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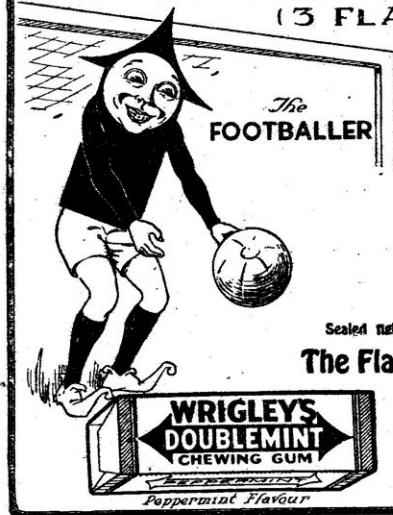
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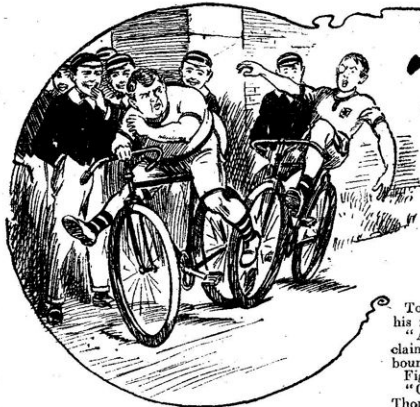
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TALBOT'S MASTER-STROKE

A Grand Long Complete School Story
of the Chums of St. Jim's.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.

Throwing Down the Gauntlet!

THOSE New House bounders have got something up their sleeve!" declared Tom Merry. The scene of this conversation was Tom Merry's study in the Shell passage.

The Terrible Three were at tea. And Jack Blake & Co. of the Fourth, together with Talbot and Harry Noble of the Shell, had been invited to the festive board.

"Wonder what Figgins & Co. are up to," said Jack Blake. "They seem to have caught the sporting fever all of a sudden."

Tom Merry nodded. "The whole giddy crowd of them got up at six o'clock this morning, and went for a cross-country run," he said.

"And between morning lessons and dinner they were hammering at punching-balls in the gym," said Talbot. "They're up to some dodge or other. They're not taking all this exercise merely for the benefit of their health!"

"No jolly fear!" "The School House juniors felt puzzled and rather uneasy.

There had certainly been a great sporting revival of late in the New House. Football, running, and boxing were the order of the day. It was as if Figgins and his followers were in training for some big tournament.

But the official Sports Day was a long way ahead. What, then, was the meaning of this state of affairs?

Tom Merry & Co. were soon to learn. There was a tramping of feet in the passage, and a series of hearty thumps sounded on the door.

"Come in!" called Tom Merry. The door was thrown open, and the voice of George Figgins, the long-legged leader of the New House fraternity, was heard to exclaim:

"Follow your leader!" Figgins marched in, carrying an important-looking document in his hand. Behind him, with resolute and determined faces, came Kerr and Fatty Wynn, Redfern, Lawrence, and Owen, Koumi Rao, Robinson, Pratt, and Digges—all of the New House.

It was a tight squeeze, for the accommodation in Tom Merry's study was already severely taxed. But the New House juniors managed to force an entry—although some of them were badly squashed against the wall.

fically. "We come, not to bury Caesar, but to praise him—I mean, not to raid Merry, but to challenge him."

"To challenge me?" echoed Tom, in amazement. "To challenge all of you, my son—to throw down the gauntlet to the School House!"

"Weally, Figgins, I vegrard you as an interloph!" said Arthur Augustus.



TOM MERRY,
Captain of the
Shell Study
No. 10. Height
5ft. 5ins.
Age 16.

"What you consider, old top, doesn't count," said Dick Redfern. "Pile in, Figgys!"

Figgins cleared his throat impressively, and fixed his eyes on the document in his hand. The School House fellows looked at him in blank amazement.

"We, the members of the cock House at St. Jim's," began Figgins. Instantly there was a roar of protest.

"Rats!" "Utah wot, deah boy!" "You're talking out of the back of your neck!"

Figgins glared at the interrupters. "Shurrup!" he growled. "We, the members of the cock House at St. Jim's, hereby challenge, the fatheaded School House rabble—"

There was another roar of protest, louder than before. "Whatever the nature of Figgins' challenge, he hadn't worded it very tactfully!"

"Rabble!" hooted Manners. "Who's a rabble?" "The inmates of your private asylum, of course!" said Figgins cheerfully.

The School House fellows were all on their feet by now, their faces aflame with wrath.

"Keep calm!" said Figgins soothingly. "We can unclench your fists, Merry."

We're ten strong, and we can give a good account of ourselves if it comes to a scrap!"

"You—your cheeky boulder!" spluttered Tom Merry. "It seems that you've come over here to insult us!"

"Not at all!" "But you called us a rabble—"

"That's not an insult—it's a fact!" chuckled Kerr.

"Order, please!" rapped out Dick Redfern. "Get on with the washing, Figgys!"

Figgins tried again. "We hereby challenge the fatheaded School House rabble to a series of sporting contests—"

"My hat!" The School House juniors began to sit up and take notice, so to speak. At last they understood why their rivals had been devoting so much time to sport of late. They had been getting into training, with a view to "putting it across" the School House sportsmen.

"There will be five contests in all," Figgins went on. "First, a footer match—"

"But the New House can't play footer!" protested Monty Lowther. "Make it hopscotch!"

"Or a nice, exciting game of snakes and ladders?" suggested Jack Blake.

"I wish you fellows wouldn't keep interrupting!" said Figgins peevishly. "Lemme see! Where was I? First, a footer match. Second, a boxing tournament. Third, a cycling race—distance five miles. Fourth, a tug-of-war. Fifth—and last—a Marathon race."

"Better introduce an eating contest, for Fatty Wynn's benefit," said Digby.

"Rats! Now, there will be five events. The House that wins the greater number will be able to style itself the cock of the walk. What do you say, Merry? Do you accept our challenge?"

"Jump at it, Tommy!" murmured Manners.

But Tom Merry hesitated. "It's hardly fair—" he began.

"Eh? Why isn't it fair?" demanded Figgins.

"You fellows have been preparing for the sports beforehand. You're in strict training, and we're not."

"Well, you can have a week to get into training," said Figgins. "We'll set the ball rolling with the footer match, a week from to-day. How will that suit you?"

"Oh, all right," said Tom Merry. "But you're a chump, Figgys—a brazen, chappedhead chump! You know jolly well that your precious Home for Incurables can't hold a candle to the School House! You'll be licked all along the line!"

"We shall see!" said Figgins grimly. "I'll admit you've trounced us a few times."

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times in the past, but you'll find us a tough proposition this time!"

"Hear, hear!" said Dick Redfern. "We're going all out on this merry deputation!"

"You'll need to!" said Jack Blake grimly.

Figgins folded up the challenge and put it in his pocket.

"Everything satisfactory?" he asked. "Yes; but I think we ought to get Kildare of the Sixth to act as judge, in case of any dispute," said Tom Merry.

"All serene! We'll go and tackle Kildare right away!"

And the New House deputation trooped out of the study.

Figgins & Co. were not entering lightly or jokingly into the proceedings. They had been outclassed on numerous occasions by their School House rivals, and they were desperately anxious to atone for past failures.

Figgins was keeping his men up to the mark, and in strict training—much to the disgust of Fatty Wrenn, who didn't relish being deprived of pies and pastries.

There was every reason for supposing that when the sports came off the New House would give a much better account of themselves than formerly. They were handicapped in a way, because they hadn't so many fellows to draw from as the School House, which was rich in athletes. But this drawback was countered by the fact that the New House would have a longer period of training than their opponents.

Kildare of the Sixth readily consented to act as the presiding official. And in both Houses that evening there was tremendous excitement.

The School House were confident of victory, and their rivals were no less confident.

One of the two factions was destined to disappointment and defeat.

Which would it be?

CHAPTER 2.

The Order of the Boot!

OUT in the dusky quadrangle Aubrey Racke of the Shell was pacing to and fro.

Racke's face was pale and troubled; his hands were thrust deeply into his pockets.

He was in trouble, a state of affairs which was not surprising, considering the life he led. Indeed, the surprising thing was that Racke wasn't in trouble more often.

The cad of the Shell was faced with financial difficulties. He owed money to a bookmaker in Rylcombe, and the sum he owed would have made the average fellow gasp.

Racke was haunted by visions of the bookmaker in question coming up to the school and interviewing the Head. Such an interview would be extremely painful to the kindly Dr. Holmes, and even more painful to Aubrey Racke.

"Thirty quid!" muttered Racke, as he paced to and fro in the darkness. "I shall have to raise it somehow, or the chopper will come down. Hope my pater turns up trumps, and sends me a fat remittance. But I rather doubt it. The last letter I had from him was *anxious*, but *encouraging*. I believe he suspects that I've been goin' the pace. Jove! I only wish that affair of the concert had come off all right!"

But the affair in question had come off all wrong—for Racke. He had got up a concert-party called Racke's Revellers, with the intention of sending the bulk of the proceeds to the Cottage Hospital, and retaining the balance himself.

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The concert, however, had not taken place, for at the last moment a scheme which Racke had plotted against Tom Merry & Co. had been discovered.

Racke's reward, instead of being about twenty pounds in hard cash, had taken the form of a public flogging.

He had written a desperate appeal to his father for funds, and he was now waiting for the paternal reply.

Presently there was a sound of heavy footsteps on the gravel, and a lantern swung to and fro.

Peering through the gloom, Racke discerned the postman. He went forward eagerly.

"Anythin' for me?" he asked.

"Yes, Master Racke."

"Good! Hand it over!"

"It's a registered letter," said the postman. "Will you sign for it, please?"

Racke produced a pencil, signed the receipt with feverish fingers, and hurried into the building with the letter.

He went along to his study, and was relieved to find that he had the apartment to himself. He ripped open the envelope greedily, and a banknote fluttered to the floor.

Racke pounced upon it, and held it up to the light.

"A tenner!" he muttered. "It isn't so much as I wanted, but it's better than nothin'!"

He put the note in his wallet and turned to his father's letter.

It was not at all a pleasant communication.

"Dear Aubrey.—I am far from satisfied with the reports which I have received from time to time from your Housemaster. You appear to be giving the school authorities a lot of trouble, and I understand that on more than one occasion you have had a narrow squeak from being expelled."

"I tell you emphatically that this won't do. You must pull yourself together, and not fritter away your time in selfish pleasures."

"I have made you a liberal allowance of pocket-money this term—I do not suppose there is a boy at St. Jim's who receives one-third as much pocket-money—and yet you have just written to say that you are in urgent need of more funds. I enclose ten pounds herewith, but unless there is a manifest improvement in your conduct I shall cut off your allowance altogether."

"I am informed that you do not represent your House in any capacity on the playing-fields. Why is this?"

"When I see by the school magazine that you have gained a place in the School House junior eleven, I shall be pleased to signify my approval by sending you a further remittance. I trust you will take the hint."

Your affectionate

"FATHER."

Aubrey Racke read this letter two or three times. But he didn't seem to derive much comfort from it.

Gain a place in the School House, eleven, indeed! He might just as well endeavour to get a place with Aston Villa or Tottenham Hotspur!

"Tom Merry wouldn't give me a second's consideration!" growled Racke. "He'd show me the door. Still, something's got to be done. I hear there's goin' to be a sports tournament between the two Houses. P'raps I can kid Merry into believin' that I intend to turn over a new leaf and take up sport. I'll have a shot, anyway. It means another tenner from the pater if I can smuggle myself into the School House team!"

For a long time Racke remained in his study, deep in thought. Then he rose to his feet with an air of resolution and went along to Study No. 10.

He arrived at a very inopportune moment, for Tom Merry was engaged in compiling the list of players for the House-match.

The captain of the Shell was being helped—or, to be more correct, hindered—in his task by his chums.

Tom Merry looked up with a frown as the sallow face of Aubrey Racke appeared in the doorway.

"Scat!" he growled.

Instead of "scatting," Racke stepped boldly into the study. He glanced over Tom Merry's shoulder at the list of players.

"I don't see my name there," he said. "No; and you wouldn't see it there if you looked at the list for a thousand years through a powerful microscope!"

was Tom Merry's retort.

"Don't get huffy," said Racke. "Look here, Merry, I'm anxious to get a place in the School House team."

Tom Merry stared, Manners snorted, Monty Lowther blinked, Jack Blake chuckled, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy frowned.

Racke's statement caused quite a sensation.

The cad of the Shell was no footballer, nor was he at all interested in the great winter game. Healthy sport was not in Racke's line. He preferred the unhealthy variety.

