticing things like that."

"You're goin' a dashed long way round to get to the same place that I've already reached, Kerr," said Cardew lazily.

"But you'd see Racke and Crooke in anything fishy that happened," objected Clive.

"Well, Sidney, my simple child, aren't they always in it?" drawled the dandy of the Fourth.

"I don't see how they can have been in this. It's so altogether out of their line," Talbot said.

"Had that MS. any money value, old thing?" asked Cardew.

"Yes. At least, I suppose so."

"Motive supplied!" chirped Cardew. "I feel like little Jack Horner!"

"Not good enough!" said Kerr decisively. "I'm not saying they couldn't or wouldn't have done it; but the only fact of any importance as far as they are concerned is that they overheard what Gore and Manners said."

That is, they knew something about the MS. So did Baggy. But they don't seem likelier to have been interested than Baggy, and that's saying a good deal.

"I wonder just what they did hear?" Levison said. "If Gore and Manners could remember exactly what they said to one another we might get a clue out of that."

"Now that's a notion!" agreed Kerr. "I'll go along and see Manners now. Don't say anything to Gore, Talbot—that is, don't question him on your own account, in order to report to me. I'd rather have what he can tell at first hand."

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"I've handed over the case to you fellows, and I'll do what you think best," replied Talbot, smiling. "But it's a good deal to expect of any fellow that he should remember what he said in a casual chit-chat to which he couldn't have attached any importance at the time."

CHAPTER 2.

The First Clue.

"TOMMY! Thomas! Tom Merry! Aes! Chumpl! Fathead!"

It was Monty Lowther who spoke, in Study No. 10 on the Shells passage; and his voice rose as he grew more and more impatient at the difficulty he found in attracting Tom Merry's attention.

Tom and Manners were seated at the table. The rain was pouring down into the quad, and footer was off for that day. So Tom was writing an overdue letter to his uncle, General Merry, while Manners was busy with some of his negatives.

"Well?" said Tom, looking up.

"Which of you two idiots is sitting on the 'Ludgate Monthly'?" replied Lowther.

"Mine's a chair," Tom said.

"So is mine," said Manners.

"Get up, both of you! I want that paper, and I want it now!"

"What's the hurry?" asked Tom, rising. "The thing's been about here for no end of a time. Why are you frantic about it at this particular moment?"

"My story has to go in to-day!" howled Lowther.

"What story?" inquired Tom innocently.

"What story! Hear him! Why, the competition story, of course, dummy! The story into which I've put all my beam—the story that's going to bring me fame and a hundred quid!"

"Oh, that?" replied Tom. "I'd forgotten all about it!"

Manners grinned.

"You know, Tommy," he said. "It's called, 'The Man Who Punched Back.'"

"Oh, I know now!" said Tom. "But I haven't read it. What I felt interested in was whether Back punched back when the other chap punched Back. Did he, Monty?"

"Stupid! That isn't the title at all—it's 'The Man Who Came Back.' You can read it if you want to."

"Thanks, old man, no end! But—but I'm afraid that's a bigger treat than I ought to be allowed!"

"Pah!" ejaculated Lowther.

"Ma!" said Manners.

"Get up!" commanded Lowther.

"Whafor?"

"I want that paper, and I believe you're sitting on it."

"Whafor?"

"Because you're a silly ass, I suppose!"

"What do you want it for, you maniac?"

"To see how I'm to address this thing, of course."

And Lowther held up a fat envelope.

"Well, I don't believe it's under me, and, if it is, it's your own fault; and, anyway, I'm not going to get up!" said Manners, always capable of being awkward and obstinate.

"I'll make you!"

"I'd jolly well like to see you!"

Lowther proceeded to carry out his threat—or to attempt its carrying out.

Manners clasped his chair by the seat with both hands, and hung on.

"Leave go, dummy!"

"Not likely, lunatic!"

Neither heard a tap at the door. It was quite a gentle tap, but Tom Merry

heard it. He went to the door and opened it, while the two still struggled, unseeing.

"Oh, really, Manners! Really, Lowther!"

Ethel Cleveland stood in the doorway, charming as ever, doing her best to look shocked.

She was really Gussy's cousin Ethel; but she was also "Cousin Ethel" to quite a small crowd of St. Jim's fellows, and these three were among her best chums.

Lowther released his hold. Manners got up. Both looked a trifle shamefaced.

"Oh, I know you didn't mean it!" said the girl.

"Not so sure," replied Manners frankly. "This fellow is a bit trying at times. He insisted on my getting up, and I didn't feel inclined to. He was trying to make me; but he wouldn't have done it if you hadn't come in."

"Don't brag!" snapped Lowther. "After all, the blessed thing's not here. Where can it be?"

"What have you lost?" asked Ethel.

"That 'Ludgate Magazine,' with the competition announcement in it," Lowther answered. "It's the day for sending stories in, and I want the exact particulars of how to send mine."

"Try goods train, carriage forward!" grunted Manners.

"Oh, I should think it must be all right if you know the address, and put 'Story Competition' on the envelope!" said the girl. "I do hope you'll win, Lowther! I think your story is ever so nice!"

"Have you read it, Ethel?" asked Tom, in an awed voice.

"Every word of it!"

"There you are, you two," chortled Lowther.

"You are a pal, Ethel!" breathed Tom.

"Hear, hear!" cried Manners. "But it hasn't hurt her, Tommy. She looks quite all right after it."

"I hope so. And I hope I am a pal," said cousin Ethel. "And I'm sure you two will be more pleased than anyone else if Lowther does win."

"If!" said Manners.

Lowther glared at him again.

"I've come to say 'Good-bye,'" said Ethel. "I'm going this afternoon, you know, and there won't be time later in the day."

"Wish you never had to go," said Tom. "If we could only have our way we'd keep you and Professor Fielding, and let a dozen or two people we could spare quite nicely go instead."

Ethel smiled as she held out her slim right hand.

"It's a compliment to be classed with the professor," she said. "I wish he was staying. I should like to think that when I came back here I should find him. And Mrs. Holmes says that there is no one else whose company does the Head so much good as his."

"He's a brick!" said Tom.

"I wonder what has become of that paper?" persisted Lowther.

"Then Kerr appeared."

"What have you lost, Lowther?" he asked.

"Now you are well on the way to getting it back," Cousin Ethel said, smiling.

"If anyone can find it for you, Kerr can."

"Don't be sarcastic, Ethel!" pleaded Kerr.

"I wasn't. I meant it. Don't you suppose I know what a clever detective you are? Good-bye, Tom!"

She held out her hand to Tom Merry,

then to Manners, then to Lowther. When she turned to Kerr he asked:

"Shall I say good-bye to Fatty and Figgy for you?"

Ethel Cleveland flushed as she answered:

"I—I think, perhaps, I may see Figgy, Kerr. But if I don't see Wynn you might tell him I hadn't forgotten him."

Then she went.

"Yes, I rather fancy she may see Figgy," said Kerr. "He might have to scoot out of the Form-room and ride to Rylcombe at record pace to do it, but I'll bet he would be there before her train went out!"

"Shouldn't wonder!" replied Tom.

"Now, what's the trouble, Lowther?" inquired Kerr.

"Oh, it's nothing much. There's a

"It isn't a bit like that. 'It's about two men and—'"

"A girl!" chipped in Kerr.

"Good old Sherlock!" gibed Manners. "But that was easy guessing. If it wasn't two men and a girl it would have been two girls and a man."

"There isn't a girl in it!" howled Lowther.

"Then it doesn't stand an earthly!" said Tom.

"What's the magazine wanted for?" Kerr asked.

He hardly knew why that struck him as significant. But he trusted to his intuition, though he did not go on Cardew's line of making up his mind in advance who was to be found guilty in the end.

"It had the conditions in—date of

"Who was that?" asked Kerr sharply.

"Gore."

"How was it you spoke about it to him?"

"Gore isn't a literary person," remarked Tom, grinning. "It wouldn't interest him much."

"But, as a matter of fact, it did," said Manners. "It was rather queer why it did, too. Oh, you wanted to know why I mentioned it, Kerr. It was because Gore asked where Lowther was, and I said he was mugging away at this story."

"Where were you at the time?"

"In the Common-room. There were only two or three fellows there, and I was just going out when Gore came in."

"And why was he interested in the competition?"



Tom Merry went to the door and opened it, while Manners and Lowther still struggled. "Oh, really, Manners! Really, Lowther!" said Ethel Cleveland, standing in the doorway. (See Chapter 2.)

story competition in the 'Ludgate Magazine, and I've done a yarn for it—ripping good yarn, though I say it myself!"

"I don't see why you shouldn't. You're the only person who would!" growled Manners.

"Wrong there! For Cousin Ethel said it was good."

"Being polite, that's all!"

"It's called 'The Man Who Came Back,'" volunteered Tom. "I don't know what he came back for, unless he'd left his gloves. And I don't know whether, when he came back, he caught her kissing the other bouncer. But it's something funny and tragic like that, I'm sure!"

"You're all wrong!" howled Lowther.

closing, how to address the stories, and all that sort of thing," replied Lowther.

"And it's gone?"

"Yes; it's gone."

"Did anyone else know about the competition? I mean, was anyone else here thinking of entering?"

"Not that I know of," Lowther answered. "Of course, these asses knew; but they weren't interested enough in it to talk about it. And I didn't know of it when it was first announced; it was quite by chance I bought the mag. I only had ten days to do my story in."

"You're wrong about one thing," said Manners. "I don't know that I was particularly interested, but I do remember mentioning it to one chap."

"You're asking quite a heap of questions, Kerr!"

"I've a reason, old fellow."

"Right-ho! I don't mind being interrogated. It was because of that MS. of Talbot's—the thing that's lost now. Gore said that if it really was the work of Poe—though he didn't know properly who Poe was—Talbot had only to send it for the competition to walk off with the first prize."

Kerr almost started. Manners noticed a curious look in his eyes.

For the moment the Scots junior could not help suspecting Gore.

The fellow had done many fishy things in the past—things that were worse than

fishy—black things, such as Racke and Crooke did nowadays.

"Was it so certain that he was above a temptation like this?"

"Perhaps it was less Talbot's faith in Gore than the fact that the conversation in which he had taken part had been overheard which made Kerr confident of the former black sheep's innocence. But Talbot's faith counted, for, after all, he knew Gore, as Gore was now, better than anyone else at St. Jim's did."

"What did you say to that?" asked Kerr.

"Told him Talbot would never think of a trick like that," replied Manners. "And he said that was true; but there had been a time when he would have done it himself without thinking twice about it. He would have, too! But I'm sure he isn't that sort now."

"Anybody hear you?"

"Not that I know of. When Gore came in Racke and Crooke were standing by the fire, talking about horse-racing. I rather fancy they went out; anyway, if they heard it wasn't likely to make any impression on them."

Kerr doubted that. And he was sure, too, that Racke and Crooke had not gone out as soon as both Manners and Gore thought, for the precious pair had certainly still been there when he himself had come in with Figgius and Fatty and one or two School House fellows.

They had heard, and the Pos MS. was missing, and the magazine with the particulars of the competition in it was also missing!

From that conversation between Gore and Manners they had got not only information concerning the MS., but also, through Gore's random speech, a notion as to how it might be used profitably.

That did not prove they had stolen it, of course. But it did something to direct suspicion quite definitely upon them.

"What are you after, Kerr?" asked Tom.

"Tell you later, old top," Thanks, Manners! I really think you've helped me."

And Kerr went.

"I suppose I shall have to chance getting this thing right," said Monty Lowther, sitting down to address the envelope.

CHAPTER 3.

Following Up a Clue.

"Y AAS, dear boy, I think I could manage it," said Ralph Rackness Cardew. "But do you think it's really important?"

It was to Kerr that he spoke. Levison and Clive were present, for Kerr had looked in at No. 9 to see Cardew.

"I think it may be; it's a small thing, of course, but it's often the small things that matter," answered Kerr. "There isn't enough in it to justify a fellow turning over their things in their absence to find out, but if it were possible to find out without the necessity for that—well, I really think it would be worth while."

"How are you going about it, Ralph?" asked Clive.

"My dear Sidney, your verdant innocence never withers! What is the use of havin' one foot in the camp of the unrighteous if one cannot take advantage of the fact to spy out the land when needs be?"

"Don't go and gamble with those odds again just to get at this," said Levison bluntly.

"An' why not, dear boy? I assure you that what you term gamblin' does not cause me any qualms of conscience. I'm

glad of the excuse for a slight flutter, by gad!"

"With fellows who are dead sure to try to rook you!" snorted Levison.

"That, old gun, only adds to the charm. An' they can't do it, y'know; they'll try, no doubt, but your Uncle Ralph will be one too many for them. Did you say the name of the rag was the 'Ludgate Monthly, Kerr'?"

"No, 'Ludgate Magazine.'"

"Right-ho! An' do you want me to sneak it away?"

"No, chump!"

"I could, y'know. An' that wouldn't trouble my conscience, either."

"Have you a conscience?" asked Kerr.