Yet here he was, calmly expressing a desire to get a place in the School House eleven!

"I know you think I'm rottin'," Racke went on, "but I'm not. If you'll give me a place in the team, Merry, I'll make myself worthy of it. I can't say fairer than that. I don't care what department of the team I play in. You can stick me between the posts—"

"We can't stick you at any price!" murmured Monty Lowther.

"Or you can make me one of the backs," continued Racke. "I've got a strong kick—"

"So have I!" said Jack Blake significantly, pointing a well-shod foot in Racke's direction.

"Or I'll play half or forward," went on Racke, unheeding. "It's all the same to me. What do you say, Merry?"

What Tom Merry said was more emphatic than polite. He pointed to the door.

"Vamoose!" he said curtly.

Racke didn't budge.

"I'm not kiddin'," he said. "I mean what I say. Let me play in the House-match; an' if I'm a failure I won't bother you again."



HARRY
MANNERS
(Shell), Study
No. 10. Height
5ft. 5ins.
Age 16.

"I'm not running any risk of playing a smoky boulder like you!" said Tom Merry. "I'd as soon play Baggy Trumble!"

"I promise you I'll go into strict training," said Racke.

"Does that mean that you'll restrict yourself to thirty cigarettes a day?" asked Monty Lowther. "Or p'raps you'll give up cigarettes altogether, and walk on to the field with a fat cigar in your mouth?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Racke tried hard to keep his temper, but it was impossible. The crowd of grinning faces proved too much for him. "You're a set of cads!" he cried hotly. "You bar me from the team just because I don't happen to belong to your priggish circle! If I was the best footballer going it would be just the same! You'd have no use for my services. It's rank, rotten favouritism!"

"Really, Wacke, you have no right to say such a thing!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Racke glared at the swell of St. Jim's. "To think that a stuffed tailor's dummy like you can get a place in the side while good players have to take a back seat!" he said bitterly.

A flush of anger overspread D'Arcy's features. And the next moment he proved himself to be anything but a stuffed tailor's dummy. He pushed back his cuffs and rushed at Racke.

"You fearful wretch! Take that—an' that—an' that!"

Racke took them.

The first was a smashing straight left in the chest, which caused him to stagger, the second was a powerful punch on the nose—Racke had rather a prominent nasal organ—and the third was a telling upper-cut.

"Yaroooooh!" roared the recipient of these blows, as he went spinning through the doorway.

The rest of the juniors did not interfere, and Arthur Augustus sped the parting guest, so to speak, with his boot.

Aubrey Racke sat down violently in the passage, and the door of Study No. 10 was slammed in his face.

The cad of the Shell felt as if a battering-ram, a steam-roller, and an earthquake had hit him at the same time. He seemed to be surrounded by shooting-stars, and it was some time before he could collect his scattered senses.

Then he picked himself up, and limped away to his own quarters. His face was white, his hands tightly clenched.

"The rotters!" he muttered savagely. "I might have known there was no chance of getting into the eleven."

Racke had never had any superfluous affection for Tom Merry & Co. And he had still less now. In fact, he hated them with the hatred of a Hun.

He did not pause to reflect that it was entirely his own fault that he was unable to get a place in the eleven.

Tom Merry was the soul of fairness, and if Racke had been a decent fellow he would have been only too pleased to give him a trial. But it was no use including in the team a fellow who never took the trouble to keep himself fit.

Besides, the House-match was a vitally important affair. One weak link in the School House side, and Figgins & Co. would romp home easy winners. For the New House fellows were trained to perfection, and even Tom Merry's strongest side would have all its work cut out to hold them. And no side could be strong which included Aubrey Racke.

The cad of the Shell realised that

nothing would alter Tom Merry's decision.

A wild thought came into his mind of raising a rival eleven, to cut the regular team out. But that would be impossible. No doubt there would be fellows willing to play; fellows like Grundy and Buck Finn and Skimpole. But such a team would be a laughing-stock.

Racke did no "prep" that evening. Instead, he sat brooding over the situation, and trying to think of a scheme whereby he could cause the New House to win the sports.

The unscrupulous junior had no sense of honour. He would have rejoiced to see his own House humbled in the dust.

How could he bring it about?

It was not until bed-time that Racke thought of a way. And as he went up the stairs to the Shell dormitory he chuckled—a harsh, unpleasant chuckle which boded ill for the sportsmen of the School House!

CHAPTER 3.

The First Event!

FOOTBALL fever!

That was the complaint from which both Houses suffered during the next few days.

Football was indulged in at strange times and in strange places.

Early in the morning the rival teams were at practice. After breakfast they were at it again. In the interval between morning school and dinner the thud of the football sounded in the quad. And so it went on, until dusk put an end to the practice.

Even if it rained in torrents, the juniors were not discouraged. They cleared an open space in the Common-room, and practised there; or they punted the ball through the corridors.

Threats, impositions, likings—all were powerless to check the fever. It raged

incessantly, until at last the day of the House-match dawned.

It was a glorious day, keen and frosty. And overcoats were turned up, and mufflers were in evidence, as the crowd flocked down to the football ground.

The two elevens had been chosen several days before, and the rival captains made no changes in their selections. Both elevens were in the pink of condition, and everything pointed to a keen, thrilling tussle.

Even the Head, who could not be expected to take much interest in junior football, had turned out to see the match. Standing beside him, on the touchline, was Mr. Railton. And a short distance away was Marie Rivers, who wanted to see the School House win, for Talbot, her best chum, was in the team.

Kildare beckoned the two captains to the centre of the field, and the coin was spun.

"Heads!" said Tom Merry.

"Heads it is," said Figgins. "Which way are you going to kick?"

"We'll face the wind in the first half," was the reply; "and then we shall have the advantage of it in the second."

"You'll need all the advantage that the wind's likely to give you!" chuckled Figgins. "Come along, you fellows! Line up!"

The twenty-two players took up their positions amid a storm of cheering.

The School House were confident almost to the verge of cocksureness. And they had reason to be, for their forward line—D'Arcy, Blake, Merry, Noble, and Talbot—was a very skilful and speedy attacking force.

The New House, however, had the better defence. Fatty Wynn, in goal, was a host in himself. And Figgins and Kerr, at back, were a pair of resolute defenders.

Kildare blew his whistle, and Dick Redfern kicked off for the New House.



It was just on half-time when the School House scored. Talbot, challenged by Figgins, lobbed the leather across to the waiting Harry Noble, and the Australian junior whipped it into the net before Fatty Wynn could say "Grub!" (See page 6.)

"School House!"

"New House!"

"On the ball!"

"Put your beef into it!"

Then there was a lull, as Lawrence raced away on the New House wing. He tricked Clive and Levison major in turn, and then fired in a terrific shot.

To the intense relief of the School House partisans, the ball just skimmed the crossbar.

"A narrow squeak, by Jove!" panted Tom Merry. "Keep your eyes open, Levison, and don't give the beggars an inch, or they'll take a mile!"

But Lawrence was possessed of a fine turn of speed, and he frequently had the School House defenders in difficulties. There was no stopping him. He seemed to streak past the halves and backs like a lightning-flash.

Once he sent across a glorious centre, and Dick Redfern came charging up to drive the ball into the net. But the School House goalie rose to the occasion, and booted the ball clear.

So far, very little had been seen of the brilliant forward-line that was led by Tom Merry. The School House players were penned for a long period in their own half, and they couldn't seem to get going. But their backs defended finely, and the New House failed to score.

The Head was surveying the game with keen interest.

"I rather fear, Railton," he said, "that your House will be defeated. The defence is holding out well, but I think it will be pierced before long."

Mr. Railton smiled.

"My boys have not yet got into their stride, sir," he said. "They are being rushed off their feet, but they will soon settle down and get a grip on the game."

The Housemaster was right.

Gradually the School House improved, until they had more than an equal share of the play.

But it was not until just on half-time that a goal came.

Monty Lowther sent Talbot away, and the Shell fellow put in a brilliant run.

He was challenged by Figgins within a few yards of goal, but out of the corner of his eye he saw Harry Noble waiting for a pass. So he promptly lobbed the leather across, and the Australian junior whipped it into the net before Fatty Wynn could say "Grab!"

"Goal!"

"Bravo, Kangaroo!"

The School House supporters were jubilant. But Aubrey Racke, who was standing on the touchline with Crooke and Mellish, was scowling. He didn't like the turn events were taking. He wanted to see the New House win, and Tom Merry's pride humbled.

Shortly afterwards the whistle sounded for half-time. And the players were only too glad to get a breather, for play had been fast and strenuous.

"We're doing' well, deah boys!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy cheerfully.

"Strange!" murmured Monty Lowther.

"Eh? Why is it swange?" "Because you're playing, Gussy. It's surprising that we should be doing well when we're labouring under such a handicap!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Lowthah, I wepudiate your insinuation with scorn! I hurl it back in your teeth, bai Jove!"

"Keep your wool on, Vere de Vere!" chuckled the humorist of the Shell.

"I wufese to keep my wool on. Why should I be insulted in this flagrant manner?"

"The answer's a lemon," said Monty.

Lowther. "Hand over the rare and refreshing fruit, Tommy!"

Tom Merry passed his chum a lemon, and Lowther sucked it complacently.

The School House fellows were in good spirits. They enjoyed a goal lead over their rivals, and their chances of winning the match were decidedly rosy.

Snow began to fall when the game was resumed. It fell lightly at first, but after a time a blinding, whirling snow-storm prevailed.

"Never mind the weather!" sang out Dick Redfern. "On the ball, New House!"

The surface of the ground was soon mantled in white. It was a picturesque scene, but the players had no eyes for scenery just then.

The New House attacked fiercely. They were desperately keen on bringing the scores level.

But their luck was dead out.

Dick Redfern struck the cross-bar with a terrific drive, and a moment later Lawrence sent in a beauty from the wing, but the ball went just wide of the post.

MONTAGUE

LOWTHER

(Shell), Study

No. 10.

Height 5ft.

5ins.

Age 15 years

11 months.



The School House goal seemed to bear a charmed life.

Try as they would, the New House forwards could not get through. Most of their shots were charged down, and the remainder were just off the target.

Then the School House came into the picture.

Clive of the Fourth tried a long shot from thirty yards' range. The flight of the ball completely deceived Fatty Wynn. He clutched at the empty air, and the sphere lodged in the top corner of the net.

"Goal!"

"Two up!"

"Stuff to give 'em, School House!"

"Keep the merry pot boiling!"

Tom Merry & Co. were on excellent terms with themselves now. They scarcely deserved to be two goals up, for the New House had had quite as much of the play. Still, it was goals that counted, and the School House had bagged two. Their opponents would have to score three times in order to win—a very stiff proposition!

But Figgins & Co. did not lose heart. They kept pegging away, and their supporters gave them plenty of encouragement.

The snow continued to fall thick and fast.

Kildare of the Sixth had all his work cut out to follow the progress of the game. But it was not a difficult match to referee, for there were no fouls, and very few infringements of the off-side rule.

The School House forwards warmed to their work. And Tom Merry, who had

been rather subdued owing to the close attentions of Figgins and Kerr, came into the limelight. He snapped up a clever pass from Jack Blake, and steered the ball past Fatty Wynn with a masterly effort.

"Goal!"

The School House partisans were crowing with satisfaction. Their heroes were three clear goals to the good, and only twenty minutes remained for play.

The Head and Mr. Railton left the ground. They considered it was a case of "all over, bar shouting."

Only by a miracle could the New House players, with the snow beating in their faces, save the game.

But miracles sometimes happen in football. And it looked as though one was about to happen now.

Many teams would have gone all to pieces on being three goals down. They would have argued, "What's the use of trying? We're hopelessly whacked!"

But the New House team was made of sterner stuff than this. And they strove manfully to reduce the margin.

Levison accidentally handled the ball, and the New House were awarded a free-kick just outside the penalty-area.

Figgins came up and took the kick, and he lobbed the ball over the heads of several players into the net.

"Hurrah!"

At last the New House supporters had something to shout about. And they were shouting still louder a moment later, when Dick Redfern, taking the ball through on his own, scored with a rasping shot.

"Played, Reddy!" panted Figgins. "We're only a goal behind now! Stick to it, kids!"

The School House fellows were temporarily thrown off their balance by these unexpected reverses. In vulgar parlance, they "had the wind up." A few moments ago it seemed as if they would win hands down. But a great change had come over the game, and Tom Merry knew that his men would have to contest every inch of the ground.

For the next ten minutes the New House forwards bombarded their opponents' citadel. They rained in shots from all angles, and the goalie was up to his eyes in work, whereas Fatty Wynn, at the other end, was half-frozen through having nothing to do.

The School House players packed their goal, in a desperate endeavour to prevent the nippy New House forwards from getting through.

But Dick Redfern & Co., having tasted blood, as it were, were playing right on top of their form now. They were not to be denied.

Crash!

A deadly shot from the foot of Owen struck one of the uprights. As the ball rebounded Dick Redfern got his head to it, and it zipped into the net.

"They've drawn level!"

"Well played, New House! Oh, well played!"

It really looked as if the miracle would happen—as if the New House would pull the game out of the fire and win.

It seemed almost incredible that only a short time before they had been three goals down. They were playing like a winning team now.

With only five minutes to go, they crowded on all sail.

Again Redfern broke through, and a goal seemed certain.

But Levison, major came plunging through the snow, and he dispossessed Redfern of the ball just as the New House fellow was in the act of shooting.

There was a deep, almost a sobbing,

breath of relief from the School House supporters.

"Well cleared, Levison!"

But Levison was not finished yet. Having got the ball, he refused to part with it. He dodged through a pack of New House fellows, and went away like a hare, with a crowd of opponents after him, like hounds in full cry.

It was a glorious solo effort, and the crowd watched, spellbound.

Running alongside Levison was Talbot. And when Levison was eventually bowled over by Figgins, Talbot dashed for the ball and took up the running.

"Shoot! Shoot!"

It was a frenzied yell from the School House supporters.

Had Talbot hesitated a second, the chance would have been lost, for Kerr of the New House was dashing across to intercept him.

But Talbot didn't hesitate. He shot hard and true for goal.

Fatty Wynn threw himself full length in a valiant endeavour to save. But he was too late.

The ball crashed into the net, and a perfect pandemonium prevailed.

"Goal! Goal! Goal!"

"School House have won!"

"Hurrah!"

"Four goals to three!" panted Tom Merry, as he squealed through the snow. "Jove, what a game!"

"There's still two minutes to go," muttered Manners.

In those two minutes the New House made their last dying effort. They were game to the last. It was a forlorn hope; but they went under fighting, and they were attacking when the final whistle rang out.

The match finished in semi-darkness. And as they staggered off the field through the driving snow Tom Merry & Co. were treated to a demonstration the like of which they had seldom known before.

Figgins was the first to congratulate the rival skipper.

"Played, Tommy!" he said breathlessly. "You just got through by the skin of your teeth. But we gave you a run for your money—what?"

"You did!" said Tom Merry. "The way your fellows backed up after being three goals down was great! You deserved to draw!"

"We don't always get what we deserve in this world," said Figgins philosophically. "Never mind! We've lost the first round, but there's four more events to follow. And the New House is going to finish on top!"

To which the School House fellows retorted with the ancient and classic monosyllable:

"Rats!"

CHAPTER 4. In the Ring.

AUBREY RACKE was bitterly disappointed at the result of the House match.

He had been in the act of leaving the ground when the score stood at 3-5. And he told himself, with a chuckle, that it would be impossible for the School House to win. On reaching the exit, however, he heard a mighty roar, and he turned just in time to see Talbot put on the winning goal.

Racke was furious.

"That's one event to the School House!" he muttered savagely. "Never mind! They've a long way to go yet. And I'll make it my business to see that they're not on top at the finish!"

The boxing contests were to take place next day, and Racke tried hard to devise some scheme whereby he could hinder Tom Merry & Co.'s chance.

There were to be three bouts. Tom Merry was to face Figgins. Talbot was to do battle with Dick Redfern; and Jack Blake was to tackle Kerr.

It looked any odds on the School House candidates winning each bout. Tom Merry was streets ahead of Figgins as a fighting-man, and Talbot's superiority over Dick Redfern could not be questioned.

As for Jack Blake, it was anticipated that he would have a "walk-over" against Kerr.

If the School House won three, or even two, of the contests they would secure the honours, and would be one step nearer their goal.

The prospect was not at all pleasing to Aubrey Racke.

"If only I could get Merry an' Talbot an' Blake out of the way," he muttered, "things might work out differently. The School House would have to be represented by Kangaroo an' Roylance an' Gussy; an' that would give the New House a great chance. I wonder—"

And the cad of the Shell fell to thinking of a ruse for preventing the three chosen candidates of the School House from taking part in the boxing tournament.

It was not until he was in bed that night, and the dormitory was still and silent, that Racke hit upon a plan.

It was not a particularly ingenious scheme, but Racke felt that it would answer the purpose. And he chuckled softly to himself before he fell asleep.

After dinner next day Tom Merry, Talbot, and Jack Blake were in the gym, putting in a final bout of practice with the punching-ball, when Arthur Augustus D'Arcy rushed in.

The swell of St. Jim's was in a state of great excitement. But his chums took little notice of him at first. They imagined that his excitement was due to the boxing tournament which was about to take place.

"I say, deah boys, I'm all of a fluttah!" said Arthur Augustus. "I've

just weiceived a note twom my bwethah Conway!"

Tom Merry suspended operations with the punching-ball and spun round.

"Eh? What's that, Gussy?"

"My bwethah Conway's ovah at Wayland, an' he wants to see us at once!"

"What! The four of us?" echoed Talbot, in astonishment.

"Yaas, deah boy. He's just sent this note by a special messengah!"

And Arthur Augustus handed over the missive.

The juniors looked at it curiously. It was worded as follows:

"The King's Arms,

"Wayland.

"My dear Arthur,—I am stranded here as the result of a motor accident. Nothing serious, but I'm prevented from coming over to St. Jim's.

"I want you to come over and see me immediately on receipt of this note. Bring Merry, Talbot, and Blake with you. It is imperative that I should see the four of you at once.

"Don't fail, will you?"

"Your affectionate brother,

"CONWAY."

Tom Merry looked grave, and so did Jack Blake. As for Talbot, his expression was very thoughtful.

"It appeals that poor old Conway has had a smash, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus. "He says it's nothin' serious, but I can't help feelin' wowed."

"The puzzle is, why should he want to see the four of us?" said Jack Blake.

"Let's have another look at that letter, Gussy," said Talbot.

Arthur Augustus handed it over, and the Shell fellow scanned it intently.

"Have you any previous letters from Lord Conway?" he asked.

"Heaps, deah boy. I nevah destwoy my bwethah's lettahs."

"Would you mind fetchin' me the last half-dozen letters you've received?"

"But—but why—"



Two hundred yards from the school gates Figgins came a nasty cropper. Swerving to avoid a pony and trap coming towards him, he pitched over the handlebars into the ditch. Harry Noble, with a sympathetic look at the unfortunate Figgins, passed by. (See page 10.)

"I rather think we shall discover something," said Talbot quietly.

Arthur Augustus hurried away. He returned in a few moments with a bundle of letters.

Talbot compared the letters minutely with the one that had just arrived.

"I thought so," he said grimly.

"Eh?"

"This letter you've just received, Gussy, is a spoof."

There was a shout from Talbot's chums.

"Look for yourselves, you fellows," he went on. "At a casual glance the handwriting seems the same. But if you look at it closely you'll see several differences. For instance, in all these letters that Gussy has just brought, Lord Conway doesn't dot his 'i's.' Whereas, in this note that's just arrived, the 'i's' are dotted. Then take the letter 'y.' Lord Conway writes it with a flourish, but the flourish is missing from this latest letter. And if you want further evidence that it's a fake, see how it finishes up—'Your affectionate brother.' None of these other letters finish like that. They're all 'Yours ever.'"

"Bai Jore!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus. "You're quite right, dear boy! As a fellow of keen discernin' powahs, I ought to have noticed myself that this letter was faked."

"But—but who did it?" added Jack Blake.

"It's impossible to say who did it," said Talbot. "Some fellow with a perverted sense of humour, I should say. The chap who wrote it thought we should swallow the bait, and go toddling off to Wayland. And when we got there, I expect we should have been kidnapped and—"

"Kidnapped?" echoed Tom Merry.

"Detained, if you prefer a milder term. Anyway, we should have been prevented from taking part in the boxing tournament."

"Great Scott!"

"Then—then Conway isn't at Wayland at all!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus.

"Of course not!" said Talbot.

"But he might have got somebody else to write the letter for him," suggested Tom Merry.

"If he's really been mixed up in a motor-smash, it may have been impossible for him to write."

"Gussy can go over to Wayland and see, if he likes, for his own peace of mind," said Talbot. "But I'm absolutely convinced that this letter's a fake."

After further discussion, Arthur Augustus agreed with Talbot. And the juniors decided to ignore the letter which had been brought to St. Jim's by special messenger.

It was fortunate for Racke of the Shell that they did not suspect him of having a hand in the business.

As a matter of fact, it was Racke who had written that letter. Moreover, he had arranged with some shady acquaintances of his at the King's Arms, Wayland, to detain Tom Merry & Co. when they came.

But Tom Merry & Co. did not come.

Thanks to Talbot's shrewdness, the plot had missed fire.

Half an hour later the gymnasium was packed.

Aubrey Racke did not arrive on the scene until the last moment. He fully expected to find the School House boxing representatives absent, and three others of less renown chosen in their places.

But there was a shock in store for the cad of the Shell.

Tom Merry, Talbot, and Jack Blake were present—stripped for the fray.

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Racke rubbed his eyes like a fellow in a dream.

What had happened?

In what way had his scheme miscarried?

Had the messenger who had been entrusted with the note failed to deliver it?

Whatever had happened, Racke's plans had gone astray, and he gritted his teeth with annoyance.

The rest of the fellows were far too excited to take any notice of Racke.

Never had there been such a crush in the historic gym. Every inch of available space was occupied.

The faces of the School House through were wreathed in smiles. And the New House partisans were far from being dismayed. They considered that their champions had quite a sporting chance of winning the spoils.

On paper, Tom Merry & Co. looked certain winners. But boxing was a sport which was full of surprises. And Figgins



MISS MARIE RIVERS, the Popular School Nurse.

& Co. were determined to put up a great fight.

Kildare of the Sixth shouted for silence. And gradually the hum of voices died away.

"The first bout," announced the captain of St. Jim's, "will be between Tom Merry, of the School House, and George Figgins, New House."

The two rivals stepped into the ring. The eyes of two hundred fellows were focused upon them.

"Time!" said Kildare.

"Go it, ye cripples!"

Figgins started off at a great pace, as if he would rush his opponent off his feet.

Tom Merry retreated under the rain of blows, and the New House supporters crowed with delight.

But Figgins' onslaught soon fizzled out. His opponent counter-attacked, and drove him against the ropes.

Biff! Thud! Biff! Thud!

Figgins had a gruelling time. He felt as if an earthquake was happening. He was in a tight corner, and try as he would he could not get out of it. If he moved to the right, one shot Tom Merry's left. If he stepped to the left, he got in the way of Tom Merry's right.

"Good old Tommy!" chortled Monty Lowther. "Put him out of his misery!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

But Figgins, although he took heavy punishment, refused to give in. He was in a very dazed and battered condition when Kildare called "Time!" But he was not yet hors d'combat.

Fatty Wynn tended his chum almost affectionately during the brief interval. He sponged Figgins' face; he set a gale blowing with the towel; and he gave his chum some excellent advice, which Figgins was too dazed to hear or heed.

When it was time to go up for the second round, however, Figgins felt heaps better. He gave a good account of himself in this round, too. He kept in the open, and refused to allow Tom Merry to get him against the ropes again.

The captain of the Shell continued to fight coolly but trustfully, never missing an opening, and never giving his opponent a second's pause.

Once, however, Figgins broke through his guard, and dealt him a smashing blow on the jaw.

Loud cheers from the New House supporters!

Figgins tried hard to press home his advantage, but Tom Merry defended bravely.

Honours were easy at the end of the round.

"Keep that form up, and you'll soon polish him off, Figgys!" said Fatty Wynn.

Figgins grunted.

"He's a long way from being polished off yet," he said. "The beggar seems to be made of cast-iron."

In the third round Figgins went all to pieces.

The instant he faced his man he was knocked clean off his feet. And, although he was up again in a twinkling, he never seemed to recover from the blow. His punches grew feebler and feebler, and Tom Merry's grew stronger and stronger. And just as the round was nearing its close, the School House fellow planted a terrific punch between his opponent's eyes.

Figgins went down like a log, and amid a breathless hush, Kildare counted him out.

Then a storm of cheering burst from the School House partisans.

"Hurrah!"

"Tommy wins!"

"Trot out your next victim, New House!"

Everybody thought that Kerr would be the next victim. But everybody thought wrongly.