"Aas, dear boy, I've considered the matter. When I think of Sidney here, an' you, an' other truly virtuous persons, I am inclined to doubt it; but then I turn to the contemplation of Racke, Crooke, Baggibus, and such insects, an', like the dashed Pharisee, I am thankful that I am not as other men are."

"When will you do it?" Kerr inquired.

"I really think I might as well go now. There is no time like the present, which is one of the old saws that I favour when in virtuous mood. When otherwise, I say, with the Spaniard, that to-morrow is also a day. Ever noticed, Kerr, how the old proverbs contradict one another? 'In the multitude of counsellors there is wisdom.' On the other hand, 'Too many cooks spoil the broth.' I keep mine in two sets, but I forget which those two belong to. Don't get impatient. I'm just going!"

And Cardew lounged out.

"What an ass Ralph is!" said Clive.

"He's not," replied Kerr. "That is, only when he chooses to be. The borderer's as deep as a well. Did he mean anything by his gas about too many cooks spoiling the broth, I wonder?"

"That's the worst of Ralph, you can't tell when he means anything, and when he's just getting rid of hot air," said Clive.

"I can," Levison said.

"Did he mean anything, then?" asked Kerr.

"I think he did. Not in a nasty way, but I fancy he'd just as soon Talbot had left this to him, and not called you in. And, if I were you, Kerr, I wouldn't depend on his telling you all he finds out. I'm not saying anything against him, and I'm certain he has nothing against you; but Talbot's one of the two or three fellows he thinks a heap of without ever saying much about it, and he'd have liked getting to the bottom of this mystery for him without help."

Kerr nodded.

Cardew, meanwhile, had strolled to the Shell passage, and had tapped at the door of the study tenanted by Racke and Crooke.

"Come in!" snarled Racke.

His face still looked like that of a wolf in a bad temper when he saw who the visitor was.

Cardew and these two had many encounters. The Fourth-Former made no pretence of liking the two Shell outsiders; he never had made any such pretence. But when the whim took him he would treat them as if he had quite forgotten all causes of disagreement.

He treated them thus now.

"Any notion what's the best thing for a fellow to do when he's bored to death, by gad, Racke?" he drawled, sinking into the armchair.

Then he yawned portentously.

"Play banker," replied Racke, with conviction.

"But banker's rather a bore, too, I think."

"That's only because you've got out of the way of it. Take a hand with us; you'll soon brighten up."

Racke and Crooke were all eagerness. Cardew had heaps of tin, and he was not careful. He did not easily allow himself to be cheated, even when in his slackest mood. But it was quite possible that a considerable sum might be won from him playing on the straight. And, anyway, those two were always ready for a gamble.

Cardew sat to the table as if he did not take two pennyworth of interest in anything in the world—so Racke and Crooke thought. His eyes were half-veiled, as though he were too lazy to open them fully.

But under the drooping lids those eyes, as keen as any at St. Jim's, as keen even as Kerr's, were on the watch. Already Cardew had caught sight of what he believed to be the magazine of which he was in search. But he did not hurry.

Racke took a new pack of cards from the drawer on the table, unlocking it to do so. There was something in that drawer which he did not want anyone to see. He did not suspect in the least that Cardew saw it; he would have said that it was impossible he should see.

They cut for deal. Crooke dealt. The game began. Cardew seemed utterly indifferent to it. Every now and then his hand went to his mouth, as if to stifle a yawn. He took up his cards listlessly, and put them down as if it did not matter a rap to him which of them he played.

Nevertheless, he was a winner at the end of twenty minutes or so.

"I really don't find myself gettin' the least little bit brighter, Racke," he remarked pathetically.

"I don't, either!" growled Crooke, glancing meaningfully at the very small pile of silver in front of him.

It had been a much larger pile when he had started.

"Change seats an' change your luck," said Cardew. "Perhaps I shall feel brighter when I begin to lose. Doin' a good turn to the deservin' poor, y'know. No offence!"

Racke and Crooke both grinned. They were neither poor nor deserving; but if Cardew felt that it would make his life ever so little brighter to lose money to them, they were quite willing to indulge him. Racke, usually the first of the two to think of playing on the cross, began to wonder if Cardew would notice a little tricky dealing, but decided that it was not safe to try it yet.

Neither thought anything of the fact that the seat to which Cardew moved, in order that Crooke might change his place, brought him in front of the locked drawer.

"Let's play nap," he said.

"Right-ho!" answered Racke.

And he kicked Crooke under the table.

Nap suited them very well. They could play into one another's hands at that game. Cardew was careless. If Crooke called "three," and Cardew could not stop him, Racke was careful not to do so. And Crooke would hold up an ace while Racke went "four," with a hand which had the king of the same suit as his best card. The ace went back into the pack when the four had been scored; that was all.

Then Cardew dropped a card, and had to get down to pick it up. Crooke had a look at the four cards he had left confidingly on the table, and winked at Racke as he looked. Neither guessed

that when Cardew came up again the key was turned in the lock of the drawer.

An apparently accidental jog of Racke's elbow as he dealt sent the pack flying all over the place. Crooke and Racke gathered up the cards.

"Clumsy," said Cardew. "Awfully clumsy of me. But you do rather spread-eagle yourself when you're dealing, Racke. Excuse my not helpin' to pick up the pasteboards. I really don't feel equal to it."

But even while he spoke his hands were in the drawer, and when they emerged he held something in them. He laid that something on his knees. The cards had been collected, and he must wait for the chance to smuggle it under his jacket.

And all the time he looked so lazy, so indifferent to anything and everything, that Racke and Crooke, fly as they thought themselves, were completely deceived.

They were winning now; Cardew did not appear to mind. But it seemed that the losing game bored him as much as the winning one, for while Racke was dealing he took a magazine from under a pile of books.

"'Ludgate Magazine,'" he said. "Didn't know you patronised literature even to so slight an extent as buyin' this kind of rag, you two."

Crooke gave Racke a swift glance of alarm.

But Racke was not troubled. There was nothing much in the fact of their having that particular paper on their table, though it would have been safer to destroy it.

"We didn't," he said. "We don't waste the oof that way. Baggy brought that along. I don't know a bit why."

Racke had told part of the truth, because he fancied it sounded more convincing than a lie. It was only part of the truth, for Baggy had been bribed to get that paper from No. 10, Crooke having failed in an attempt to obtain a copy in the ordinary way.

But Crooke felt that even so small a measure of verity required to be backed up.

"Yas, you do, Aubrey," he said. "You've forgotten; that's all. Didn't the fat bouncer say there was a racin' article in it? Dunno why he should think we'd be interested in such a naughty subject. Ha, ha, ha."

Racke frowned at Crooke. Cardew was turning over the pages of the magazine. It had been Racke who had spoken of a racing article to Baggy, not Baggy to Racke. The schemer had thought it best to account to the fat rascal for wanting the "Ludgate."

"I don't see it," said Cardew. "Never mind. I shouldn't be interested. There's nothin' really interestin' in this footin' old world, I think. My cards? Thanks, Crooke!"

He laid down the paper in the most indifferent way, and took up the hand which had just been dealt him.

Then he put his elbows on the table, and in doing so contrived to pull the cloth towards him. Those half-veiled eyes of his saw that at the other end it was already beyond the edge. A very slight tug would set the things upon it sliding.

Racke and Crooke had eyes only for their cards.

"D'ye always let the dashed fire out?" asked Racke plaintively.

And he buttoned his jacket, with a very realistic shiver. He had slipped under it before buttoning what had been on his knees for the last few minutes.

Crooke got up to put on coal.

"Sorry," said Racke. "We didn't notice. Have a cigarette?"

He pushed a box of cigarettes towards Racke, sliding it along the table. A stationery cabinet which had been moved to the edge overbalanced and crashed down. Cardew, with a hand at the level of his lowest waistcoat-button, gave a tug at the cloth to make sure, and what he had wanted happened.

Down went inkstand, books, silver, cards. Crooke turned from the fire with a start, and the descent of a shovelful of coals added to the clatter.

Cardew jumped up.

"Oh, dash it all, that ink only just missed my bags!" he snapped. "I must say you're a clumsy bouncer, Racke! Never mind! There isn't much of my oof down there, an' I've had enough disfigure for one day. I may look in again some time—when I've nothin' better to do."

He went. Crooke and Racke, who were not proud where money was concerned, pocketed what he had allowed to stay on the floor. The cards had got inked, and Racke flung them into the grate. Neither thought of looking at the drawer. If they had they would have found it locked, but they would not have found the key in the lock.

Cardew had thought it expedient to take the key, and his very accommodating conscience had not said him nay.

CHAPTER 4. More Clues.

ONLY Clive was in No. 9 when Cardew returned.

Without a word to him Cardew took a big envelope and thrust something into it. He fastened the flap, sealed it, with precise attention to tidiness, and handed it to Clive.

"What's this?" asked the South African junior.

"I want you to sign your name an' put the date outside," returned his chum.

"Been making your will?" queried Clive, with a grin, as he did what was asked of him.

"Not exactly. But that's a private paper, which may be wanted again, an' I should like you to remember that you saw me put it in an' seal it."

While he spoke Cardew was signing his own name under Clive's.

"Take care of that, Sidney," he said, "an' oblige me by not sayin' anythin' to anybody."

"Not even to Ernest?"

"Not unless he asks. You may tell him then."

But Cardew was very sure that Levison would not ask, because he had nothing to go upon.

"You say it's valuable?" said Clive.

"That's why I'm trustin' it to you. You are such a reliable chap, Sidney dear."

"Thanks! But I know you're only gassing. Find out anything?"

"All that Kerr wanted to know. It was easy. What was the name of Sexton Blake's boy assistant? Pots—Kettle—no; that's not it."

"Tinker!" said Clive.

"Right, as usual! Call me 'Tinker' in future. But don't call Kerr 'Blake,' as it might lead to confusion with our pil in No. 6. I am Kerr's very junior assistant. Sidney dear, an' don't you forget it!"

Levison would have been quite sure that Cardew had something important up his sleeve. Clive only thought it might be so.

It was near dinner-time, but five minutes remained in which Cardew could run across to the New House.

He did not get there, however, for on the way he met Baggy Trimble.

"Hail, Baggybus the Charitable!" he said.

"What are you getting at, Cardew?" squeaked Baggy.

"The crudite professor has indeed spread the light in unexpected places," said Cardew. "Who would have imagined Baggybus takin' food for the mind to Racke an' Crooke?"

"Food?" repeated Baggy vaguely. That word meant so much more to him than "mind" that he missed Cardew's meaning. "I haven't been taking those two grab. Catch me at it! I can do with all that comes my way."

"Food for the mind, I said, my fat pippin!"

"Eh? Oh, rot, Cardew! The dinner-bell will be going in a minute, you know, and I'm jolly peckish."

"Really? I say, though, you've been the means of givin' me an acute disappointment."

Baggy stared. He really did not mind if he had disappointed Cardew. He had no love for the sarcastic dandy. But he could not make out a bit what Cardew was driving at.

"Eh?" he repeated.

"What made you say that there was an article about horse-racin' in the 'Ludgate Magazine'?"

"I didn't! I don't know anything about it! Oh, yes, I remember now! But it wasn't me—"

"I, Baggybus, I! Without any wish to be pedantic—"

"It wasn't you, any more than it was me. I think you must be going a bit potty, Cardew. You weren't there. It was either Racke or Crooke who said that. I don't remember which."

"And did you tell Lowther that Racke an' Crooke wanted to borrow it?"

Baggy was taken quite off his guard for a moment. It was possible to take Baggy off his guard even when the secret he had to keep was his own; and he was a very leaky vessel where the secrets of others were concerned.

"Not jolly well likely! I collared the rag when those chaps weren't in their study. I mean—that is to say, I never collared it at all! I don't know what you're talking about, Cardew. Did you say 'Bradshaw'?"

"No, Baggybus; neither Bradshaw nor Bradbury. Racke may have said 'Bradbury,' though I should imagine your little piece of sneak-thievery came cheaper than that. Don't trouble to tell me any more of 'em. I know all I want to know now, thank you!"

Then the first bell for dinner sounded, and Baggy hurried in to give his hands a slight dampness—sufficient to enable him to rub off some of the dirt upon them with a towel. The heir of the house of Trimble thought washing one's hands once a day quite enough—in fact, rather too much. But one had to make some pretence of conforming to the absurd standards of cleanliness which other fellows expected.

Cardew, who hated even a speck of dirt on his carefully-kept hands, did not hurry. He went in slowly and thoughtfully. But then Cardew hardly ever hurried.

He strolled across to the New House after dinner, and looked up Kerr.

"The magazine is there, dear boy," he said. "If you want to be quite certain that it is the same copy, you might ask Lowther whether there was a smear of ink on the page opposite the competition announcement. But I don't think that's necessary. I have found out that Baggy borrowed the rag from

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 639.

no. 10 in the absence of Lowther an' the rest."

"Found out anything more?" asked Kerr.

"One or two little things. Perhaps you wouldn't regard them as important. I go to work the wrong way—make up my mind in advance, an' all that, y'know."

Kerr was just about to ask what those one or two little things were, but just then Figgins appeared, with a letter in his hand, a beaming smile on his face, and Fatty Wynn behind him.