True, Kerr was no match for Jack Blake, in the ordinary way. But on this occasion he managed to master him. He employed shock tactics at the outset, and attacked his man with such vigour and swiftness that Jack Blake was utterly bewildered. If he had been allowed to settle down, the bout would have had a different ending. But, for once in a way, dash proved superior to science, and George Francis Kerr won the day.

"That's one win to each House, dear boys," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Ev'rythin' depends on you, Talbot. It's up to you to lick Wedfern into a cocked hat."

Talbot smiled.

"I'll do my best to oblige," he said, "but I've a hard nut to crack."

Dick Redfern, on his day, was a great fighting-man. And this was one of his days. He knew that Talbot enjoyed a big reputation, but big reputations didn't trouble Redfern. Had his opponent been the celebrated Jimmy Wilde he would have entered the fray with a good heart.

Physically, there was not much to choose between the two juniors as they stepped into the ring.

Talbot was taller by half an inch, and he possessed the longer reach. But Dick Redfern was sturdy, and there was nothing of the weakling about him as he commenced to fight.

The spectators looked on with kindling eyes.

It was doubtful if anyone was more excited than Racke of the Shell.

Racke was desperately anxious that Redfern should win, and thus score a valuable point for the New House in the sports tournament.

This was a thrilling fight—even more so than the one between Tom Merry and Figgins.

First Talbot and then Redfern gained the advantage, and at the end of the first round they were about level.

The second round was Talbot's; the third was Redfern's; the fourth was Reddy's again. And in the fifth Talbot pulled himself together, and led his opponent a rare dance.

The onlookers waited eagerly for the knock-out, but it did not come.

Both boxers had been knocked down once, but both had risen with alacrity.

Dick Redfern had taken heavy punishment, and Talbot was not unmarked. When they went up for the sixth round they blinked at each other in a manner which made the crowd roar with laughter.

"Come along, Talbot!"

"Now, Reddy!"

"Stick it, School House!"

"New House for ever!"

For round after round the grim and grueling contest continued.

Talbot was fighting desperately. He had anticipated that Dick Redfern would give him a certain amount of trouble, but he had not bargained on the New House fellow lasting out all these rounds.

Redfern's attack weakened somewhat, and he never once looked like landing a knock-out blow. At the same time, he never looked like being knocked out. His defensive work was magnificent, and his tricky footwork deceived Talbot again and again.

"Looks like ending all square," remarked Monty Lowther.

Tom Merry nodded.

"Kildare won't let them go beyond twelve rounds," he said. "If they get that far, the decision will be given on points."

Dick Redfern battled on gamely, and by sheer pluck he extended the contest to the full twelve rounds.

The last round was a thrilling affair.

Reddy was knocked across the ropes, but he swiftly rallied. Darting out into the open, he beat a tattoo on Talbot's ribs, and the School House junior gasped.

"That's the style, Reddy!" shouted Figgins. "Keep it up, old man!"

"You've got him groggy!" roared Fatty Wynn.

Talbot certainly staggered before that snatching onslaught. But towards the end of the round the attacked became the attacker, and Dick Redfern was driven round and round the ring.

The end came with Talbot still attacking.

Kildare stepped aside, and held a brief consultation with Mr. Raitton. Then he announced in clear tones:

"The fight is awarded to Reginald Talbot on points."

Frenzied cheers greeted the announcement.

Wary and dazed though he was, Dick Redfern staggered across the ring to congratulate the victor.

"Well won, old chap!" he said.

Talbot grinned breathlessly.

"It was a jolly near thing," he said.

"I only just scraped through. You put up a great show!"

There was joy in the School House camp that afternoon. The House had won two of the five events; and, in order to prove themselves cock House, Figgins & Co. would have to win the remaining three events off the reel—a very formidable task!

Aubrey Racke was furious.

"Those New House fellows seem to be doing their level best to lose the sports," he growled, as he lounged out of the gym. "Dash it all, I can't understand why Tom Merry and the others didn't go over to Wayland this afternoon!"

Then he turned pale as a sudden thought struck him.

"Wonder if they discovered that the letter was a fake?"

The possibility made Racke feel very uneasy. He expected to be pounced upon at any moment by the fellows against whom he had plotted.

But there were no developments, and Racke eventually came to the conclusion that no one suspected his base designs against his own House.

CHAPTER 5.

The Turn of the Tide!

"WEADY, deah boys!"
Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, attired in running-shorts and a fancy vest, looked into Study No. 10.

Twenty-four hours had elapsed since



REGINALD
TALBOT
(Shell),
Study No. 9.
Height 5ft.
Sins.
Age 16

the boxing tournament, and the inter-House cycling race was about to commence.

"Ready, ay, ready!" said Monty Lowther, in response to Fussy's query. "Let us trot out our ancient gridirons, and put it across the New House once more!"

The juniors made their way to the bicycle-sheds.

Figgins & Co. of the New House were standing in the school gateway with their machines, waiting impatiently for the race to start.

The bicycles of the School House competitors, as they were wheeled out into the quad, gleamed brightly in the winter sunshine. They had been thoroughly overhauled the previous night, for it was imperative that they should be in perfect running order.

"I think we'd better make sure that our tyres are all right," said Talbot.

"Rate! Of course they're all right, you duffer!" said Tom Merry. "We pumped them up only an hour ago."

"Lots of things can happen in an hour," said Talbot. "I'm going to examine mine, anyway."

"Weally, deah boy, you will delay the race!" protested Arthur Augustus.

"Better to delay the race than lose it through having faulty tyres," was Talbot's rejoinder.

He removed the outer cover of his back tyre, and carefully examined the inner tube. Then he uttered a sudden exclamation.

"My hat!"

"Anything wrong?" asked Jack Blake. Talbot nodded.

"Somebody's been having a game with my bike," he said. "It was quite O.K. an hour ago, and now there's a slow puncture in the back tyre!"

"Great Scott!"

"I should advise you fellows to overhaul your own jiggers," said Talbot.

"It's my belief that there's been some shady work."

Tom Merry & Co. promptly examined their tyres. In every one, without exception, a slow puncture was discovered.

"What cad has done this?" exclaimed Tom Merry hotly.

"It's outrageous!" said Arthur Augustus. "If Talbot hadn't discovered it, we should have lost the race!"

The School House juniors, wrathful and indignant, set to work to repair the punctures.

Figgins & Co. were tired of waiting by this time. They came sprinting up to their rivals.

"What's the little game, you fellows?" demanded Figgins. "You've kept us waiting twenty minutes already!"

"Some precious outsider has punctured all our tyres!" growled Jack Blake.

"Great pip!"

"Better see if your own are all right, Figgys," said Talbot.

The New House juniors promptly inspected their tyres, and found them in perfect order.

"Looks like a plot against the School House," said Dick Redfern, with a troubled brow. "I hope nobody in our House is responsible for this!"

"It's a good thing the punctures were discovered, anyway," said Kerr.

In less than half an hour all the tyres were pronounced in order, and the competitors lined up in the school gateway with their machines.

Kildare of the Sixth was informed of the reason for the delay. The captain of St. Jim's looked thoughtful.

"It's clear that there's some low-down trickery going on," he said. "It's more than likely that the puncturing of the tyres is only a part of the plot."

"What do you mean, Kildare?" asked Tom Merry excitedly.

"I mean that an attempt might be made to detain you on the road. It's only a surmise on my part, of course. But I think the wisest plan would be for you to take a different route from the one originally decided upon. Instead of heading straight for Wayland, you'd better take the High Road, and return by way of Rylcombe Lane."

"Good!"

"That will frustrate any plot that might have been laid to upset your chances. Now, then, are you ready?"

"The competitors—there were a dozen from each House—prepared to mount."

Kildare blew a whistle, and there was a roar of encouragement from the onlookers as the cyclists started.

There was a calamity at the outset.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's front wheel bumped into Fatty Wynn's front one, and both juniors came a cropper. They rolled over in the roadway, to the accompaniment of yells of laughter.

The rest of the cyclists were away like the wind.

Figgins was in front. His head went down over the handlebars, and he pedalled away as if his life depended upon it.

Behind him came a bunch of School House juniors, of whom Tom Merry, Talbot, and Harry Noble were prominent.

The pace was a corker. The machines seemed to leap over the hard surface of the road.

Faintly from the rear came the shouts of the rival supporters.

"Let it rip, School House!"

"Put the pace on, Figgys!"

Toiling along, far behind the others, came Fatty Wynn and Arthur Augustus.

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D'Arcy, who had had a wordy argument before remounting.

"Stick it, Gussy! You'll be an easy twenty-fourth!" shouted a wag from the school gateway.

As there were exactly twenty-four competitors the remark was far from flattering.

All the way along the High Road Figgins easily held the lead. And the fellows behind him were beginning to gasp a little, for the pace was terrific.

Harry Noble had come up to second place. Dick Redfern was third, and behind him, speeding side by side, came Talbot and Kerr.

Tom Merry came next. He was reserving his energy for the last lap. It was a great race.

Figgins seemed to have the issue in safe keeping, but a mile from home he was challenged by Harry Noble, who was riding strongly.

"Time I put on another spurt!" thought Figgins.

Two hundred yards from the school gates, however, he came a nasty cropper.

There was a pony and trap coming towards him, and in swerving to avoid it Figgins went into the ditch. He pitched over the handlebars, and for several seconds lay embedded in the slimy ooze.

Meanwhile, Harry Noble came on at top speed. He darted a sympathetic glance at the unfortunate Figgins, but he could not afford to stop and offer his condolences. He went by like a flash, and the School House juniors in the school gateway roared their encouragement.

"Good old Kangaroo!"

"Come on!"

"Only a few more yards!"

"Look out for Redfern! He's just behind you!"

Dick Redfern was riding as he had never ridden before. His bicycle bounded forward like a live thing. Yard by yard it gained upon the machine in front.

To the watching crowd Harry Noble's speed seemed to slacken. But that was not really the case. It was Redfern's fierce final spurt that made it appear that Kangaroo was travelling slowly.

The New House supporters exerted their lung-power to the utmost extent.

"Reddy's gaining!"

"He'll do it!"

And from the lips of the School House fellows burst the confident retort:

"Never!"

The two machines were level now. Neck-and-neck Redfern and Noble strove for the supremacy.

Reddy's last desperate spurt proved too much for the Australian junior.

Harry Noble's bicycle whizzed over the chalk-line, but Reddy's machine had crossed it a second earlier!

Thus the New House scored a splendid victory on the post.

The New House fellows were overjoyed at their success, and Dick Redfern came in for a tremendous ovation. He was borne shoulder-high into the building, and warmly congratulated by his delighted chums.

Meanwhile, Aubrey Racke strode savagely along the Wayland road.

For the second time he had been badly balked in his base designs.

It was Racke who had punctured Tom Merry & Co.'s machines. And for upwards of half an hour he had been in ambush behind a hedge, waiting to see the result of his handiwork.

To his dismay, however, not a single cyclist from St. Jim's had gone past.

Once again his precious scheme had miscarried.

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True, the School House had lost the race. But the New House had won it by sheer merit, and the crafty cunning of the cad of the Shell had had no bearing whatever on the result of that stern tussle between the rival Houses.

CHAPTER 6.

A Talbot for Talbot!

TWO more events were down for decision—the tug-of-war and the Marathon race.

After an hour's rest from their exertions, the teams for the tug-of-war contest lined up in the quadrangle.

Practically all St. Jim's had turned out to witness the struggle.

If the School House won they would have won the sports. If the New House won the two Houses would be level, and the Marathon race would be the deciding factor.

Figgins & Co. strongly fancied their chances in the tug-of-war contest. They had the assistance of Fatty Wynn, and the School House fellows would have all their work cut out to haul Fatty's huge bulk over the line.

Tom Merry mustered his men together.

"Pull like the very dickens, you fellows!" he said. "Don't yield an inch!"

Figgins of the New House was giving precisely the same advice to his own men.

"Ready, you kids?" inquired Kildare.

There was a general nodding of heads, and the rival teams lay back on the rope.

"Heave!" rapped out the captain of St. Jim's.

Both teams complied with a will.

There was a desperate struggle for the mastery.

The School House had the lighter team, but they got off the mark quicker than their opponents.

One quick, powerful pull, and the New House fellows lurched forward, and were dragged over the line.

Two more pulls remained to decide the issue.

The New House supporters rallied their men.

"Buck up, you fellows!"

"Don't let 'em catch you napping this time!"

At Kildare's fresh word of command the teams got to work. And this time the New House doggedly refused to yield an inch.

Try as they would the School House could make no impression on their opponents. And presently their strength began to fail. Their grip on the rope weakened, they staggered, and then they came stumbling over the line.