Cardew answered the greetings of the newcomers, and went. Probably he would not have told Kerr anything in any case, but he went without being asked to tell.

Fatty winked at Kerr. Figgins subsided into the armchair and slit the envelope of his letter—very carefully, as though it were precious. That and Fatty's wink enabled Kerr to guess from whom it was.

But Figgins had no intention of keeping its reception a secret; secrets were not in his line.

"Ethel got home all right, you fellows," he said.

"It's a weight off my mind to hear it," replied Kerr, grinning.

"But if there had been a railway accident it would have been in the morning papers," said Fatty.

"Ass!" snorted Figgins.

Then he went back to his letter. Kerr and Fatty sat and looked at him as he read.

He glanced up suddenly, and became aware that their eyes were upon him.

"What are you fatheads staring at?" he snapped.

"Another fathead!" answered the Welsh junior.

"You were smiling so sweetly, Figgys," said Kerr.

"Rats! Well, then, there was something here about Racke that tickled me a bit. Did you know that Lowther had gone in for a story competition?"

Kerr's heart fairly leaped, but his face showed nothing.

"Yes, I heard something about it," he said.

"I didn't. Might have had a shot myself if I'd known of it. I get a lot more life into my yarns than Lowther does into his."

"Life—and death!" murmured Kerr.

"What do you mean, ass?"

"Member 'The Red Avenger; or, the War-Tail of the Apaches,' Fatty? There were seventeen killings in the first three chapters."

"I remember, Kerr," replied Fatty solemnly.

"You're two idiots! You don't know a good story when you see one. Well, Lowther asked Ethel to read this story—like his blessed cheek—and she says it was jolly good. But, then, she's so nice to any decent fellow. She wouldn't hurt his feelings. I say, Kerr, you remember, when we went down to the station to see Cousin Ethel off, those two bouncers got into her compartment, and said they were going as far as Wayland!"

"Yes, I remember."

"Well, Racke had the cheek to offer to help her with her luggage at Wayland!"

"Better manners than I should expect of Racke," remarked Fatty.

"Manners!" snorted Figgins. "Lot of manners about it, you bet!"

"I thought it was about Lowther we were talking," said Kerr.

"Oh, yes! Well, Racke dropped a big envelope out of his pocket, and Ethel couldn't help seeing the address. It was to the same magazine that offered the

prize Lowther has had a shot at. Wish I'd known! Fancy Racke trying to write a story! Oh, my hat!"

Kerr thought that possibly a story actually written by Racke might have stood about the same chance in the competition as an effort of George Figgins. Figgins had rather a gory taste in the way of incident. Redskin scalpers and blood-stained pirates were his usual characters, and, being what they were, they met the fate they deserved, for the talented author killed them off by the score without compunction. This might have a good moral effect, but Kerr rather doubted whether the editor of the "Ludgate" wanted yarns about Red Indians and the Jolly Roger and walking the plank, and all that kind of thing.

"Figgys," said Kerr, "there's more in this than meets the eye! I rather fancy Ethel's given me a valuable clue when she thought of nothing but telling you something funny to help dry your tears."

"What are you getting at, maniac?"

"My tears! Oh, my hat!"

"Better weep 'em into your hanky," said Fatty. "We'll be bad for the nap of toppers."

But Figgins took no notice of Fatty's gibe. He saw now that Kerr was very much in earnest about something.

"What is it, Kerr?" he asked.

"The other afternoon, when Ethel came to tea in Blake's study, Gore looked in to tell Talbot that he couldn't find that lost MS."

"Oh, yes, I remember! Old Talbot had told us the story of it, and it made Ethel quite serious, I know."

"We've good reason to believe that MS. was stolen. This makes it pretty certain it was."

Figgins looked puzzled.

"Don't see it," he said.

"I believe the envelope Cousin Ethel saw contained a copy of that MS!" said Kerr impressively.

"Oh, but I say, Kerr, those sweeps haven't brains enough to think out a scheme like that! It would be a dirty trick, but a chap would have to be a bit brainy to think of it."

"Rather! I should never have thought of it," Fatty said.

Kerr smiled. Fatty Wynn did not lack brains, though he was simple in some ways. But quite certainly such a scheme as this would never have occurred to his honest mind.

"Racke has brains, more than most of you are inclined to credit him with," he said. "But they didn't think out the wheeze; they barged it from Gore!"

"But—Oh, see here, Kerr, I'm not saying that I'm exactly fond of Gore; but the fellow's straight enough now. And I do believe that he'd cut his right hand off before he'd do anything against Talbot."

"So do I, Figgys. And Talbot won't hear of the least breath of doubt against him. But it wasn't like that. Racke and Crooke heard something Gore said to Manners—something he only half-meant—just as you said that you could have slain Racke and Crooke for getting into the same compartment with Cousin Ethel."

"And you think I only half meant that? You're dead off it there, old man! But go on!"

"That's pretty nearly all. The MS. had disappeared, and it wasn't easy to make out why anyone should want it. The competition and Gore's remark to Manners that Talbot could walk off with the first prize if he chose to send in that yarn as his own, don't you see how that supplies a motive? If no one—well, no one fishy—had heard, it might look as

though Gore had given way to temptation; but—"

"But as it is, anybody can see with half an eye that those two bad eggs stole the MS., and sent the story along to win the prize by a low wangle!" burst out Figgins. "And my notion is, that they ought to be tackled about it at once!"

"Gently, gently, old fellow! We've no absolute proof yet," said Kerr. "Even the circumstantial evidence has some missing links."

Fatty and Figgins stared at him. What more could the fellow want? He seemed to them altogether too slow and cautious. Cardew's methods were really much nearer their notion of the way to do it.

"I don't see where there's any missing link," said Figgins.

"I might refer you to Grundy, but I won't. There's this: We don't know how the MS. was sneaked out of Talbot's study."

"Why, Racke sneaked it, of course; or, if he didn't, Crooke did. You can bet they're both in it," said Fatty, his china-blue eyes wide open in astonishment at what he thought Kerr's slowness.

"But that's just one of the links that's lacking. We haven't any proof that either of them put his ugly nose inside Talbot's study."

"I see," said Figgins. "But I don't see how you can be expected to prove everything. Look here! Wouldn't the story they sent up prove it all?"

"It might, and again it might not," Kerr replied. "Talbot hadn't read the yarn. Skimpy, who had taken it over, hadn't read it. There isn't any certainty that Colonel Lyndon had read it. Yes, he must have, though, for he was sure that it was really Poe's! I say, that's a notion of yours, Figgys!"

"I'm jolly glad if I've helped you," answered Figgins. "It isn't often I can in things of this sort. But this case does look simple enough for anything to me."

"It's beginning to straighten itself out in my mind," said Kerr. "And another clue may drop from the sky at any moment like this last one."

"He means Ethel's an angel, Figgys," said Fatty.

"You're an ass!" snapped Figgins.

CHAPTER 5.

Talbot's Uncle.

"I SAY, Kerr!" It was Reginald Talbot who spoke thus, coming out from breakfast a day or two later.

"Yes, old chap?"

"My uncle's coming along to-day. I knew he thought of coming, but I didn't expect him just yet. I haven't told him about that lost MS. I've been hoping the thing would turn up. But I shall have to face the music now."

Talbot would face the music manfully enough, of course. But he was worried. He did not fear Colonel Lyndon's wrath, but he was ashamed of not having been more careful.

"The best thing I can think of is to lay my case, as far as I have it complete, before him—without names—and ask him what he thinks about our chance of finding out something from the 'Ludgate Magazine' people," replied Kerr.

"Yes; that does seem best. He would know more about the way to approach them than we do, I suppose, though it wouldn't be much in his line. Hallo, Skimpy! My uncle's coming to-day."

"Is he, indeed, Talbot? I am very

pleased to hear it," answered the genius of the Shell. "I have a high regard for Colonel Lyndon, though I cannot say that the military caste, in general, has my approval, for I am convinced that war is an error."

"So is everybody," said Kerr. "That doesn't do away with the chance of new wars, though."

"Colonel Lyndon was very kind to me when he was here last," Skimpole said, for once failing to seize the opportunity for an argument. "I had mislaid a pair of my glasses—in fact, I had mislaid both pairs—and I recall how he helped me to search for them. Dear me! Now that is very strange, very strange, indeed!"

Skimpy put his right hand to his bony brow, and squeezed up his face into an impression of profound thought.

"It wasn't strange at all," said Talbot. "People may think him stern, but he's as kind as any man I know."

"That is not my meaning, Talbot. I have thought of something which quite slipped my mind when I was being asked who had visited our study about the time when the MS. of that story disappeared." "Here, come aside," said Kerr sharply. "We don't want everyone to hear."

The three drew away into a corner.

"Now then, Skimpy!" Kerr said.

"It is strange in the extreme that I should not have recalled it earlier, especially as my memory is quite a remarkable one—"

"It certainly is," agreed Talbot. "I never knew anyone like you for being able to remember things that don't matter a scrap, and forgetting all about things that are really important."

"And as the episode struck me at the time as very distinctly out of the common," went on Skimpy, paying no heed to Talbot. "It is very seldom indeed that Racke does anybody what is colloquially termed 'a good turn.' I should say that the element of altruism is as conspicuously lacking from Racke's psychology as from that of anyone I am acquainted with, Trimble possibly excepted."

Talbot had opened his mouth to say something; but Kerr nudged him for silence. It was best to keep Skimpy in the heel. If he were interrupted he might forget again, Kerr feared.

"Yet Racke, having found my glasses, brought them to me. He was not very polite about it; he made injurious remarks which are somehow associated in my mind with waxworks. What an exceedingly curious thing association of ideas is, my dear fellows!"

Racke had actually said something about looking at Skimpy being no special treat to him, as he had seen the Chamber of Horrors at Madame Tussaud's.

"Don't get off the track, Skimpy, for my sake!" said Kerr, in low alarm. "There may be quite a lot hanging on your evidence. Can you date Racke's visit?"

"As it happens, by what may appear to be a fortuitous concatenation of circumstances—"

"Help us!" murmured Talbot faintly.

"Do you not feel well, my dear Talbot?" asked Skimpole, in real anxiety. "That would be most unfortunate, with your uncle coming."

"Go on, Skimpy!" said Kerr. "Talbot's recovered. But it was a narrow squeak. If you'd said 'avuncular relative' I don't know what might not have happened."

"I really do not quite apprehend your meaning, Kerr—"

"Never mind, as long as I get you. It's a bit tough at times, but so far I've kept up."

"What was I saying? Oh, yes, about the date! I am sure that I can fix that, for when I am engaged upon work of particular importance I have a habit of dating my notes. Now, on the day when Racke brought back my glasses, I was at work on the subject of the varying influences of heredity and environment upon the—"

"Never mind the rest of the circus. Let's have a squint at those notes!" said Kerr.

"Pardon me, Kerr, but I fail to grasp your exact meaning. I made no mention of a circus. I—"

"Come along!" said Kerr, giving him a push in the required direction.

And the three went up together to the study which Talbot shared with Skimpy and Gore.

Gore was there; and he opened his eyes very widely when Kerr and Talbot put their heads together over a sheet of Skimpy's scientific notes. But it would have taken more than that to convince Gore that those notes were anything better than waste paper.

"Gone potty, you two?" he asked.

"Not exactly, dear boy," replied Kerr.

"The date fits all serene, Kerr," Talbot said eagerly.

"Fits what?" Gore inquired, full of curiosity.

"Racke was in here, to return Skimpy's spec, between the day I got that MS. and the day when it went missing," Talbot answered.

Gore drew a deep breath.

"My hat! But I'm not really a bit surprised," he said. "Just the chap to bone anything—though why he should want that story licks me!"

"Your fault, Gore," said Kerr uncompromisingly.

"My fault? Hang it all, you New House bouncer, that's a trifle steep: I'm not going to stand that!"

"Half a minute, Gore," said Talbot quietly.

"Before you start in on Kerr will you try to remember what you said to Manners about that yarn in the Commemorative, when Racke and Crooke were here?"

"What? Oh, scissiors! Did they hear? I say, Talbot, I was a fool!"

"It wasn't very wise," admitted Talbot.

Gore's face was a study in puzzlement, with some other feeling in it that was difficult to analyse until he said:

"Who else knows—I mean that blessed silly thing I said must have been talked over among you. Who knows about it? Manners, of course, and you two. Who else?"

Tom Merry, Lowther, Cardew, Levison, and Clive," replied Kerr.

"I'll bet some of them thought I might have done what I suppose Racke and Crooke have done."

"They didn't," said Kerr.

"Are you sure? Not even Levison?"

"No one, and certainly not Levison."

He said that if you weren't to be counted as above suspicion he couldn't be."

Gore straightened his shoulders, and his chin went up.

"I've more friends than I knew," he said. "That was decent of Levison."

Then the bell rang for morning classes, and they hurried off. Gore's eyes shone. He was touched. Kerr felt happy. His chain of evidence was very nearly complete now. But Talbot was worried. He could not doubt that Crooke was in the swindle with Racke. And Crooke was his cousin—Colonel Lyndon's nephew; and the colonel would be at St. Jim's in a few hours.