"That's one pull to each House!" said Kildare. "The third will be the decider."

The third and final pull was a gruelling affair.

The New House fellows summoned every ounce of strength for the final pull, and after what seemed an eternity, they had the satisfaction of seeing Tom Merry & Co. come sprawling over the line.

"Ow!" panted Fatty Wynn. "Carry me along to the tuckshop, somebody, and build up my constitution, or I shall jolly well collapse!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You deserve well of your country, Fatty!" said Figgins, his face glowing.

"We've managed to draw level with the School House at last, and to-morrow's Marathon will decide which House has the right to call itself Cock House."

Figgins & Co. were feeling very bucked with life. They had scored two notable triumphs that day, and they had managed to get on terms with their rivals.

They could not help feeling just a little dubious as to the result of the Marathon, for the School House possessed many fleet runners. But Figgins and his followers determined that they would do their level best—that they would not flag or falter until the final goal was reached.

St. Jim's was in a fever of excitement in connection with the Marathon.

Never had House rivalry risen to such a pitch.

The "favourite" for the event was Talbot, who had already been over the course several times, and knew practically every yard of the road.

There were many anxious inquiries next day as to whether Talbot felt fit. And he replied that he had never felt in better form.

"We're counting on you to pull it off, old man," said Tom Merry, as the Shell fellows streamed out of the Form-room after morning lessons next day. "If you can keep in front of Figgins all the time, you'll be all right. No other New House fellow will stand an earthly. Hallo! What's this?"

A telegraph-boy came in sight along the corridor.

"Wire for Master Talbot!" he announced.

Talbot took the buff-coloured envelope and ripped it open. A curious expression came over his face as he read the missive.

"Hope there's nothing wrong?" said Manners anxiously.

Talbot showed his chums the wire. It ran thus:

"Meet me waiting-room: Wayland Station this afternoon at three. Vitally important.—JOHN RIVERS."

The unexpected summons came as a crushing blow to the School House fellows.

Without Talbot, their prospects of winning the race were far less rosy. Indeed, it was quite on the cards that the New House would pull off the event, for Figgins was a magnificent runner.

Everybody felt intensely annoyed with John Rivers, the ex-professor, now a detective in the employ of Scotland Yard.

As for Talbot, he re-read the telegram, and then, with a thoughtful expression on his handsome face, he made his way to the school sanatorium.

Mario Rivers, the school nurse, greeted him with a bright smile. But the smile faded when she saw that her chum was worried.

"Is—is anything wrong, Reginald?"

"Nothing serious," said Talbot. "I'm just puzzled about something, that's all. Did you know that your father was at Wayland, Mario?"

The girl started.

"No. I presumed he was still at Scotland Yard."

"Well, he has just sent me a wire, asking me to meet him at Wayland Station this afternoon. The stamp of Wayland post-office is on the telegram."

"Are you sure that the wire is from my father? Might it not be a hoax?"

"Just what I was thinking," said Talbot. "I'll soon find out!"

"How?"

"By getting through to Scotland Yard on the phone."

"Splendid! There's a telephone here."

Talbot lost no time in putting through a trunk call to London. He had to wait about twenty minutes. Then the bell tinkled, and he again picked up the receiver.

"Hallo!" came a voice over the wires.

"This is Scotland Yard. Who are you?"

"Talbot, of St. Jim's," was the reply.
"Is Mr. Rivers there?"

"Yes."
"You're sure of that?"
"Quite! He's in the next room. Shall I fetch him to the phone?"

"No, don't bother. I expect he's busy, and I won't interrupt him. Do you know if he intends coming down to Wayland this afternoon?"

"Wayland? Oh, no! He's engaged on an important case here in London."

"Thanks awfully!" said Talbot.
"That's all I wanted to know!"
And he rang off.

"Your father's at the Yard, Marie," he said.

"Ah! Then I was right about, that wire being a hoax!"

"It's worse than a hoax!" said Talbot grimly. "It's a right-down, caddish trick! And I mean to find out who is responsible for it. There's been some shady business going on ever since the sports started. Gussy was sent for, if you remember, just before the boxing contests, and just prior to the cycling contests, and jiggers were punctured. There's some scheming rotter at work, and he's going to be discovered and exposed."

Talbot glanced at his watch.
"I've just time to nip across to Wayland before dinner," he said. "Don't say anything to Tom Merry and the others about this telephone conversation. I want them to think that I've gone over to Wayland to meet your father. See?"

"Right you are!" said Marie. "But you'll be back in time for the race, of course?"

Talbot smiled.
"Reginald Talbot won't run," he said.
"What?"

"But if you happen to see a red-headed new kid taking part in the race, you'll know who it is, Marie. Shush! Not a word!"

Leaving his girl chum in a state of great perplexity, Talbot hurried away. A few moments later he was speeding along the road to Wayland.

His first visit was to the post-office. The young lady behind the counter knew him, and smiled.

Talbot produced the telegram which he had received, and spread it out on the counter.

"This was handed in at twelve-fifteen," he said. "Were you on duty then?"

"Yes."
"Can you recollect who handed it in?"

The young lady nodded.
"It was a young fellow from St. Jim's," she said. "I don't know his name."

"What was he like?"

"He seemed to be over-dressed, and he was pale and rather unhealthy-looking. His cap was perched on the back of his head, and I could see that his hair was brushed straight back, without a parting."

"You ought to be a lady 'tee," said Talbot, with a smile.

"Have you identified the boy from my description?"

"Yes, I fancy I've fixed him. Much obliged," said Talbot.

And he lifted his cap to the young lady, and strolled out of the post-office.

"So it's Racke who is at the bottom of all this!" he muttered, as he emerged into the street. "He thought I should go to Wayland Station at three o'clock,

and I expect his intention was to have me bundled into an outgoing train, and thus prevented from running in the Marathon. Well, he'll be unlucky. I'll let the bouncer think that his scheme has succeeded; but he'll have a rude awakening later on!"

So saying, Talbot remounted his machine, and rode away towards Rylcombe Grammar School. He rode swiftly, for he had much to do, and little time in which to do it.

Arrived at the Grammar School, he called on Gordon Gay, his friend and rival.

"Welcome, little stranger!" said the youthful leader of the Grammarians.
"What can I do for you?"

"You can lend me a knickerbocker suit and a ginger wig—"

"Eh?"
"And you can also touch up my complexion with crayons. In other words, I want a complete disguise, and you're just the merchant to fix me up."

"But—but what's the little game?" gasped Gordon Gay.

"I want to turn up at St. Jim's as a new kid," explained Talbot. "Never mind why. It's a spoof, of course, I'm going to be the Hon. Bertie Binks, a stuttering young aristocrat. And I know you're an expert in the art of make-up. That's why I came to you. Be a sport, and rig me out for the part. There's no time to lose."

Gordon Gay grinned. He had a great liking for Talbot, and, peculiar though the latter's request was, he hastened to comply with it.

"Put yourself in my hands," he said. "I'll rig you out in such a ripping disguise that even your own grandmother wouldn't know you."

Talbot placed himself unreservedly in the hands of the Grammar School junior, and Gordon Gay was soon busy effecting a startling transformation.

Meanwhile, Racke of the Shell was congratulating himself that Talbot had blundered blindly into the trap which had been so cunningly prepared for him.

CHAPTER 7.

A Sensational Race!

"**B**AI JOVE!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy uttered the exclamation in amazement.

The swell of St. Jim's was standing in the school gateway, in his running attire, chatting to Tom Merry & Co. He broke off suddenly as a curious-looking individual, clad in a peculiar attire, drifted into the quad.

The newcomer presented an extraordinary appearance. He seemed about sixteen years of age, but he was garbed like a youngster of twelve. He had red hair, and he blinked at the St. Jim's juniors through his big spectacles in an apologetic manner, as if to say, "I know I've no right to be on the earth, but I really can't help it, you know!"

Monty Lowther gave a low whistle.
"Great jumping cracker!" he ejaculated. "Where did this merry merchant spring from?"

"Pip-pip-please am I r-r-right for St. Jim's?" inquired the stranger.

"Yaas, deah boy! Twot wight in!" said Arthur Augustus politely.

"Who are you?" growled Manners.
"I'm Bib-Bib-Bib-Binks, you know—the Hon. B-B-Bertie B-B-Binks."

"My hat!"
"The fellow s-s-s-eems to have a s-s-slight tendency to st-st-stutter!" observed Monty Lowther.

"Are you a new kid, Binks?" asked Tom Merry.

"Yes."
The captain of the Shell looked bewildered.

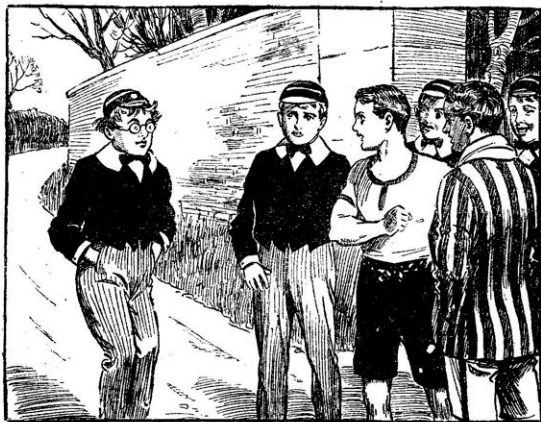
"Didn't know there was a new kid arriving this afternoon," he said.
"Where are your trunks?"

"They're c-c-coming along pip-pip-presently."

"Which House are you coming into?" inquired Digby.

"The S-s-school House."

Tom Merry & Co. groaned.
"If we got many more specimens like this platted on us," said Monty Lowther, "they'll begin to take us for a freak museum!"



"Bai Jove!" The swell of St. Jim's was standing in the school gateway, in his running attire, chatting to Tom Merry & Co. He broke off suddenly as a curious-looking individual drifted into the quad. (See page 12.)

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Pip-pip-parvion me," said the Hon. Bertie, "f-b-but what's going on this afternoon?"

"Marathon race," said Tom Merry briefly.

"An inter-House affair, you know," added Jack Blake.

"D-d-dear me! In my time I have been quite a respectable runner."

"Well, you look anything but respectable now in that queer rig-out!" grunted Manners. "Why don't you wear something a bit more civilised?"

The Hon. Bertie did not reply to this question. He continued to blink at the juniors through his big spectacles.

"I should very much like to be given a pip-pip-pip—" he began.

"You've given us the pip already!" murmured Lowther.

"Ja, ha, ha!"

"I repeat, I should very much like to be given a pip-pip-place among the S-school House runners," said Binks.

At this juncture Kildare of the Sixth bore down upon the group of juniors.

The captain of St. Jim's stared at the new boy in surprise.

"What is this, and when did it blow in?" he asked.

Tom Merry explained.

"He's a new kid called Binks," he said, "and he seems jolly keen on taking part in the Marathon."

"Well, there's no reason why he shouldn't," said Kildare, with a grin. "Which House are you in, kid?"

"S-school House, please!" said Binks.

"And you think you can keep going over a course of six miles?"

The new boy nodded confidently.

"In that case, you'd better get into some running-togs. Have you brought any with you?"

"My t-t-trunk hasn't arrived yet," said the newcomer.

"He can borrow Talbot's togs," said Tom Merry. "Talbot's got an appointment at Wayland, and he won't be running. Come along, Binks; I'll soon fix you up."

The rest of the juniors chuckled at the new boy set off in Tom Merry's wake.

They reflected that the inclusion of the Hon. Bertie would act as a sort of comic relief to the proceedings.

Meanwhile, Figgins & Co. had put in an appearance, and everybody was in readiness for the race to commence.

The New House fellows exploded with merriment when they caught sight of the Hon. Bertie. His entry into the race was regarded as a screaming joke.

Among those who had assembled to witness the start was Aubrey Racke.

The cad of the Shell was on excellent terms with himself. It seemed that his precious scheme had succeeded up to the hilt.

The runners—about thirty in all—were lined up shoulder to shoulder.

Kildare described the route to them in detail, then he sent them away.

Kerr of the New House started off as if he were trying to emulate an express train, and Figgins kept pace with him.

These two broke away from all the others, and streaked off down the road like hares.

The Hon. Bertie Binks started off at a lengthy and not ungraceful stride. He did not seem to be credibly exerting himself. At the same time, he was careful not to let Figgins and Kerr get too commanding a lead.

Tom Merry and Jack Blake were running alongside the new boy. His speed astonished them, but they made no comment. They wanted all their breath.

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At the end of the first mile Figgins and Kerr were still well to the fore.