After classes Talbot went to the station to meet his uncle, and, by his special request, Kerr went with him.

It was for Talbot to confess the loss, but he was sure that Kerr could tell better than he how they had arrived at conclusions which gave some hope, at least, that the MS. might be recovered.

Colonel Lyndon walked up to the school with them. He listened to the confession of his nephew in silence. When it had been made he laid a hand on Talbot's shoulder.

"I'm not blaming you in the least, my boy," he said. "You infer that the manuscript has been stolen. If that is the case, something has happened which I should never have anticipated; and I can hardly expect you to have more foresight than I have. There was no harm in allowing Skimpole to have it, and I cannot hold him in fault for not locking it up. But you must tell me what makes you think that a theft has taken place."

"Kerr will tell you that better than I can, uncle. You may not know it, but he's no end clever at detective work. I'm not. I asked him to help me—or, rather, to take the case over. And he's found out a lot."

"Mostly luck; and I've had some help, too," Kerr said modestly. "I'll go over it as shortly as I can to be clear, sir."

"As long as you are clear, you need not trouble to be brief, Kerr," answered the colonel. "I am interested not only in your conclusions, but also in the steps by which you arrived at them."

Kerr's explanation was a model of clearness. Colonel Lyndon looked at him once or twice in its course with something like amazement. Kerr had had some luck; but, if he were not born to be a detective, he was born to be a barrister, the colonel thought. The marshalling of evidence, the deductions made from the evidence, were alike wonderful in a mere boy.

"The aspect of the matter which troubles me most is that your worthless cousin, Gerald Crooke, should be mixed up in this, Reginald," said the colonel sorrowfully. "Even after all that has passed I cannot deal with him as I could with a stranger. He is my sister's son still."

"I understand, uncle," replied Talbot.

"And I don't want Crooke sacked or anything like that. 'Has troubled me, too.'"

"There is no doubt that Dr. Holmes must be told what has happened, as the loss of the MS. is known to him," continued Colonel Lyndon. "I fear that it will take all the influence I have with him to save Crooke. If he can be saved Racke will also escape—that is inevitable, since your Head is above all things a just man."

"Before we—before you tell the Head anything at all, sir," put in Kerr. "wouldn't it be best to make quite sure?"

"And how could you propose to do that, my boy?"

"Go to these magazine people, and tell them enough to induce them to hunt through the competition stories for the copied one. If you can get hold of that—"

"A good idea, Kerr—a very good idea!"

"You've read it, I suppose, sir?"

"Oh, yes, I have read it—several times, in fact!"

"And you'd know it, even though those two might have altered names and such things in it?"

"Bless my soul, what makes you think they will have done that?"

"I think it's more than likely, sir. They're pretty crafty. And it wouldn't be a bad thing if you took up to town with you specimens of the fists of both

of them. That might help to convince the editor."

"Reginald, you did quite right when you put this case into the hands of our friend here! He thinks of things that would not occur to me."

"That's likely enough, uncle," said Talbot. "Kerr's done a lot of this kind of thing, and it's not much in your line."

"I will go to town to-morrow, and if it is as you think—and I can hardly doubt it—there will be a heavy reckoning for Gerald Crooke and that other young scoundrel!"

CHAPTER 6.

In Sheer Desperation.

"**B**Y gad! If that isn't my uncle!" It was George Gerald Crooke who uttered this exclamation.

He and Racke were lounging together at the gates, a favourite practice of theirs when they had nothing more to their taste to do, and the temperature was not too low for their pampered bodies.

"With Talbot an' Kerr. It looks dashed fishy, Gerry!"

"Nothin' in his bein' with Talbot, though the fellow was a cad not to tell me that old Lyndon was comin'. But Kerr—" It looks as though they'd got on to something, Aubrey!"

"You're afraid of that red-headed bouncer," replied Racke.

But his pasty face had gone paler yet. Whatever he might say, he did not fail to scent danger in that conjunction.

The precious pair had at once put themselves on the inside of the gates. Now they hurried off to their study, hoping that Colonel Lyndon and his companions had not spotted them.

As a matter of fact, both Talbot and Kerr had seen them. But the colonel had, and the two said nothing to him.

"See here, Aubrey, it's not safe to keep that MS. any longer," said Crooke nervously. "There's sure to be a fuss about the loss of it now that old Lyndon has turned up."

"I said all along that it was better to destroy it," answered Racke. "On the fire it goes this minute!"

But there was a hitch. The drawer in which the MS. had been hidden was locked, and the key was not in it.

Racke felt in all his pockets before he said:

"You've got that key, Crooke!"

"I haven't, by gad! I never do take it. You know that well enough!"

"Then the thing's lost!"

"If it wasn't for old Lyndon bein' here I should say it was no odds, because if we couldn't get at it no one else could."

Said Crooke slowly. "But if they once get searchin' they won't stand for a locked drawer."

"I'm goin' to burst it open," returned Racke.

"Don't make a row! If anyone's suspicious—" But Racke realised that the noise made by a blow or two with a poker was not the kind of thing that was so unusual in a junior study as to offer much evidence to the most suspicious mind. Already he was at work, and Crooke pulled up short in his protest, and watched with anxious eyes.

The drawer was smashed open very quickly. Then both gazed at it blankly.

The MS. was not there! Packets of cigarettes were there and packs of cards and sporting papers. But the MS. had gone!

"But it must be there!" cried Crooke, in dismay.

"Rot! I don't see how it can have gone, but it has!"

"Could Baggy have sneaked it, or Mellish?" suggested Crooke. "Scoop wouldn't, an' no one else has been in except Cardew."

"Baggy or Mellish is no more likely to have done it than Cardew, an' it could be clean absurd to imagine he did, by gad!"

"He's a crafty brute," said Crooke.

"Yes, that's so. But why should he? An' how could he have done it without our spottin' him?"

"I don't see how. An' if you were careless enough to leave the key in the lock it might have been anybody—Kerr or Talbot, even!"

Crooke was in a plain funk, and Racke was not much better now.

"What's to be done?" Racke asked.

"I don't know," replied Crooke hopelessly. "I wish I'd never seen the dashed old back number! I never should have done it if it hadn't been for you, Racke!"

"Oh, put it all on to me, do! But old Lyndon's your uncle, an' if it's the sack for this it will be hotter for you at home than it will be for me."

"Don't I know that? See here, Racke, have you posted that letter yet?"

"What, the one to the magazine, giving the nom-de-plume an' the name an' address in a sealed envelope? No. I only knew this mornin' that things were fixed up for takin' in the cheque at my man's new address."

"Don't send it! They'll never know then who bungled in the yarn!"

"Rate! It's half of it's in my fist, an' half in yours. If it ever comes to be examined they'll know that fast enough. But wait a moment—"

Racke stopped, pursing his lips, knitting his brows, thinking hard.

"Oh, go on, if you've anythin' at all to suggest!" begged Crooke.

"We might get the thing back."

"How? By writing for it? But that would give the whole show away!"

"No. By fetchin' it!"

"By gad! That's a notion, Aubrey! If you're game to do that—"

"You're right. It's your job. You're deeper in this than I am. Lyndon's not my uncle, an' if I'm sacked for this—well, it won't be so bad as some of the things I might have got kicked out for."

My old man wouldn't see why any fuss should be made about what we've done. He wouldn't think twice about doin' it himself if he needed the oof an' saw his chance!"

"I—I— But I don't see how I can get leave, Racke."

"Do you see how I can?"

"You could get that fellow of yours to wire, as if it was from your pater—"

"Yaas. So I could. An' he could just as easily wire to you as if it was from your pater, couldn't he?"

"Bub-bub-but you could talk to the people at the magazine office so much better than I could, Aubrey."

"We're much of a muckness about tellin' 'em, Crooke, an' if I've got a trifle more imagination than you have—well, I'll think out for you in advance what you're to say. That's fair enough."

Crooke groaned. He would have refused outright to go, but he was very much afraid of what might ensue if his uncle found out everything. It seemed to him that if they could once get back the copy they had made of the Poe MS., they would be practically out of danger, even though the MS. itself had disappeared.

"I'll go," he said desperately.

"Right-ho!" It would be givin' too much away to wire to that blackguard of mine—they're nosey folks at the post-office here—but I'll express the letter, so that he shall be sure to get it first thing, an' you ought to have your wire in time to get up to town before lunch."

Meanwhile, Colonel Lyndon had gone to the Head's quarters. He had a standing invitation to St. Jim's as Dr. Holmes' guest. There had been a time when the Head, warm in his sympathy with Talbot, had thought Colonel Lyndon a very hard and unreasonable man; but they had learned to know one another since then, and Talbot, to whom the Head had been almost a father, was a link between them.

Professor Fielding was glad to meet the colonel again. From motives of delicacy he said nothing about the lost MS., not knowing whether Talbot had yet informed his uncle of its loss. The colonel said nothing, either. Kerr, of whose shrewdness he had formed a high opinion, considered that it would be better not to mention their suspicions until they were finally confirmed.

But the Head, who knew Talbot's frankness and fearlessness, was sure that Colonel Lyndon had been told, and did not look upon the subject as a delicate one. It was some hours after

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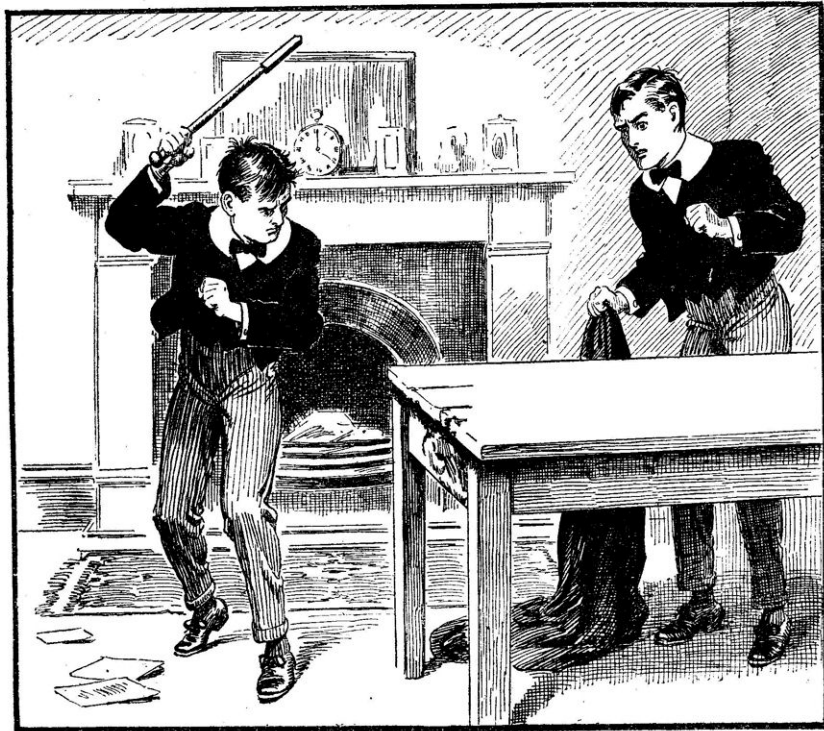
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The drawer in which the MS. had been hidden was locked. "I'm going to burst it open!" exclaimed Racke, Crooke watched with anxious eyes while the drawer was smashed open with the poker. (See Chapter 7.)

the colonel's arrival, however, before he mentioned it.

They were smoking and chatting in the study between lunch and tea when he said:

"By the way, colonel, it's a sad pity about that alleged Poe MS."

"Yes, it is a pity," replied the soldier guardedly.

"Talbot feels the loss keenly on your account. But the affair is a complete mystery to me. It is such an unlikely thing to be stolen. I cannot help but think that it must have been destroyed accidentally."

"It may have been, but somehow I do not believe that, Dr. Holmes."

"You still have hopes of its recovery, then?" said the professor eagerly.

"Yes, I have some hope. When is your next lecture, professor?"

"To-morrow evening. It is the last, I regret to say. My holiday—and I have never had a better one—is nearly over."

"But you will come again, Fielding, and soon?" said the Head.

"Oh, I shall be here again! I have made too many friends here to stay away long."

"I must go to town to-morrow," said Colonel Lyndon. "But I shall make a point of being back in time to hear you."

"Is it really worth your while? I am only lecturing to boys, you know."

"Fielding," said the Head, "there

isn't a person living who cares for literature who wouldn't find it worth while to listen to those lectures which you say are 'only for boys'! I count my boys extremely fortunate to be privileged to hear them, and I know that they count themselves so, too. Why, even Grun—but it is unfair to mention names. But even the dullest is interested, while some of them hang on every word you speak as though they simply couldn't bear to miss one."

"And excellent judgment on their part, too!" said the colonel.

The professor got up from his chair and bowed.

"Gentlemen," he said, "you positively bring the blushes to my face!"

CHAPTER 7. Trapped.

CROOKE got his wire in such good time that he was able to go to Mr. Raitton before classes, produce it, and ask for leave of absence.

He did not want to go to the Head. Some excuse had to be given for his urgent summons to town; and sudden illness had been the surest card to play. The telegram said his mother was ill. Now, Mrs. Crooke was Colonel Lyndon's sister, and it was almost certain that the Head would mention the matter to his guest.

"This is the kind of thing which we usually refer to Dr. Holmes, Crooke," said the Housemaster.

"I know, sir. But he couldn't refuse, could he? An' if you give me leave straight away I can catch the 9.15. Another five minutes would spoil my chance of that."

"That's so. Well, you can go. I hope you will find your mother better, my boy."

Mr. Raitton spoke so kindly that Crooke, hardened as he was, felt more than half ashamed of himself. But he reflected as he went out that Raitton wasn't often civil to him; and refused to be ashamed. He would have had some difficulty in showing cause for any kindness on the Housemaster's part in an ordinary way; but that did not occur to him.

Racke and Crooke were looked upon by Mr. Raitton as little better than plague-spots in the School Home. Crooke caught the 9.15, and was in town before the colonel reached Wayland Junction on his journey. But from there Colonel Lyndon had the fastest train of the day, and Crooke, having reached the office of the "Ludgate," discovered that his troubles were only just beginning.

If he had had the least idea that Colonel Lyndon was bound for that same

office, he would have been half frantic. As it was, he was so agitated and incoherent, that the dark young man who first interviewed him, the editor not having arrived at the office when he got there—grew suspicious.

"I think I remember the story to which you refer," he said. "All the entries passed through my hands." "You'd be sure to, y'know," answered Crooke, twiddling his watchchain nervously. "It hadn't any name or nom de plume."

"It was not the only one so lacking. But it was the only one I can recall in two different handwritings."

"That's it!" cried Crooke. "Can I have it? It—it was all—a mistake, y'know. It oughtn't to have been sent in really. It was—was meant to go somewhere else."

"You certainly cannot have it until the editor arrives. All the competition stories are now in his desk, and I could not think of handing it over to you, even if I had the key."

"I hope he'll soon come," growled Crooke. "It's too dashed thick, bein' kept waitin' like this. Is he always so late?"

"Oh, frequently much later! You see, he prefers to work in the evenings. But there are days when he does not come at all."

The dark young man did not seem too friendly, Crooke thought. He looked at a fellow as though he fancied a fellow wasn't quite on the straight.

And, indeed, that was just how the young man felt. He and the editor had agreed that the story sent in without any author's name or nom de plume, and written in two different hands, both bad, was by long odds the best of the batch, so far as the first skimming of the entries showed. But they had also agreed that it was strange that authors who were very slipshod in their spelling, and who now and then made queer mistakes in style, should have been capable of a story which was masterly, in some respects, which bore a haunting, elusive resemblance to other stories read long ago by both. It chanced that neither of them had lately read or thought of Edgar Allan Poe.

"You are not the sole author, I take it," said the young man.

"Yas—that is, no, not exactly. There was another chap in it."

"Older than you, I presume?"

"About the same age," replied Crooke, growing sulky at being asked so many questions.

"It is very remarkable that two mere boys should have written so good a story."

"Well, we've brains, y'know!" said Crooke.

He did not want to dwell on that. His answer was more bravado. He did not care to impress the young man with the idea that he was a genius. He would not have cared even to be one. He only wanted to get that story back and be safe.

"Ever done anything of the sort before?"

"No—first attempt!"

The young man looked at George Gerald Crooke, and that look said as plainly as words: "Now I know that you're a liar!"

"Oh! Well, you had better sit there until the editor comes. I must get on with my work," was what he said.

Crooke sat there, though he was more than half inclined to bolt.

He would have bolted had he dared. But he felt that it would be blue ruin to go without the story. He made up his mind to destroy it within five minutes.

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of getting it. He would hire a taxi, tear up the manuscript, and strew the fragments along Fleet Street as he went.

What a time that editor man was! Crooke sat with one leg crossed over another till the upper one got pins and needles; changed them, and got pins and needles in the other; yawned; perspired; shivered; blew his nose; snuffled; and would have been bored to death but for the fear within him.

The dark young man glanced in his direction now and then with obvious disapproval.

Twelve o'clock! Half-past twelve! A quarter to one!

"Look here, y'know, I'll go an' get some lunch, an' come back later on," said Crooke, rising.

He was not at all sure that he would come back. But he felt that he must get away. It was like being in the dock to sit there under the dark young man's cold disapproving glances.

"I think you had better stop!"

Crooke read menace in the tone. His nerves were all on edge now.

"I—do you suppose you can keep me here if—"

He stopped short in his speech, and his lower jaw fell. He gasped. He almost fainted. He would have given anything to have had the floor open up and engulf him.

For the door had opened suddenly, and there stood his uncle, Colonel Lyndon, with a tall, grey gentleman who could be no other than the editor!

"What are you doing here?" rapped out the colonel, and his voice had the ring of the barrack yard.

"I—I—"

"Mr. Crooke has called with reference to a story sent in for our recent competition," said the dark young man, and it seemed to Crooke that he was faintly glowing. "He wants it back. I had to keep him here till Mr. Walkley arrived."

"Will you do me the favour of keeping him here for a few minutes longer?" asked the colonel. "I wish to see that story. I have already partly explained matters to Mr. Walkley, whom I met downstairs."

"Come with me, Colonel Lyndon," said the editor, without a glance at Crooke. "Mr. Byram, you will do as the colonel asks, of course."

"Oh, with pleasure, sir!" replied Mr. Byram.

And Crooke felt sure that he meant it. The door of an inner room closed behind the two older men.

"Your mistake, Crooke sullenly.

"Your mistake. You're not," said Mr. Byram cheerily.

"You can't stop me!"

"Try it, and we'll see!"

Crooke sat down again. He had not even the courage to try to bolt.

He gazed at the inner door as if fascinated. What was going on behind it?

A fellow with more imagination might have guessed at that. But Crooke only had enough imagination to conjure up their worst in vague terms.

"The MS. is authentic. I am sure of that, Mr. Walkley," said the colonel.

"What has been sent to you is almost certainly a copy of it; the original would have given the swindling game away. I propose, when you have found the story, to give you a brief outline of what is in it before you show it to me. That should go far to establish my bona fides, I think."

"My dear sir, there is no need for any measures to establish that. But the course you suggest is a good one. Here is the story. By whom do you say it was written? Byram and I both had a

curious sense of familiarity with the style, but could not place it."

"By Edgar Allan Poe, sir."

"Oh, of course, of course! I must jump on Byram hard for this. He is a much younger man than I, and must have read Poe more recently."

"If he has read him at all, Mr. Walkley."

"If he has not, the offence is graver still, for he should have done. Now, colonel!"

Colonel Lyndon proceeded in measured tones to give a synopsis of the story. Mr. Walkley listened intently, but never once referred to the MS. before him.

The colonel came to the end, and looked at him questioningly.

"There's no possible doubt about it, sir! The title is not 'The Doom of Devenell,' and the hero is not named Ethan Rossiter—in fact, all the names have been altered. But this story is your Poe story, as certain as that it was never written by a schoolboy."

"The boy out there is my nephew, Mr. Walkley. He came up to town to-day by what, I am sure, was a ruse—He showed his Housemaster a wire to say that his mother was ill. My appearance at the school must have frightened him; and his confederate, and they decided to reclaim the story at any risk, I suppose."

"I shall leave your nephew to you and his headmaster, colonel. I have nothing to say to him. An action against him and the other boy for this attempt to swindle us might be; but, of course, that is out of the question, for your sake."

"Thank you, Mr. Walkley! No one could be more considerate than you have been. I may take the copy, I suppose? I promise you that the young scoundrels shall not escape punishment!"

The two shook hands like old friends, and the editor opened the door for his caller to pass through. He shut it again at once.

"I hope he has been no trouble, sir," said the colonel to Mr. Byram, much as if he were speaking of an ill-conditioned cur he had been obliged to leave with that gentleman.

"Oh, none at all, thank you, sir! I have spent quite a happy morning with him," answered the dark young man, with what Crooke thought the most hateful smile he had ever seen. The boulder seemed to take it for granted he was a criminal!

"You will come with me," said the colonel to Crooke. "One moment, though. Mr. Ralston told me that you had been summoned to town by the sudden illness of your mother. Is there any truth whatever in that story?"

"Nunno!" burred Crooke.

"You are sure? If there is the least doubt we will drive to your home before returning to Rylcombe."

"Oh, don't give me away to the matter!" waived Crooke.

It was a very slight sign of feeling, but it was the first decent thing the dark young man had seen in him. And Mr. Byram, who was really a very good sort indeed, turned his head away from the detected young rascal's quivering face.

Not a word did the colonel speak during the lunch which they took together. Not a word did he speak during the journey back to St. Jim's—a journey that seemed endless to the miserable Crooke.

But when they arrived he wished that it had been longer. His one crumb of comfort was that now Racke would have to share the trouble they had brought upon themselves. It was a very small crumb.

"You and four accomplices will hold yourselves in readiness to interview Dr.

Holmes, after I have seen him," said the colonel sternly.

"Oh, I say, uncle, you—you— Oh, you'll speak up for me, won't you?" besought Crooke.

"For you? I would do nothing—nothing! But for my sister's sake, I hope that your headmaster may consent to let your punishment be something short of expulsion. Do not leave your study till you are sent for."

CHAPTER 8.

A Last Surprise.

THE colonel saw Talbot before going to the Head, and told him what had happened. As soon as his uncle had gone Talbot ran across to the New House to fetch Kerr.

Figgins and Fatty came along. They felt that they were in this. And Talbot took them to Tom Merry's study, for the Terrible Three were more or less in it, too. Gore was met on the way, and he went to tell Cardew, Clive, and Levison, after which all four joined the growing throng in No. 10.

Clive carried in his pocket something which he passed over to Cardew as they went.

"It's the sack for those two," said Lowther, "and I can't say I'm sorry."

"Oh, hang it all, I hope it won't be that!" Kerr replied. "I don't love Racke, and I haven't any more affection for Crooke, but I should hate to know that I had got even such rotters as they are kicked out!"

"It won't be you. They'll have got themselves kicked out," Manners said.

But Kerr could not quite see it that way.

"I don't think they will be sacked," said Talbot. "My uncle will do his best for Crooke, naturally; and if Crooke's left off the other sweep must be. There's one thing that may happen here—and the Head, too, though. If they've made away with that MS. they may have to go."

"Will Kerr have to give evidence before the heads?" asked Tom Merry.

"My hat! I hope not," said Kerr.

"I shouldn't think so; but it depends a good deal upon whether they try to lie themselves out of it," Talbot said. "Neither the Head nor the colonel can stand a liar. If they own up their chances will be ten times better. I expect I shall be wanted, anyway. But I don't mind that."

Racke and Crooke were debating at that very moment the question whether they were to own up, and plead for mercy, or stick it out. Crooke, thoroughly cowed, was all for throwing himself upon the compassion of the Court; and at length Racke saw that he had no alternative but to tell the truth, since Crooke would give him away if he did not.

Toby, the page, came to summon them, and then went on to find Talbot in Tom Merry's study.

"An! I was to say that Master Skimpingle's Master Kerr might be wanted, 'an' had better be 'andy," he told them. "You've saved me a journey 'cross the quad by being 'ere, Master Kerr."

"I'll tell Skimpingle," said Talbot.

As he reached the door of his own study Cardew tapped him on the shoulder. There was an expression on Cardew's face which Talbot found it impossible to read.

And what Cardew said and did hardly gave him the clue, though he came to understand later.

The dandy of the Fourth put a sealed packet into Talbot's hand.

"Better take this," he said. "It may save those two blackguards, if it comes to the pinch. But, Talbot, old top,

you'll never know, with your forgiving heart, what a temptation this was to me by gad!"

He had gone before the Shell fellow could answer.

Talbot fetched out Skimpingle, and they and Kerr went down together.

But, while Talbot went straight into the Head's study, the other two waited outside. And, as it chanced, they were not called in, as the two had confessed their villainy, and their trial was shortened by that fact.

"Yes, sir," Racke was saying, "I took the story from Skimpingle's drawer. I didn't look upon it as stealin'. Crooke an' I had a notion that it would be rather interestin' to see whether the thing would win a prize in the competition. We should not have taken the money, of course. It was more or less a joke on the magazine people."

"Don't try to explain too much, Racke!" snapped the Head. "I find it impossible to believe in any such motive as that on your part, or on Crooke's."

Professor Fielding, who was present, with Mr. Raiton, and, of course, Colonel Lyndon, looked very hard at Racke just then, as Talbot noted. The excuse Racke had given for going to Skimpingle had been mentioned by the Head, who, thanks to Kerr's very clear and convincing statement to the colonel, had all the evidence to his hand.

"Where is the original MS.?" asked the Head sharply.

Crooke shuffled his feet, and looked at Racke. Racke bit his under-lip, and looked at Crooke.

"Racke, answer!" the Head snapped.

"We don't know, sir. It disappeared," Racke said weakly.

"What do you mean? You wretched boys, if you have destroyed that MS., which Colonel Lyndon valued so highly, which had an intrinsic importance quite beyond your comprehension, you shall not stay at St. Jim's another day! No, colonel. I cannot listen to any plea you may offer for them, if they have been guilty of this atrocity!"