Thirty yards behind them came Tom Merry, Jack Blake, and the new boy. The two first-named were gasping somewhat. They would both have liked to slacken speed a little, but their pride would not allow them to let the mid-looking Binks forge ahead of them.

At the end of the second mile the positions were unchanged.

Tom Merry and Jack Blake, however, were finding the pace far too warm. Both had bellows to mend, and only by sheer strength of will did they manage to keep level with the new boy, who showed not the faintest sign of distress.

Presently Blake managed to jerk out a few words:

"I say, Binks, just before we started I made a remark to the effect that you'd collapse like a pricked bladder at the end of a few yards."

"Well?"

"I'd like to take that back. Jove, you know how to get over the ground!"

"At that moment," said Binks, in his unnatural, high-pitched tones, "I'm as fresh as a daisy. But we've a long way to go yet. At the end of the fifth mile I dare say I shall resemble a wet sack."

"You—you're surely not going to keep up this pace all the way through?"

Binks nodded.

"In that case, you'll win!"

"That was precisely my object in entering the race," was the reply.

Jack Blake darted a swift glance at the new boy.

"You've dropped your stouter all of a sudden," he said.

Binks had a ready reply.

"I only stutter when I feel shy," he said. "And I felt ever so shy when I arrived at the school. I'm all right now."

For a few moments there was silence, as the trio toiled up a steep hill.

"Who are those fellows in front?" asked Binks, at length.

"Figgins and Kerr," panted Tom Merry.

"Both New House chaps?"

"Yes."

"I shall have to try and coax them to drop back a little," said Binks. "If they keep that pace up all the way I shall soon be exhausted."

Tom Merry and Jack Blake were exhausted already. But they said nothing.

At the end of the third mile Kerr's task of making the pace was accomplished. He had run himself to a standstill.

"Go ahead, Figgy," he jerked out. "I'm done!"

"Anybody behind?" inquired Figgins.

"Merry and Blake—and the new kid."

"My hat!"

With three School House fellows in fairly close attendance, Figgins felt that he dared not slacken speed, even for a moment. He went ahead in great style.

When another mile had been covered, Figgins permitted himself a glance over his shoulder.

He saw that the School House trio were still within a stone's throw of him. Two of them, however, appeared to be "whacked."

Five minutes later, when he was in the straight for home, Figgy looked round again. And this time he saw only one pursuer.

This was the new boy whose entry into the race had convulsed everybody with merriment.

There's more in that fellow than meets the eye!" muttered Figgins.

"Seems as if I shall have all my work out to do to shake him off."

After what seemed an eternity, he came in sight of the school gates and the outstretched tape. And, to his dismay,

the patter of running feet behind him drew closer and closer.

"Confound the fellow!" gasped Figgins.

He was far spent now. His breath came and went in great gasps; his throat was parched; and his head seemed to swim. The figures clustered in the school gateway, eagerly waiting to see the finish, appeared weird and grotesque.

"Come along, Figgy!"

"Only a few more yards!"

"Stick to it, old chap!"

If Figgy failed, he would not fail through lack of encouragement. Scores of New House fellows were urging him on.

But the runner close behind him—the amazing new boy—was rapidly overhauling him. He, too, was practically exhausted, but he had more in him than Figgins. On he came, with a set, resolute face, and with the cheers of the School House supporters ringing in his ears.

A second later the two runners were level.

Another second, and the tape went fluttering down. And it was the new boy—the Honourable Bertie Binks—who had breached it first!

A tremendous demonstration followed. Cheer upon cheer rang out from the School House ranks. For the sports tournament was over and won, and the New House had been vanquished.

The Honourable Bertie Binks was in great demand. Everybody seemed to be trying to wring his hand or thump him on the back. But at last he managed to escape from the delighted crowd, and he was seen to stagger away in the direction of Talbot's study.

It was half an hour later when Tom Merry & Co. arrived on the scene.

Their joy on learning the result of the Marathon knew no bounds. And they immediately went in search of Binks. But they found him not.

They had been told that the new boy was in Talbot's study, but on arriving at that apartment they found only Talbot.

"Hallo! Back from Wayland?" said Tom Merry.

Talbot nodded, and smiled.

"You've heard the result of the race, of course?" said Manners.

"Yes. I was there at the finish."

"Have you seen Binks anywhere, dear boy?" inquired Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Yes," said Talbot. "Here he is."

Talbot bowed.

"At your service!" he said.

Tom Merry & Co. stared at their chum in blank amazement. They were too stupefied to speak.

And then Talbot explained everything—how he discovered the telegram to be a fake, and how he had disguised himself in order that Aubrey Racke should not know that he was taking part in the Marathon.

"He deserves a Form-licking!" said Tom Merry wrathfully.

And, needless to state, Aubrey Racke got his deserts. He went through the mill that evening in the junior Common-room, and his schoolfellows did not spare him.

Racke's conduct had placed him right outside the pale. But in spite of all his knavish tricks, the School House had won that never-to-be-forgotten sports tournament—thanks to Talbot's Master-Stroke!

THE END.

Another grand, long story of Tom Merry & Co. next week, entitled:

REDFERN'S PERILOUS MISSION!

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Iron Hand, the leader of the powerful Crime Trust.

CHAPTER 1. Setting the Snare.

CLIFF BURNETT, Chief of the Secret Service, was sitting in his office. His brow was wrinkled, and he was evidently in deep thought. In his hand he gripped a telegram. Burnett glanced around the room, to make quite sure that he was still alone, then he unlocked a secret drawer in his desk, and took out a small code-book.

He again looked at the telegram, and a faint smile passed over his face as the meaning of the jumbled letters and figures became clear to him:

G 4 M 4B 2U 2 1 2 C L O K 587.
Y 3 B 4 G 3 A 9 A 9 T T 4 W 4 B 2.

Word by word he was able to decode this strange message, after a brief consultation with the precious little book he held:

In a minute or two he had written down the complete sentence:

"Gang must be broken up. Agents known. Get best available man to assist you. This is John Sharpe."

Burnett put the code-book back in the drawer, and tapped the bell upon his desk.

Instantly the chief's assistant entered. His name was Black, and he was the only man whom Burnett felt he could trust perfectly with his important business.

"Has anyone called for me?" he rapped out.

"Yes; there is a gentleman who says he has an appointment," came the reply.

"Show him up at once, then!" ordered Burnett, as he paced impatiently up and down the room. It was obvious that he was greatly agitated.

A few minutes later a tall, handsome dark man, clad in immaculate dress and silk hat, entered the room. That man was John Sharpe, the great scientific detective, whose name was breathed with fear and hatred by every denizen of the underworld. And they had good reason to, for young as he was, Sharpe had accomplished wonders.

Sharpe looked calmly, and apparently unconcerned, around the room, but his eagle eye took in every detail of his surroundings. Then his gaze wandered in the direction of Black, Burnett's assistant, and for a moment his eyes were riveted upon that man.

Black's face registered the faintest touch of apprehension when the newcomer's eyes were upon him, but he readily concealed this—for Black was as cunning as the meanest of Nature's creatures. Even the viper and puff adder were noble in comparison. But the alert Sharpe had already taken in the situa-

tion, and he had seen the uneasy look on Black's countenance.

Sharpe took no further notice of the incident, and advanced towards Burnett and shook hands with him; by this time the chief's assistant had left the room.

Once out of the sanctum of his master, who trusted him implicitly, Black's actions changed to cat-like quickness. He listened an instant at the closed door, then darted along the corridor leading to the stairs to the floor above, and rushed up. When he reached the top, Black noticed a painter, who, having completed his work, was hanging out a "Wet Paint" sign preparatory to making his departure.

This was unexpected, and Black endeavoured to conceal his haste until that worthy had gone. He next unlocked the door of the office situated directly above that occupied by Burnett, Black entered, and closed the door after him.

The "trusted" assistant of Burnett then made for a spot in the floor above the chandelier in his chief's office. He stooped, and pushed aside the rug, which disclosed two discs. One of these covered a dictaphone, and the other a periscope.

Black removed one of the discs, and produced the dictaphone, and he at once held the receiver to his ear. The other end was cunningly hidden behind a painting on the wall of the room beneath, and the wires cleverly twined round the picture wires, and were then carried to the room above.

A triumphant leer crossed Black's face. He could hear distinctly every word that was being said by Burnett and Sharpe below. Satisfaction was expressed in every line of his wicked face.

Black next pushed aside the other disc, and it revealed a tiny lever embedded in the floor. Sliding the scoundrel moved this, and in the room below, at the base of the splendid ornamental chandelier, the mirror of a periscope came into view. Black peered into the end which he held, and thus he was able to hear and see everything that went on in Burnett's office. By the aid of his wonderful instruments, the tiny figures of Burnett and Sharpe in consultation were revealed to him.

Sharpe, the great detective, and Burnett, Chief of the Secret Service, were standing close together, engaged in earnest conversation.

"You have heard of the wreck of the San Martin National Bank, and the attempt to kidnap the governor?"

Sharpe nodded in reply to Burnett's question.

"They call it the Crime Trust," continued the Secret Service chief, "and a reign of terror is at hand. The head of the gang of rogues is in San Francisco. The Government is confident you can

run them down. Will you take the job? I'll give you every assistance."

Burnett pressed closer to Sharpe, anxious to hear his reply, and Black, in the room above, peered more eagerly into his periscope.

Sharpe was thinking.

"It is a considerable undertaking," he replied, at length, "and I've got some pressing affairs to settle up, but, nevertheless, I'll agree on one condition!"

"And that?" questioned Burnett eagerly.

"That I am allowed to work in my own way, unaided."

Upraised Black was smiling with malignant triumph. His wicked, heavy eyes sparkled. He had obtained most important information, which would effectually upset the plans of the men below.

"Good!" replied Burnett, as he gripped the other's hand. "You are the only man who could succeed in such a task! Look over these papers!"

Burnett handed the great detective a bundle of documents, and tapped the bell for his assistant.

Black received a terrific shock when he observed through the periscope that his master had rung the bell, as a signal for him to enter the office. He had been so engrossed in his dirty spying that this possibility had never entered his head.

In frantic haste he replaced the dictaphone and periscope, and covered them over with the rug. Beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead. He knew his master well, and knew how impatient he grew at any delay.

Would Burnett suspect that something was wrong and find his way upstairs?

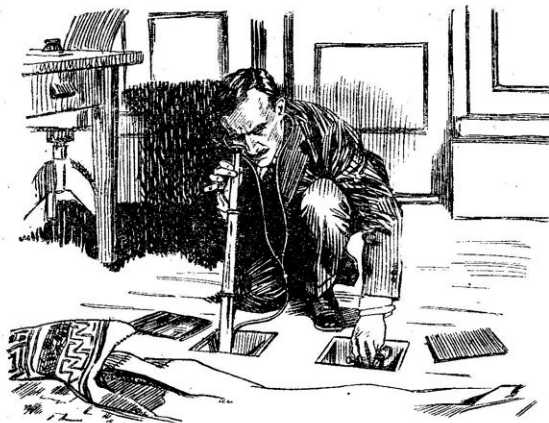
Black prepared to leave the room, but he did not notice in his haste that he had left one of the discs partly uncovered, and that the rug was ruffled.

Black tore out of the room. He noticed about him for a moment, and noticed that it would be quicker for him to climb over the balustrade and drop to the floor. It was a risk, but he was prepared to take it in the face of such an emergency as this, although he was by nature of such cowardly tendencies that he did not often risk his precious skin.

Black cursed to himself as he saw that in his climb a faint streak of the new white paint had smeared his trousers. He endeavoured to remove it, but only succeeded in making it a little worse!

Angrily Cliff Burnett strode over to the bell, intending to ring it again; but at that moment the door opened, and Black, calm, collected, and business-like, appeared at the entrance. He was a master of cunning was this fellow!

The Secret Service chief glared at his secretary, but no words of reproof escaped his lips. Burnett's mind was too full at this moment for him to waste



The "trusted" assistant of Burnett stooped and pushed aside the rug, which disclosed two discs. One of these covered a dictaphone, and the other a periscope. A triumphant leer crossed his face. He could hear distinctly every word that was being said by Burnett and Sharpe in the room below.

words in reprimanding his assistant for his delay in answering the bell.

Deep in thought, Sharpe and Burnett walked towards the open door, then, before leaving, Burnett handed some telegrams to Black.

"Take these to the main office, and send them off," he ordered, "then you may go for the day!"

Black, as he prepared to go, gave a glance at John Sharpe, who appeared to be in a somewhat absent-minded mood; but the wonderful detective, this man of almost superhuman powers of observation and an unguany instinct, was taking in everything.