"I was only about to say that if the MS. had been destroyed I should no longer think of asking for mercy for them," said the colonel, rather stiffly.

Crooke's face began to work. There was blood on Racke's lip. He had bitten it almost through.

In the pause which followed there was heard the sound of tearing paper.

Talbot had remembered Cardew's strange speech. He had not looked at the packet till now. A glance showed the signatures of Cardew and Clive upon it. He wondered, but did not hesitate. Young scoundrels as those two were, he would save them if he could.

He gasped as he saw what the package contained. His voice had a queer break in it as he said:

"Here's the MS., sir!"

"Talbot, what does this mean? Surely—"

"Let me see that envelope, Reginald!" demanded the colonel.

Talbot was obliged to hand it over, though he had no desire to drag in Cardew or Clive. Keen as he was, Cardew had overlooked the fact that the production of the missing story by Talbot would look black for him.

"Here did you get this?" asked the Head.

There was no help for it.

"Cardew gave it to me just as I was coming here," replied Talbot.

Racke and Crooke looked at one another. They understood, if no one else did.

The Head struck the gong on his table.

"I must send for Cardew and Clive," he said.

"There's no need, sir!" cried Racke. "Cardew took that from the drawer in our study a day or two ago. I know now, though I didn't suspect it at the time. I suppose he thought we—we might burn it."

That last remark was a lucky one for Racke. Any attempt to make out Ralph Reckness Cardew a fellow hawk sheep with him and Crooke would have recoiled upon his own head.

The professor had the MS. now, scanning it eagerly. He looked up from it to hurl a question at Racke.

"How was it you returned Skimpingle's spectacles? It was Crooke who wore them," he said.

Then Talbot knew that for some time past Professor Fielding had had his suspicions that Racke and Crooke had played that shady trick upon him on the day of his coming, and that now, having seen them at close quarters with his glasses on, he was sure.

The Head had not heard the question. He and the colonel and Mr. Raiton were deep in consultation.

"Don't answer!" said the professor. "Talbot, am I justified in letting that matter slide—in saying no more about it?"

"I think you are, sir," answered Talbot gravely, though he wondered how the professor knew that Racke and Crooke had expiated that particular crime.

The Head turned to the culprits.

"You will not be expelled," he said sternly. "though only Colonel Lyndon has saved you from that. I shall now have Kildare sent for, and he will see to your being incarcerated in the punishment-room. To-morrow you will be flogged, and for the rest of this term you will be provided with a sufficiency of work to keep you out of mischief. I cannot trust myself to say what I think of you; but if you fail to see that your conduct in this matter has been wholly contemptible, there is small hope for you in the future!"

Five minutes later Racke and Crooke were shut in the punishment-room, and Talbot, Kerr, and Skimpingle had cleared off to Study No. 10.

"You mad ass, Cardew!" said Tom Merry, when Talbot had told his story.

"Kerr's fault, by gad!" replied Cardew coolly. "Oh, you may glare, Kerr, but it was. You didn't fancy my detective methods. Too much dashed jumpin' at conclusions for you! But while you were muddlin' about over little twopenny clues, I simply walked in an' collared the evidence that proved it all—see?"

He failed to convince any of them—even Clive and Levison—that he was in the right. But that mattered little. Ralph Reckness Cardew always had gone his own way, and he always would. In his lecture that evening Professor Fielding referred to the Poe MS., stated his opinion that it was undoubtedly authentic, and, at a request voiced by Kildare on behalf of the audience, read it to them.

"The Doom of Devalen" was voted quite a good story. But the majority considered that it was not half so interesting as the story of how it was twice stolen, and how the second theft saved Racke and Crooke from the worst consequences of the first!

THE END.

(Another grand long story of Tom Merry & Co. next week, entitled: "THE FIGHTING SPIRIT!" by Martin Clifford. Make a point of ordering your copy of the GEM early.)

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REFORMERS ALL!

A Splendid Complete Story of the Chums of St. Katie's. By Michael Poole.

CHAPTER 1.

Bill Strong's Band.

THERE were two people at St. Katie's who were seriously worried about Dick Dexter. One was Jolly Roger and the other was Bill Strong.

It was Jolly Roger who made Bill worry, which just shows the sort of man Roger was. Bill's mind was the calmest, most unruffled thing there was in Katie's, and that was really why Bill was in the Trans. He had persistently ignored all attempts to make him worry over work.

Some days after the episode of the photographs in the "Daily Flashlight," Jolly Roger met Bill Strong strolling to footer.

"Ah, Strong!" Roger smiled energetically. "I wanted to have a chat with you sometime. A little confidential talk, you understand. Comp and see me about four-fifteen this afternoon, will you, Strong?"

"Yes, sir," said Bill. "Four-fifteen, sir."

"Just when it suits you, Strong," said Jolly Roger.

"Yes, sir," said Bill, and passed on. "It must be about the Kid," Bill told himself hopelessly. "It's bound to be about him. What's he want to talk to me for?"

His worst fears were confirmed. It was entirely and solely about Dexter, and Roger lost no time in coming to the point.

"You and Dobbin are, I believe, Dexter's best friends?" Roger asked, after the first brief round.

"Yes, sir," Strong admitted. "And I have no doubt that you, personally, have great influence with young Dexter?"

"That rather floored Bill. He couldn't say 'Yes, sir,' and he didn't like to. THE GEN. LIBRARY.—No. 639.

say "No, sir," and he couldn't think of the right and tactful answer to make.

"Now, I don't want to suggest anything to you, really, Strong," Jolly Roger went on, before Bill had quite made up his mind. "But of late I have no doubt you yourself have observed that Dexter has exceeded the bounds which a tolerant headmaster can permit. Unless something is done to pull him up I fear that the next outbreak of our young friend will be his last at St. Katharine's. You understand what I mean, Strong?"

"Yes, sir," said Bill hopelessly.

"But we are not going to allow that to happen, Strong!" Jolly Roger simply beamed cheerfulness. "You and I simply will not allow Dexter to become involved in any further foolishness! He's quite a good fellow at heart, a truthful, honest boy, kind and gentle. You agree with me, Strong?"

"Yes, sir," Bill answered eagerly. "He's a real brick—I mean, if you only knew him as I do. He doesn't mean to do wrong, sir. He wouldn't harm—I mean to say, sir, he really isn't what you would call—You know what I mean?"

"Exactly!" Roger nodded his head vigorously. "That is precisely what I feel about Dexter. That is why I want to talk to you about him, Strong. I felt all along that you had exactly the same views that I have."

Jolly Roger talked at some length. No one else, he said, need know that they had discussed it, but, of course, it might be advisable for Strong to have a quiet chat with others, and explain to them the seriousness of the situation. What they wanted to do was to keep a friendly eye on Dexter, day and night, and night and day. By this, and by their own example, they would keep Dexter from further trouble.

"But I need say no more," Jolly Roger concluded. "After all you've told me I feel quite confident that you

are just as anxious as I am to keep Dexter amongst us."

"Yes, sir," said Bill, and gracefully retired.

It was the first time this sort of thing had ever happened to Bill Strong, and he felt very serious about it.

When the chance came he mentioned it to Dobbie. He told him in the very strictest confidence, and he impressed Dobbie.

"You can take it from me, old son," Bill said. "They've got their little eagle eyes right on the Kid. The beak's simply waiting his chance. Then he'll go right out, Dobbie! Sacked! We're the two fellows who's going to stop them getting their chance!"

"We—we must watch him," said Dobbie.

"Better give the Busy Bees the tip, too," Bill went on. "You never know where the Kid might break out. Bunting will see that this is the sort of thing where we've got to combine. Esprit de corps, and all that sort of thing. Dobbie!"

"Yes," Dobbie agreed. "And there's the Worm; he'd be a good man, you know."

"We'll wander round and see one or two of the chaps right now, while the Kid's out," Bill Strong said. "It's got to be kept to ourselves, but it doesn't do to take any risks. We're going to be like a father to Dick Dexter!"

Of course, you never can tell how a thing will catch on. In the present case Jolly Roger had judged that his talk to Strong would just brighten up Bill's sense of responsibility, and, very quietly, lead him into the reformer's paths. Despite Bill's own feelings on the subject, Roger hadn't been really enthusiastic about Strong's class-work.

Thereafter, thought Roger, the idea might spread, slowly but surely.

The idea did spread. When the Busy

Bees heard that Dexter was on a sort of time-limit, and that they might help Strong, a wave of goodness thrilled through them. They understood, and it was only right and proper that Bill should come to them.

The Worm and his study-companions took exactly the same point of view. It's so jolly to have that feeling that, though there's nothing goody-goody about you, yet you're just the bright, breezy sort to keep another fellow from going too far.

By the end of twenty-four hours after Roger had mentioned the subject to Bill Strong, practically every fellow in the Transius knew that, but for him, the Kid would probably get the sack. It had come straight from the Beak himself. The first time Dexter was up before him again he would be for the long, lone trail, packed off by the next train, carriage paid, to the nearest relatives who would take him!

The Transius could never allow that to happen! Let Dicky Dexter show the faintest sign of diving from a bridge or sawing goal-posts, or inventing some new stunt, and the twenty-nine other fellows in the Trans would, individually or collectively, in pairs or in groups, just jump on him, batter him, hold him down, and generally restrain him.

Dicky Dexter was at first quite unconscious of the crowd of reformers who gathered about him, waiting their chance. He had at the moment quite enough troubles of his own.

Just at present he was right up against it. Big Hallam took all his money towards the cost of new uprisings for goal-posts. Jolly Roger watched him in class. He daren't do anything except work and read and go for short-cuts.

Even then somebody always clung to him. And if he made a joke about anything such as running away or painting the goal-posts pink, or any silly thing, they were on him at once.

"Now, Kid," they warned, "you have a rest! Bet you can't repeat all the irregular verbs backwards!"

The Kid began to sit up after a day or two of this sort of thing. Wherever he went there was someone tagging on, and Dicky began to wonder what the game was. He decided to ask Dobbie, but it was difficult even to get with Dobbie alone.

In the end it was Dobbie who made the chance. The Kid saw him deliberately wink, however, at one or two of the others before he suggested a quiet stroll, as soon as they were alone the Kid asked straight out what the game was. Why did everybody tag after him? Were they afraid—

"Yes, I know all about it, Kid!" Dobbie admitted the charge right away. "We're all pals of yours, and it's up to us to keep our little eyes on you for a time. But don't worry about that, because it's all for your own good. Just you look at this! It came this morning."

Before the Kid could demand a fuller explanation a letter was pushed into his hand. It was typewritten, and on the top it bore the name, "The True Briton Film Co., Ltd."

It was addressed to J. A. Dobbins, Esq., St. Katharine's School, Dulchester, and ran:

"Dear Sir,—I was very much interested in the photographs taken by you, and published in a recent issue of the 'Flashlight.'"

"I shall be in Dulchester to-morrow and Thursday, and wonder whether I could have the pleasure of meeting you, and, if possible, your friend who per-

formed the diving feat. I cannot suggest that I have anything of importance to talk about, but as our interests appear to be similar, it might be useful one day if we knew each other."

"Couldn't you come along and have tea with me at the Belvoir Hotel on either Wednesday or Thursday at, say, four o'clock? I feel sure that we could have a very pleasant hour together."

"Any other time would suit me, of course, if you could let me know."

"Hoping to see both you and your friend."

"Yours sincerely,
"A. JEWELL."

"My hat!" said the Kid. "Tea at the Belvoir—to-day! Dobbie, my child, I mile again! You must wash your hands, Dobbie, and part your hair this day! We'll meet the jolly old Jewell!"

CHAPTER 2. Surprising Mr. Jewell.

MR. JEWELL was really quite an important man in the cinema world. He was, if you understand, a young-old man. He'd lived a good many years without growing any older.

He had seen the "Flashlight" photographs of Dexter's dive, and thrilling rescue, taken by Dobbie. Fate ordained that he had to go to Dulchester a week or two later, and he made inquiries. He wrote to Dobbie because he felt that to have tea with two bright schoolboys would be a tonic for his tired mind.

There was really very little more in it than that. He hadn't got any thousand-pound contracts up his sleeve, nor did he want them to run away and join him at once. He just wanted to meet them.

When, at five minutes to four that Wednesday afternoon, Dexter and Dobbie strolled calmly into the Belvoir Hotel—the best hotel in the county, you know, and quite the right thing—Mr. Jewell came to meet them joyously.

His welcome was a jolly, comfortable, happy-go-lucky sort of affair, that made you feel you'd known him for years. He was a perfectly-attired man, who looked nearly as fit and newly-polished as Jolly Roger, and he had a charming manner.

"Frightful check of me, of course, to write you," he laughed. "But here we are! Let's find a quiet corner for tea. I don't know how you feel, but I'm rather inclined to go in for a combination affair, myself—a light lunch joined up with the tail-end of a pleasant tea. But we'll get the waiter along and talk kindly to him."

Mr. Jewell ordered the tea. It was a carefully-thought-out production. It cheered Dexter and Dobbie, and even inspired them.

They told Mr. Jewell all about the high dive, and a good deal of what they said was quite truthful. But they gave him quite a wrong impression of the Head's point of view, and nothing was mentioned about the Kid's lonely interview with Jolly Roger.

Half-way through the tea Mr. Jewell found himself a little bewildered. He started off with the same impression that most people had at first about the Kid. He thought he was a nice little boy. People often said, "What a sweet child!" when they first saw him. At the end of ten minutes they usually said, "I don't like him."

"He's wonderfully intelligent, isn't he?" When they really got to know him well they realised that education to-day is quite different from what it was once upon a time.

Towards the end of this tea Mr. Jewell was no longer entertaining two school-boys. The Kid was entertaining Mr. Jewell, while Dobbie sat and solemnly agreed with everything Dexter said.

"This is, of course, a very proud day for my young friend Dobbie," Mr. Jewell, the Kid told their host. "Your kind words of praise will be engraved on the tablets of his memory, and will doubtless encourage him to accomplish greater deeds. As the Head said when he first realised what Dobbie had done, 'Dobbie,' he said—he always calls us by our pet names for short—'Dobbie, my heart throbs with pride! That bucked old Dobbie up no end, Mr. Jewell!'"

"I'm sure it would!" agreed Mr. Jewell, and stared straight at Dexter's face. "Did your headmaster pat you on the head, too, for your fine dive?"

"No, it was my Form-master who wept on my shoulder, and did the patting part of the business. He's a nice, kind man, isn't he, Dobbie? We all call him 'Jolly Roger' because we love him so much. I should think school life has changed a great deal since your days, Mr. Jewell?"

"Yes!" said Mr. Jewell. "Oh, yes!"

He stared again at the Kid's big, blue eyes, and his solemn mouth, and ideas began to jump into Mr. Jewell's mind.

Quite abruptly he turned to Dobbie.

"I was telling you about that new plate," he said. "You'll find out all about it, if you're interested, in this week's 'Photo-Man.' I left my copy in the smoke-room, but if you cared to run along—"

"Thanks, very much!" said Dobbie, and left the table.

"Ah, by the way," said Mr. Jewell abruptly, as soon as Dobbie had gone. "I'm very interested—I'd like to have a chat with you alone, sometime. Nothing wonderful to propose. A holiday engagement, perhaps! When could I see you—by yourself?"

"Ah!" The Kid sighed. "I'm afraid I— Oh, I could get here about half-past ten to-night, or a little later. Would that be convenient?"

"Half-past ten to-night!" Mr. Jewell was again surprised. "But— The school? They won't allow you—"

"Things are rather different with us, Mr. Jewell," the Kid said pittingly, and smiled. "I don't suppose my Form-master will be able to come with me to-night. I think some of the fellows have asked him round to supper. I wish you could meet him! A very intelligent man! But I'll come along at ten-thirty! Just a little stroll before I turn in!"

Mr. Jewell nodded just as Dobbie came back to say he couldn't find the paper.

"Someone must have taken it," said Mr. Jewell hastily. "I'll send you a copy on, and some of those plates, too. You'll want a flash-lamp; I expect we've got a spare one somewhere. I won't forget, Dobbie!"

It may be said here that Mr. Jewell kept his word. He liked Dobbie, and was really impressed with his photographs. The boy deserved encouragement.

His feelings towards the Kid were different. He saw young Dexter in the light of a sound business proposition, and as a discovery. But being a decent man, he wanted to approach the parents and the school authorities with any suggestion he might have. A holiday engagement was the idea in Mr. Jewell's mind, by way of an opening experiment.

As they parted, Dobbie turned away first, and Mr. Jewell took the chance to whisper to Dexter:

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"To-night?" he asked, still a little doubtfully.

"To-night!" the Kid answered. A few moments later the boys went off. They had had a most successful afternoon, and were highly pleased with Mr. Jewell. Dexter was also pleased with himself. He passed the evening in quiet contemplation, and dreamed dreams.

Now, the business of making an exit from dormitory C at Katie's was too simple for words.

The framework of a proposed veranda had been erected long years ago, and never completed. Nowadays it was covered with creeper, and really looked quite well.

Mr. Roger Blunt had observed it, and in his opinion something ought to have been done about it a long time ago. It was a direct encouragement to boys to wander about at nights, rules, or no rules.

When Dicky Dexter made his arrangement with Mr. Jewell, he knew that the difficulties before him were as nothing. The only thing was to avoid letting any of his friends know. Now they were playing the kind of protecting guardian over him, they might try to stop him, and this, perhaps, was the one factor which tempted him to go out at night.

The dormitory lights were out at nine-forty-five. Having made all arrangements beforehand, the Kid dressed again under the clothes, and even tied a tie about the collar of his pyjamas.

He was in a fortunate position in the room, and at five past ten was cautiously and noiselessly slipping through the open window, confident that no one had heard or seen him.

It was just on half-past ten when he entered the Belvoir Hotel. Mr. Jewell was waiting for him, and observed that the Kid had no cap, and that, apparently, he had dressed in different fashion from this afternoon.

But that really doesn't affect this story. Nor does the talk which Mr. Jewell had with Dexter. It is sufficient to say that Mr. Jewell learned something about Dexter's parents, who were abroad, and about the holidays at Katie's. That was all he wanted to know. The Kid assured him that he'd be delighted to spend a holiday with Mr. Jewell, and it was arranged that the cinema-director should write him in due course.

Dexter politely bade him good-night and went forth. There was no great hurry, so he went by the main road, and entered the school grounds by way of the Head's garden. He used the proper amount of caution, of course, but you'd expect that from Dicky Dexter, and he climbed back into C dormitory with a little less noise than a black cat would have made.

He even crawled on all-fours to his bed, slipped off his clothes, and glided, as it were, into the bed. It had been a pleasant little interlude, and no one had suffered.

It was about a quarter to twelve when Dexter got into bed. By ten minutes to twelve he was almost asleep, when he heard someone enter the room. An electric torch-lamp flashed about, and, by the reflected light, Dexter, through one corner of his eye, perceived Jolly Roger!

Instantly Dexter gave a lifelike exhibition of one of the Seven Sleepers. He could still hear the sounds of Jolly Roger walking about. The suddenly the light flashed on to his face, and he felt a hand shaking him gently.

"Dexter—Dexter! Are you asleep? I want to speak to you, Dexter! Waken up, boy!"

With a start Dexter sat upright. Somehow, he felt that something had happened. He blinked and stared at the light, and tried hard to think of something new in the way of excuses.

But there was Jolly Roger towering over him, and it was very plain that Roger was painfully angry about something.

CHAPTER 3. Dexter Gets the Truth.

ABOUT six minutes past ten that same night Bill Strong had a faint suspicion that he heard someone moving.

For some minutes Bill lay and thought about this, but nothing more happened. Only he felt very wide-awake now, and called out to the Kid very gently to ask if he'd gone to sleep.

There was no answer. This didn't satisfy Bill at all, because he felt that the Kid hadn't any right to be asleep when he called. He rose and went over to the Kid's bed.

"I say, Kid—" he began, and put his hands out to give him a gentle shake.

The Kid was not there!

In two minutes Strong had told Dobbie. Being wakened roughly rather upset Dobbie's imagination. He said at once that the Kid had run away. Then he remembered that queer remark of the Kid's to Mr. Jewell: "To-night!"

Other fellows began to waken up. In a short time the whole dormitory knew that the Kid had gone. It couldn't be an ordinary sort of lark, or the Kid would certainly have told them about it, and they would have stopped him.

"He's run away!" said Bill Strong. "Poor old Kid! Fed up, hard up, sat on, spied on—and now he's bolted! Oh, my hat! And I'm responsible! You're all responsible! They'll drag him back and then sack him! This is awful! We've got to act!"

"We ought to get him back!" said Dobbie desperately.

They discussed it. Everyone felt that something ought to be done.

"I'm going out!" Bill Strong announced. "I'll search for him! He can't have got far. I feel there's a chance—and this is my job!"

"I'm coming, too!" said Dobbie. "We'll go to the Belvoir and ask that chap—I'll tell you all about it as we go along. He'll go there for the night!"

"He'll go to the station!" said Bunting. "Come on, Buckle! We're in this!"

"He'll probably hide in the woods near the river," said the Worm. "What about it, Pikey?"

"It's a good idea," Pike agreed. "We can't simply hang on and do nothing."

"We'll get him back!" someone else said. "We mustn't let the Beak know about this!"

Just before eleven o'clock Bill Strong and Dobbie quietly went down the framework. In the next five minutes nine other fellows followed them.

There was no risk, you understand. They'd done it before. And they had to find the Kid to-night!

At eleven-thirty the whole of C Dormitory was empty. Twelve little beds were going spare!

Out in the open eleven noble youths acted in the manner of Red Indian scouts. They spread themselves and got lost in the darkness after arranging to meet at a certain place in three-quarters of an hour. Bill Strong was in command and he laid down the rules.

About the same time Mr. Roger Blunt was thinking that he would retire. He stood by his window and gazed out into the blackness of a moonless night.

Did his eagle eyes deceive him, or was that a figure moving cautiously across the Head's garden?

Jolly Roger laughed at last. "Nerves! Imagination! Pooh!" he said. "Ridiculous! I'll get to bed!"

But he couldn't help thinking now about the Wasps and the queer tales he'd heard of their midnight revelries. At the end of ten minutes he determined to settle his mind. He would inspect C Dormitory—possibly B Dorm as well.

In C Dormitory his fears were quickly confirmed. From bed to bed he went—and all were empty.

Except one! Jolly Roger flashed the light on the bright little face so peacefully asleep. He spoke, and slowly Dicky Dexter sat up and wakened.

"Where are the others, Dexter?" Roger demanded.

Dexter blinked. "I—I don't know, sir," Dexter was hopelessly at sea. "I'm sure they were all asleep—I mean—I don't understand!"

"That's all right, Dexter. You may go to sleep again," Roger said. "I shall wait for the others!"

He sat on Strong's bed and waited. In the fulness of time a black shadow came against the open window. Jolly Roger rose.

One by one eleven boys found themselves jerked into the room by a strong arm, and heard Jolly Roger's voice, icy-cold and steely, cutting through the chill night air:

"Stand on one side! I want you all—eleven of you!"

The light was switched on. Jolly Roger faced the sad eleven. They had been everywhere, but without finding Dexter. Even at the hotel there had been no news, and Mr. Jewell had gone to bed.

And now, as the light came on, they saw the Kid sitting up in his bed and watching them in pained surprise. He looked as though he had just been wakened from a long sleep.

"I want no explanations of this mad escapade," said Jolly Roger. "I will see you all—the whole eleven at twelve-thirty to-morrow. You will go to bed now, and there will be no talking! You understand?"

They did. Jolly Roger waited silently until they had all settled down. There was no chance to discuss the horrible problem that night.

In the morning the whole thing became confused. Nobody quite grasped the situation, because when Dicky Dexter was approached he scorned them. He said he really couldn't understand fellows who played silly games of that kind, and if he were the Beak he'd sack the lot.

They tried to ask where he'd been, but Dick refused to talk with them. You see, he really hadn't the faintest notion yet that they had been after him. Indeed, he felt rather hurt that they had never told him they were having a little jaunt.

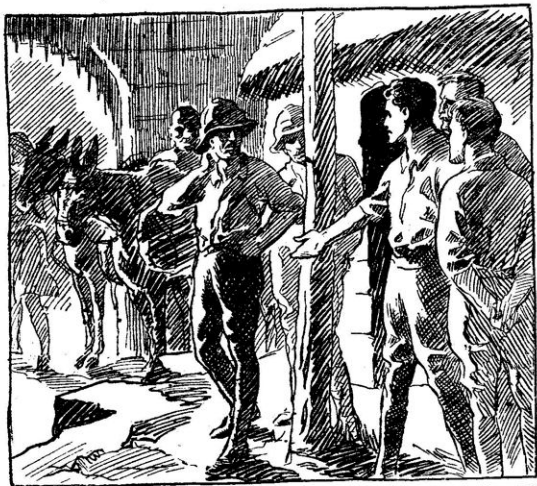
In turn, even Bill Strong felt staggered. There was a dim idea in his mind, and in the minds of the other ten, that in some way they had been hoaxed. But it was no use by now to hoax about it. They had been out—and how they ought not to have been out! They couldn't very well tell Jolly Roger that they'd been hunting for Dexter. That would only have dragged Dexter in and made it worse for them. And anyhow, the Transitus fellows were not that sort. They'd face the music.

Mr. Roger Blunt did not ask for

QUINTON'S HERITAGE.

Our Great Adventure Serial.

By ANTHONY THOMAS.



"Good-bye, Quinton!" said Bracer, in a queer sort of voice. "We shall get through all right. Some day I'll thank you decently." "Good-bye, and good luck!" returned Jim. (See page 18).

Giving Bracer a Chance.

"SIT down, Bracer!" Tim said slowly. "We'd better have a talk about the whole thing. You know we've got your boy? He was to have been shot this morning. I didn't raise a finger. Quinton, here, stuck out against it. He's persuaded the Bazara—I've just been to see him—and he's washed his hands of your lad. We can turn him out or do what we like about him. That's the position."