He had already noticed something which had escaped the observation of Burnett. He wondered what that tell-tale white mark on the secretary's trousers was, and he also had a curious desire to know how it got there. Perhaps Black's long absence had some connection with it, was his reflection.

Accidentally John Sharpe's hat fell to the ground. He stooped to pick it up. There was a nervous movement on the part of Black.

Unconcernedly, Sharpe recovered his hat, and gave a quick, searching look at the white mark. He knew there was no new paint anywhere on this floor. John Sharpe was puzzled, but he hid his perplexity under a mask of complete indifference.

Taking his companion Burnett by the arm, the two walked together towards the street, and as he did so John Sharpe's magnetic eyes glanced up towards the landing above, where the words "Wet paint!" met his gaze.

At the doorway the two men paused; Burnett grasped Sharpe's hand.

"I am sure you will be successful in bringing Iron Hand and his gang to justice," he said. "No matter how you get them—dead or alive—nobody will

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care. Just get them, that is all I ask. But I can assure you you have taken on no light task. It is one honeycombed with dangers. But if you insist upon working single-handed there is nothing more to be said. Good-day, Mr. Sharpe, and may God speed you!"

Cliff Burnett strode over to his car and entered, and Sharpe paused on the pavement for a moment, and watched his friend ride off. The next instant the detective darted into the doorway of one of the near-by buildings, thus keeping effectually out of sight of the passers-by. Hardly had he done this, than Black emerged from the building in which Burnett's office was situated.

He put the telegrams given him by his master into his pocket, and hurriedly walked over to a taxi, which he engaged. Black pointed in the direction of Burnett's car, which was by now just turning the corner of the street, and he gave his man instructions to follow.

From his hiding-place John Sharpe could overhear every word. He waited until the taxi got well going, and then re-entered the building.

Sharpe knew pretty well that his deductions were correct, but in order to make quite certain he hurried upstairs to the landing above the floor occupied by Burnett. Seeing the door of the office ajar, he pushed it open and entered.

The crumpled rug on the floor soon attracted him, and, rapidly kicking it aside, the whole of Black's cunning apparatus was revealed to his astonished gaze.

"Ah! As I suspected!" muttered Sharpe. "The man is a traitor! This is an important discovery!"

Quite satisfied with himself, he replaced the rug and left the room. This wonderful hunter of criminals was already in possession of valuable information.

The Next Move.

SHARPE'S next move in the great game he had undertaken was to visit the main telegraph-office in the district. He took it probable that Black would take an early opportunity to send the knowledge he had obtained possession of to his headquarters, even if he did not consider it worth while to send off the telegrams entrusted to him by Burnett!

Sharpe sent for the manager, and hurriedly whispered something to him which seemed to cause that gentleman a good deal of alarm. At first he protested; but when the detective showed him his credentials, he was greatly impressed, and consented to Sharpe's plan.

Meanwhile, Cliff Burnett had arrived at a district in which were a number of residential flats. The Secret Service chief glanced casually up and down the road, but he did not see the sinister figure of Black lurking in the shadow some distance behind him.

Burnett walked to the entrance of one block of buildings, and entered. On the wall was a list bearing the names of the tenants in that particular block. Burnett looked them out, and then pressed the button of the speaking-tube which the list indicated belonged to the rooms occupied by Anne Crawford.

The occupant of the room above was sitting reading, and idly toying with a paper-knife, when she was aroused by the sound of the bell.

She was a girl of striking beauty, and there was something about her face which indicated great pluck and daring, as well as decided intelligence. Crossing the room to the tube, she inquired who was there.

When Burnett heard Anne's voice he was satisfied, and, instead of replying, he took a pencil from his pocket, and tapped out a message in the Morse code.

Meanwhile, the sneaking traitor Black was getting somewhat alarmed over Burnett. Something was going on that he knew nothing about, so he made up his mind to investigate. He decided to take a risk and get nearer to the entrance of the house which Burnett entered.

Anne Crawford was as expert with the Morse code as Burnett, and she interpreted his message readily. A look of surprise and interest crossed her pretty face as the full meaning of it came to her.

"The Government has hired John Sharpe, the great analytical detective, to break up the Crime Trust and capture Iron Hand. You are our best woman agent. I want you to pose as a 'crook,' and get into the confidence of the gang. It is dangerous service. Will you do it?"

Making use of the paper-knife which she held, Anne Crawford answered the Secret Service chief by the same system.

The reply which she tapped out was brief and decided.

"I'll do anything for my country."

"Good!" answered Burnett. "You can start to-night, but Sharpe insists upon working alone, so do not reveal your identity, even to him. To avoid spies, one of my men, Santrey, will get on the train at Joliet, and give you money, papers, and final instructions. God bless and prosper you!"

Anne Crawford was delighted. She realised only too well the risks she would have to undertake if she took up this perilous mission, but this did not worry

her. A task of this sort appealed to her adventurous nature, and the greater the perils the more she revelled in it.

Anne hastily packed up a small travelling-bag and prepared to leave, when she suddenly recalled something. She went over to her desk, and produced a small automatic-pistol from one of the drawers, and a box of cartridges, which she slipped into her bag. She felt that this precaution might be necessary.

When Burnett emerged from the entrance of the building, he was amazed to come almost face to face with his secretary, Black.

The traitor was momentarily confused, and looked around for a way to avoid meeting Burnett. This, however, was impossible for him, and he decided to bluff it out. Burnett was naturally surprised and suspicious, but he accepted his assistant's explanation that he was about to visit a friend who lived in the street, and, hurrying away, dismissed the incident from his mind.

Black was considerably annoyed at his own bungling, and growled at himself for his error. His thoughts went back to John Sharpe, whom he was convinced had certain suspicions about him. He shuddered to think what his fate would be if Iron Hand, his real master, by any chance, learnt the truth. The master-criminal had a method of his own in dealing with men who failed to carry out his orders successfully.

With these thoughts in his mind, Black engaged a taxi-cab, and bade the driver take him to the main telegraph office. He would be more careful in future, and not take too great risks.

Arriving at the office, he hastily snatched up a telegraph-form, scribbled a few words upon it, and handed it casually to the operator behind the counter.

The assistant was busily engaged on a pile of work, and sullenly took the paper from the man. Over his eyes he wore a green shade to shield them from the glare of the brilliant light above him.

The man behind the counter counted the words, and, without troubling to look up, stated the cost, which was readily handed over by the visitor, who then took his departure.

The assistant watched him out of the building, and a smile crossed his face as he re-read the message on the telegraph-form:

"I. H., c/o. Schwartz Hotel, St. Francis, St. Francisco, California. Beware the Needle heading your way. M. follows to-night.—B."

Strangely enough, the operator did not send the message to Iron Hand off. Instead he folded up the paper and put it in his pocket, then he calmly removed the false moustache from his lip, and took off the eye-shade—it was John Sharpe!

Sharpe was distinctly pleased at the way things had turned out so far. The clumsy scoundrel Black was rendering him great assistance. He did not expect to obtain news of the whereabouts of the master-criminal, Iron Hand, in this easy manner.

John Sharpe rang for the manager of the office, thanked him for his aid, and putting on his hat and coat, went out into the street again.

As he strolled along, he could not help thinking that the unfortunate Black would feel very sorry that he had ever heard of the "Needle" before very long.

The Needle was a nickname bestowed upon him by the criminals of the underworld, and was really a complimentary term denoting his "sharpness," although, of course, the detective was the object of their most bitter hatred, and there

was not one of them who would hesitate to "do" for him if the opportunity came their way.

Sharpe was by no means finished with Black yet. He hurried along, and soon saw him a short-distance ahead, and he wondered what his next move would be. He had not long to wait!

Black entered a street in which there were a number of shabby tenement houses with a cigar-shop on the corner. He at once made for one of the buildings.

Sharpe took a mental note of the house, and without hesitation entered the cigar-shop. He bought a few cigars, and then informed the man that he desired to use the telephone. The instrument was upon the counter in front of him, and he realised that he would have to be very discreet in what he said as the shopman would be in a position to overhear, and in all probability knew Black personally.

It was urgently necessary for him to phone. He called the desired number, and in a minute or so was connected with the house of his friend Burnett.

Sharpe thought for a moment, and a clever idea entered his nimble brain. "Is that you, Burnett?" he asked.

"Yes," came the reply.

"This is Sharpe. I want you to think of the darkest colour there is—understand?"

There was silence at the other end for a moment.

Then the meaning of Sharpe's message flashed through his mind. Of course, the detective desired him to think of Black.

"I understand!" he replied, and John Sharpe continued:

"The dark colour is all wrong—I have proof. Be very careful!"

Sharpe then gave instructions to Burnett to hurry along to the address he gave, and bring assistance.

The Secret Service chief was not altogether surprised at Sharpe's information. He, too, was beginning to doubt the trustworthiness of the "darkest colour"—namely, his assistant, Black. He would be very careful in future.

When Sharpe left the cigar-shop, he kept a careful watch on the house which Black had entered. After a while Burnett arrived on the scene, accompanied by two assistants.

"We are going to raid that house," said Sharpe, "when Black has left it. Keep him under observation, but don't arrest him yet—let him escape. He's of value to us!"

Marna Black.

INSIDE the little slum tenement house some important business was being conducted.

In spite of the shabby exterior of the house, the rooms were—it might almost be said—luxuriously furnished.

Black and his sister, Marna, who was one of the cleverest agents of the Crime Trust, were engaged in earnest conversation.

"You are to go West to-night," Black was saying. "Report to Iron Hand at once, at Nest No. 1. I'll wire him again, and inform him about the Needle, in order to make doubly certain. In case this place is being watched, I'll leave by the back way, and you do the same when you are ready."

(Continued on the next page.)



Into the black portals of Iron Hand's luxurious underground den stepped Anne Crawford. Would her impersonation be discovered? For a moment she hesitated nervously, then she realised the great mission she had been entrusted with. She produced from her bag the packet of papers, which Iron Hand eagerly pounced upon and read.

"Very well," replied Marna. "I'll pack my bag and be out in half an hour."

"Good!" replied Black, beaming with admiration at Marna, for he was proud of his clever sister. "Here are your papers. You'll never get near Iron Hand without them. And watch out for Sharpe, curse him; he's strong on the trail!"

Black wished his sister good-bye, and then made his way to the window where the fire-escape was. He climbed quickly down, and dropping to the ground, disappeared through an alley-way. Almost before he had time to get clear away, Marna heard an unusual noise at the bottom of the house, and became alarmed.

The next moment the door opened and Sharpe and Burnett, followed by one of his assistants, entered. There was a dramatic silence for a brief space.

The girl stood defiantly at the door, and, protesting her innocence, demanded to know the reason for such an intrusion. But there was no time for explanations. Burnett and Sharpe meant business, and they pushed aside Marna, and quickly made a search of the room.

From a drawer Burnett withdrew a bundle of papers. They were the documents previously handed to her by Black, and he noted with glee that the important introduction to Iron Hand was among them.

Burnett carefully placed the papers in an inside pocket; and, after giving orders that Marna was to be locked up for the time being in safe custody, he departed, well satisfied with his find.

There was a striking resemblance between Marna Black and Anne Crawford, and this pleased Burnett, who was quick to notice the coincidence. It would certainly make Anne's task easier when she started on her important mission to visit the stronghold of Iron Hand.

A short time after the raid on Marna Black's house, another little scene in the great drama, which had now begun in real earnest, was being enacted some distance away. Anne Crawford had started on her adventurous journey.

The courageous girl was looking idly through the window of her compartment just as the train was stopping at a station, when the handle of the door turned, and a man, who had evidently been keeping a look-out for her, entered. It was Santrey, one of Burnett's assistants.

The man introduced himself to Anne, and then handed her a small packet, adding briefly:

"These identification papers will get you into the inner circle of the Crime Trust. You are to impersonate Marna Black, whom, I hear, has been captured. All directions are there."

Anne took the papers from Santrey, who bid her good-bye and good luck.

Some hours after the departure of Anne, John Sharpe bade farewell to Cliff Burnett, and he also set out on his journey to the great unknown adventure. Although he knew the task set him was no light one, little did he realize the dangers and difficulties which were to befall him.

As he boarded the train the great detective was unaware that his movements had been fully observed by the scoundrel Black, who, when the train started off, left his hiding-place and entered the telegraph-office. He at once sent off an important message to his chief, Iron Hand.

"Friend Sharpe will experience an unpleasant shock before he reaches his destination!" muttered the villain as he stroled away.

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The Lair of Iron Hand.