"I—I'm very grateful," Henry Bracer said, and struggled to moisten his lips. Jim noticed it, and remembered that the man had probably had neither food nor drink for many long hours.

"What about something to eat, Tim?" Jim asked quietly. And Daly nodded.

"We won't let you die of hunger, anyway, Bracer," Tim laughed. "But, by goodness, man! If I'd had my way with you a few days back, you'd have gone out for good and all! There's nothing tender-hearted or forgiving about me! But we've beaten you—beaten Flexman and Kerzon and all their clever schemes. That's enough for me for the present! I suppose you want us to bring that lad of yours along now?"

He rose, without waiting for Bracer to answer, and went outside, where, presumably, he spoke to some of the natives, who were waiting to do his bidding.

Meantime, Erik, with the aid of other servants, had brought in a meal. Almost before they had really begun there was a noise outside, and Tim Daly rose again.

It was some two or three minutes before he returned, and when he did

someone came in with him. The eulien look on Dillon Bracer's face was tinged with a touch of fear now.

Henry Bracer rose as soon as the lad came in and almost jumped forward to greet him.

"Dillon! How are you?" He had seized his son's hands, and was clasping them excitedly. "It's all right, boy! There's nothing to fear!"

For the first time in his life Jim Quinton felt a certain amount of regard for Dillon Bracer, as he saw the change which came into his face. The fear and the resentment slipped away, and he began to smile.

"Hallo, dad! I didn't know—I thought you'd got away!" Dillon Bracer said. "What's happening? I—I don't quite understand."

Jim Quinton suddenly recalled the day at Harmood's, when he had caught Bracer trying to take the "gang" which Tim Ridman had won as cox for the senior fours. Somehow, this meeting seemed to explain Bracer's anxiety, even though it made it none the less despicable.

Dillon Bracer was at least anxious to impress his father and to win his favour. After all, if they had behaved like scoundrels, there was a certain amount of good in the feeling which plainly existed between the two. And that made it easier for both Quinton and Daly to forget a good many things which had occurred of late.

"You'd better join us, young Bracer," Tim Daly said, at last. "Quinton, here, has got you out of this mess. I didn't agree with it."

Dillon Bracer sat down by the side of his father. Neither of them were over-clean just at present, but that was a minor detail. For some time young Bracer kept his eyes fixed on the table before him, and did not dare to raise them and meet either Jim Quinton's or Dick Willoughby's.

Indeed, just at first that meal promised to be the most trying which any of them had yet taken part in. It was Tim Daly who brought the unpleasant silence to an end.

"I'm not going to say we're glad to see you here," he said quietly. "You know my views! I'll leave it at that. I don't wish Kerzon any harm, but if he gets shot quickly I shan't weep about it. If he ever comes around here again trying to stir up trouble, I think he'll find it all right. We'll be ready for him! But we'll leave that. What do you think you are going to do, Bracer?"

"I am in your hands," Henry Bracer answered.

"Well, you can't stay here!" Daly answered quickly. "It wouldn't be healthy for you. I've no doubt Quinton would let you have his bed and everything he'd got, but he hasn't got the hang of African customs yet. The Bazara or some of his men, might get annoyed if they saw you."

A faint smile flickered across Henry Bracer's face. His knowledge of Central Africa was not so very far behind Daly's.

"The question is whether you'll give us a decent chance to get out of here?" he asked slowly. "If you will—it's more than I ought to ask, I know, but I'd like the chance. You know why. I've made a good many mistakes in my life—perhaps I might save somebody else from making the same mistakes. He's already seen something of what it means."

He looked towards his son, and Tim Daly nodded.

"We'll give you a chance," said Tim at last. "We can't do more. You'll have to get out of here to-night!"

Tim Daly's attitude the whole time appeared to be that of a man who was not prepared to raise a finger to help the Bracers. What was he doing so merely because Quinton wanted it. Jim made no protest because he knew that Tim found some consolation in assuring Henry Bracer that he disliked him.

But when at last the two had made such arrangements as were possible, Daly took them both along to one of the other rooms where they could add to their outfit and fit themselves up in such a way that they would have what Tim had promised—"a decent chance."

Erik was busy, too, and the other servants were pressed into the work. Actually a very small expedition was being fitted up again. Two or three donkeys, which belonged to Tim and Jim Quinton, were duly loaded with things that would be required on the long journey which lay before the two Bracers.

Night came, but for two or three hours before that neither Jim nor Dick Willoughby had seen anything of the Bracers. They had been in another part of the house, and Tim Daly was presumably with them.

Tim came in at last, and there was a queer little smile on his face as he stood in the doorway nodding at Jim Quinton.

"You've let me in for something!" he said. "I suppose you'd better go and see this off! Our last little bit of triumph, so to speak! Are you coming, Jim? You'd better join us, too, Dick!"

They went out, and Jim led them in the darkness to where the great gateway

was which allowed entrance to the Quinton boma from the side farthest away from the king's house. Here, in the pale light of the moon, a little group was gathered about three pack-donkeys, all ready laden for a journey.

For a moment Quinton could not quite make out the different figures in the dim light. There were one or two natives, and Erik—then Henry Braester stepped forward.

"Good-bye, Quinton!" he said, in a queer sort of voice. "We shall get through all right. Some day I'll thank you decently. I'm sorry—wish I'd known before. Good-bye!"

Dillon Braester was behind his father. He found it even harder to say anything, but he did manage to jerk out one or two sentences.

"You've been a brick, Quinton! I'm a rotter—was at Harmood's." But I'll let you know some day. Good-bye!"

Dick Willoughby joined them. Just for a time, at all events, the old hatred and bitterness was forgotten.

"Good-bye, and good luck!" Jim said. And Dick echoed his words.

Willoughby and Tim Daly stood and watched them until their shadows were lost in the blackness.

"We'll get back!" said Tim Daly suddenly. "That's the finish. I think, of most of our troubles. We've won through, Jim, after all. Now you really can start to face the big things your heritage means for you! Let's get back to our own room and have a quiet chat. I feel in the mood for it to-night."

"So do I," Jim agreed. "I suppose this is really the beginning of my work now."

"That's right!" said Tim. "We're just beginning now!"

The Big Man of Karradon.

TIM DALY was quite correct. They had cleared away all the difficulties and the obstacles which had interfered with Jim Quinton taking up the work and the duties which his inheritance brought upon him.

But the history of the work which Quinton and Daly are accomplishing in the country of the Karradons is not yet written. It is still progressing, without any great excitement, but with many minor adventures, which may perhaps one day be recorded.

In a few years Karradon will be an easily accessible country. The wealth which the country itself contains, apart even from the wealth which John Quinton had accumulated, is more than sufficient to pay for all those modern de-

velopments which it was the elder Bazar Quinton's desire to bring about.

Jim, of course, became almost an expert in the language of the country as Tim Daly himself was, and, like Tim, he quickly gained an understanding of the customs and the point of view of the natives.

Dick Willoughby stayed in the Karradon country for just over six months. By that time a fairly regular transport service had been organised between Karradon and the nearest railroad.

Just before Dick's stay came to an end a long letter was brought up to them from Henry Braester, and with it a much shorter one from his son. They had made the journey safely, and in due course had reached the coast, from where they had sailed south.

They were at the time of writing in South Africa, and the elder Braester spoke as though the prospects ahead of him were quite healthy. He had heard nothing of Cyrus Kerzon.

Nor have they ever been able to gather just what did happen to Kerzon, though they gathered from various sources that he had also made the journey with his two companions—Flaxman's agents from Mombassa—in safety.

But whether Kerzon went back to England or not cannot be said. He simply disappeared from Mombassa, and may still be trying to persuade someone to finance him on another expedition. If he chooses the Karradon country again, he will find them better prepared to receive him!

Nor is he likely to gain any aid from the Mauzi people. It will, unfortunately, be quite a long time before they ever recover from that fierce battle outside the village of Karradon itself.

Meantime, the village of Karradon is also improving, and the Bazarra Malkura is the greatest ruler for many hundreds of miles round.

Down by the lake work still proceeds in the great cavern, but machinery has been brought into play, and there is still more to come.

Every day the Bazar Quinton and Meljor Daly are out and about. It isn't a lazy, sleepy sort of life they lead, nor even one of complete luxury. But as Dick Willoughby told some of Jim's friends when he went back to Harmood's for a brief time after his journey, "It's a man's life! Just the sort of life old Jim Quinton loves." You know, he's a big man out there!

Of Dillon Braester Dick Willoughby said very little when he got back. After all, he was a Harmood's fellow, and he might turn out to be quite a decent chap

in the end. But to Mr. Matlock Dick told the full story, and the solicitor listened in wonder to the history of Quinton's adventures since that morning when he bade him good-bye on a very prosaic London railway-station.

Dick himself had to settle down in England for some time. His father had returned from his foreign appointment, and was anxious that his son should remain with him. But it is understood that as soon as other circumstances allow Dick Willoughby is taking the boat for East Africa, and making the journey to the Karradon country over again.

"You really ought to come, Dick," Jim Quinton urged in the last letter which reached Willoughby.

You never had a real chance of seeing the country at its very best. And we want more white men out here now—men of the right stamp, of course, who will give the native crowd a chance.

"We are going ahead in great style just now. Daly and I were out at Quinton Lake for two or three days a short time ago. We have fixed up that hydraulic lift from the top of the cliff to the lake-side, but it was a pretty tough job. We are expecting a whole lot of machinery to get out here soon, and that will mean more work."

"There hasn't been much done in the hunting and shooting way just lately. As a matter of fact, we've been concentrating on other things, but we have got rid of most of the ivory which was collected at the Dump. Do you remember the place? We rested there for a day or two after that attack of Kerzon's on the camp, when poor old Tim got hit and made a temporary prisoner."

"Nijellah and Ranallah, and most of the fellows you know, are still going strong. Nijellah is, of course, a pretty important man these days, and is what you might call our Lord Chief Justice."

"I've written to the Head at Harmood's, just to let him know how I'm progressing, and suggesting that if he knows of any decent fellows who would like to try their hand out here he should tell them about it. It's a great place!"

From which it will be gathered that Jim Quinton is making the fullest possible use of his heritage, despite all the difficulties which he encountered before he was able to enter into possession.

And it will be gathered, too, that he is living up to the prophecies which were made of him, and to the native title which he bears. For Bazar means "Big Man." And Bazar Jim Quinton is, in every sense of the word, "A Big Man."

THE END.

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REFORMERS ALL!

(Continued from page 16.)

excuses. More in sorrow than anger he commanded that for three afternoons next week they should spend their time indoors.

"I am surprised at you, Strong," he said. "But I am glad you did not persuade Dexter to join you. That is the one thing for which I am very glad."

"Yes, sir," said Bill.
But the story got abroad. Not the story here given, but the story as Jolly Roger knew it. Eleven boys of Dormitory C had climbed through the window after lights-out. Jolly Roger was going to put a stop to that sort of thing!

Only there was one brave boy who had refused to go. Richard Dexter of Dormitory C had not been led astray. He was sleeping peacefully when his master entered the room.

"I am glad you refrained from going out last night," said Jolly Roger to the Kid.

"Yes, sir," said Dexter simply, because, of course, at that time he didn't know the real facts about the other fellows any more than Jolly Roger knew the full truth.

Mr. Steed heard all about it from Mr. Roger Blunt.

"Ah, I'm glad Dexter did not go!" said Sammy Steed. "It shows the boy really wishes to be good, I think. He really tries at times."

"Yes! Oh, yes!" Jolly Roger agreed. "I don't quite understand it yet. I think young Dexter is improving. I really think so. But the others—I quite agree, Steed, that it is a most difficult form to understand."

"You won't try to get rid of them?" asked Sammy.

"Get rid of them?" Jolly Roger smiled. "I'm going to reform them. It is slow, I admit. It is difficult. But the process of reform goes on. It will be increased, intensified, and extended. The Transitus—the whole of the Transitus without any exception—must be reformed!"

And at that very moment Dicky Dexter was covering his two bosom friends with scorn. The truth was still hidden from him.

"You're really naughty boys!" he mocked them. "You ought to go to sleep at night, instead of wandering about!" Jolly Roger said to me last night, 'Dexter,' he said, and put his hand on my shoulder, while the big tears splashed down his face—Dexter, you're the one good boy in the Form. If you

could only influence those bad companions of yours, and help me to reform them—"

"Dry up!" Bill Strong suddenly sat upright, stung to fury. "Listen to me, Kid, and I'll tell you. We were on the giddy ran-tan last night, you think? We weren't. I'll tell you all about it. You're the microbe who caused all the trouble! You ought to be in a guard's van now with a label round your neck, 'Not to be returned.' Yes, you ought, Kid! And yet you're trying to do the good little boy stunt on us! Listen to me! I'm going to tell you all about it right now!"

And then Dicky Dexter learned the true story! They really hadn't been out for the fun of it! They'd been hunting for him! Because of him they had fallen right into the soup—and he was the good little boy who had really reformed!

The Kid listened, and his brain reeled. When it stopped reeling he thought—But that's another story.

Only this explains why the progress of reform in the Transitus got mixed up, and why Bill Strong felt that as a real "influence" he had never had a fair chance!

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