FEAR beneath the streets of San Francisco was the luxurious den of the Crime Trust. In the darkness of an underground tunnel the faint flicker of a light could be seen dancing about as the man who carried it walked along.

Presently the figure of a man, hardly discernible in the gloom, stopped. His hand stretched out, and he pressed a button on the wall of the tunnel in front of him. Immediately a sliding panel opened before him, and he entered. A most luxuriously furnished room was revealed.

The man again pressed a button, and the panel door opened silently behind. Another slight movement with his hand, and the room was weirdly but brilliantly lighted from globes in the roof of this strange underground apartment.

When he had removed his hat and coat, the man took from his pocket a half-moon which he fixed to his face. This gave him a horrible and startling appearance.

This strange creature next went to a cupboard, and taking from it a decanter and a glass, he poured himself out a strong drink. He used only his right hand, and on the left one, which hung limply by his side, he wore a black glove. This weird, uncanny figure was the personage known as "Iron Hand," the directing genius and master of the all-potent desperate gang who called themselves the Crime Trust.

Even now the cultured arch-criminal, with all the vicious might he could command, was marshalling the hyenas of the underworld to let loose a reign of lawlessness and terror.

Iron Hand glanced rapidly over the papers on his desk, and he eagerly took up two telegrams. After reading them a frown of annoyance crossed his face. He pressed the button on his desk.

In a small room a short distance away from Iron Hand's comfortable underground office one of his assistants was sitting. At the sound of the bell he got up and went to the rear of the office. He pulled down a small lever, and at once a secret trapdoor in the floor opened.

The assistant descended the stairs through the trapdoor, and as he did so it closed after him. When he reached the bottom of the stairs he made his way along through a long, dimly-lit passage.

A minute or two later the assistant had reached Iron Hand's room. He bowed in a servile manner, and standing at attention before his chief, waited for the master criminal to speak.

Iron Hand indicated the telegrams which rested on his table.

"These have been here two days?" he asked. "Why haven't you reported?"

The assistant paled, and looked frightened at Iron Hand's stern manner, and explained lamely that he did not know what to do.

Iron Hand turned upon him sharply. "You did nothing, fool! This refers to the 'Needle.' What does it mean?"

"That is what they call Sharpe," explained the man. "If he's on our track, he'll get us, sure!"

"Exactly," nodded Iron Hand, with cold sarcasm.

The assistant started to apologize and explain, but Iron Hand silenced him with a gesture.

"Get me Sharpe's record," he ordered, as he pointed to the cabinet in one part of the room.

Rapidly the assistant ran through the card-index, and soon produced a card, which he brought to Iron Hand.

On it was a small photograph of

Sharpe, and in typewriting underneath it said:

"John Sharpe, the greatest analytical detective in the world. Extremely dangerous. Beware of him. In the case of the Crown Jewels of Ruritania, he succeeded when every other Secret Service in the world utterly failed."

There were many other particulars also concerning the achievements of the great John Sharpe. This was only one illustration of the wonderful and thorough method which Iron Hand employed. Everything was done upon the most businesslike lines.

Iron Hand threw the card down angrily, and then picked up the other telegram.

"Our faithful Black informs us," he said, "that the Needle is coming via the Union Pacific. Wire Black Jack to have him intercepted at Ogden or Winnemucca before he gets here. He will know how to deal with him."

The assistant bowed, and started to walk towards the mysterious sliding door. Iron Hand stopped him, however.

"There is one other thing," he said. "Black mentions that his sister Marna left Chicago four days ago, to place herself at our service."

Iron Hand's assistant nodded.

"Yes. She is now in the waiting-room," he said.

"Bring her in!" thundered Iron Hand.

And into the black portals stepped Anne Crawford, in the criminal shoes of Marna Black!

Would her impersonation be discovered?

Hiding her tenseness under an air of apparent unconcern, Anne descended by the staircase, passed through the sliding panels, and stood face to face with Iron Hand.

For a moment she hesitated nervously, then she realised the great mission she had been entrusted with. She must remember that from now onwards she was Marna Black, and not Anne Crawford.

Iron Hand bowed stiffly, and invited her to sit down. Then he produced from her bag the packet of papers, which Iron Hand eagerly pounced upon and read.

While his eyes were away from her, she gave a quick, sly look around the room, and her gaze fell upon the index-card bearing the portrait of John Sharpe. She was very interested in this.

When he had finished with the papers, Iron Hand turned towards Marna.

"I am charmed to welcome you to our circle," he said, with studied politeness. "You can be of great service to us."

Anne realised that one of her greatest tasks would be to prevent Iron Hand, or any of the members of his gang, from becoming suspicious.

"I can give you some important news already, which my brother told me before I left," she replied. "Sharpe, the great detective, is after you!"

As a matter of fact, Anne had already read the telegram which lay upon Iron Hand's desk, and she thought there could be no harm in telling him something of which he was already aware.

"Yes," muttered Iron Hand moodily, as he passed her the form containing the message. Anne pretended to be very interested as she read the telegram, and it was with great difficulty that she concealed her smile.

"We shall take care of John Sharpe," said Iron Hand confidently. "Meanwhile, I want you to report to my second in command, known to you and all of us as Potsdam. He is at present at Eagle's Nest, and he will have work for you. When can you go?"

(Continued on page 18.)

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THE INVISIBLE HAND.

(Continued from page 16.)

"I am ready at any time," replied Anne, without hesitation.

"Right!" You will leave this afternoon," replied Iron Hand. "Now, go back to your hotel, where you will receive your instructions."

After Ann's departure, another member of Iron Hand's gang entered.

John Sharpe certainly started on the United Pacific line. I have information on this point," the man informed his chief. "But if he is equal to his reputation, he will change trains en route somewhere. I have wired our agents, therefore, to cover every junction from Ogden to the coast."

Iron Hand nodded his approval.

The Gang at Work!

JOHN SHARPE was one of a great crowd of people hurrying to and fro in the great station at Los Angeles. He walked briskly into an office which had the word "Inquiries" written above it, and spoke quietly to the information clerk.

Sharpe took a card from his pocket and showed it to the man, who became immediately impressed with the importance of the stranger who was addressing him.

"I want Apartment C on the ten train from San Francisco. Is it disengaged?"

"Yes," replied the clerk. "I will reserve it for you."

Sharpe handed him the money, and received a voucher in return.

Immediately the detective had entered the inquiry-office another man entered. But Sharpe was so engrossed in his business that he did not notice the furtive look which this man gave him as he passed by.

Sharpe, however, never took chances. He was always on the alert, and he did not speak very loudly to the man he was addressing. Although his voice was scarcely above a whisper, however, the newcomer managed to overhear the gist of the conversation. That, in fact, was what his job was. He was yet another member of Iron Hand's criminal gang.

When Sharpe left the office the presence of the stranger occurred to him, and he paused for a moment, deep in thought. Something made him feel very suspicious. He waited a moment or two until the stranger came out of the inquiry office, and once more entered it.

"Did that man book a compartment on the ten train for San Francisco?" he inquired.

"Yes," replied the clerk.

"What department?"

"He wanted me to reserve for him Compartment D, next to yours," the official replied.

"Queer!" muttered Sharpe. "They're certainly clever, those people. I changed trains at Santa Fe and again at Kansas City, and yet they're right on the job here, and have tracked me down. If you don't mind I'll trouble you to reserve Compartment B for me as well on that train. I have an idea that it may be necessary."

(Next week's chapters will tell you of the amazing attempt made by the crooks to take Sharpe's life, and of some startling developments at Eagle's Nest, one of Iron Hand's strongholds. Get your GEM early. There will be a big rush for it!)

WHO'S WHO IN THIS WEEK'S "GEM" STORY.

For the benefit of New Readers.

REGINALD TALBOT has been mentioned as the "Toff"—a nickname by which he had been known in the older days—days when he had followed the calling of a crackman. Is now a somewhat quiet and reserved fellow of the School House Shell, and one of the very best. Steadfast and true. A staunch chum of Marie Rivers, the School House nurse, who was also connected with the "gang" in the older days.

GEORGE FIGGINS, acknowledged to be the chief of the New House juniors. Long legged and wiry. Rather a good athlete, and gifted with a fair amount of pluck. A real good leader. Always ready to take part in a joke upon the School House.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY, known as the "Swell of St. Jim's." The famous aristocrat is liked and respected by all. Immaculate in attire, and as interested as in the latest fashions. Is the recipient of a large number of "fivahs" sent by his "patah," Lord Eastwood.

FATTY WYNN, a popular character commonly known as the "Falstaff of St. Jim's." He is of Welsh nationality. A splendid goalkeeper, and a like bowler. A shocking large eater; but, in his own estimation, not a "glutton." Is very much liked by his two study-mates, Figgins and Kerr.

GEORGE FRANCIS KERR, a Scot from the Highlands, and a real nice fellow. A read good sportsman, and excellent at impersonating. A staunch friend of George Figgins and Fatty Wynn, his two study-mates. Always ready to assist the former in any joke upon the School House, in which he nearly always takes the prominent part. Irrespective of his jappings, he is greatly liked by the School House fellows.

YOUR EDITOR'S CHAT.

Address: Editor, THE GEM, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

My Dear Chums,—

This week you have the opening instalment of our great new story, "The Invisible Hand," and I eagerly await your verdict. Owing to the splendid length of our school yarn, I am unable to devote too much space to the serial, but I have been fortunate enough to have read next week's chapters of "The Invisible Hand," and I can tell you that thrilling events follow each other with startling rapidity. Rarely have I had the pleasure of reading a story more interesting. Next week's long complete school yarn is entitled, "Redfern's Perilous Mission," and I can assure you that this will be a rare treat. It is just the kind of story I am certain my readers will revel in, and you must make up your mind to get your copy early, as the demand will be great. Please tell your chums about "The Invisible Hand," so that they can also follow John Sharpe's great struggle with Iron Hand and his villainous gang.

YOUR EDITOR.

BOTTLED BUZZES.

It is rumoured—

That since David Llewellyn Wynn received an offer of employment from a leading film producer to act before the "movies," he has had a most extraordinary dream. He dreamt that whilst his pictures were being shown on the screen in a hall in London, Mr. "Fatty" Arbuckle was outside amusing the queue in the rain.

That on Arthur Augustus D'Arcy returning from a shopping expedition in a breathless and excited state, he was severely questioned by his study-mates. "Weally, deah boys," he answered, "I have onlay been to the tailors to buy a new fancy waistcoat, and came washing back befoah it became out of fashion."

That dancing is likely to be taught in the quad at St. Jim's in the near future. The first lesson, it is thought, will be the "quod-drill."

That a great number of the readers of the GEM LIBRARY have increased their number of friends fourfold by simply introducing to them our grand companion paper, "The Boys' Herald." Have you seen a copy yet?

That George Francis Kerr has received a severe castigation for throwing a snowball at Mr. Horace Ratcliff. "Snow use," he remarked, trying to squeeze the pain out of his hands.

That circulation causes heat. It has been thought necessary for us to employ our own fire brigade.

That the Head has made it a punishable offence for any junior found giving Ephraim Tuggles tips. We feel sure it will be duly noted with the scarcity of "Tip-see."

That shoals of letters reach the Editor daily from readers of this journal, stating what a magnificent number our Christmas number was. We should like to point out the fact that we have more line "Holly-day" numbers to come.

That Philip Lefevre, whilst riding his motor-cycle in a manner dangerous to the public, was arrested by a man of the law, P.-c. Tozer to wit! The said constable, giving evidence, remarked: "Twas as much as I could do to catch up to prisoner, but I did eventually."

That burglars recently broke into St. Jim's. Fortunately, they were frightened away by William Cuthbert Gunn, without a shot being fired.

That Gerald Cutts has been severely cautioned for not shaving his upper lip. A "barber-ous" affair.

That George Gerald Crooke has found a new shelter in the Slung Inn, wherein to carry on his shady games. We have no hesitation in stating it will not be long ere he is "slung out."

That Ralph Reckness Cardew's number of weeds smoked per diem is getting extremely lessened. Probably due to too much fog.

SOME OF THE LEADING CHARACTERS IN "THE INVISIBLE HAND."



JOHN SHARPE.
The world-famous detective.



IRON HAND.
The skillful and villainous leader of the Crime Trust.



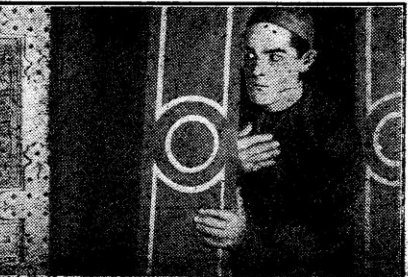
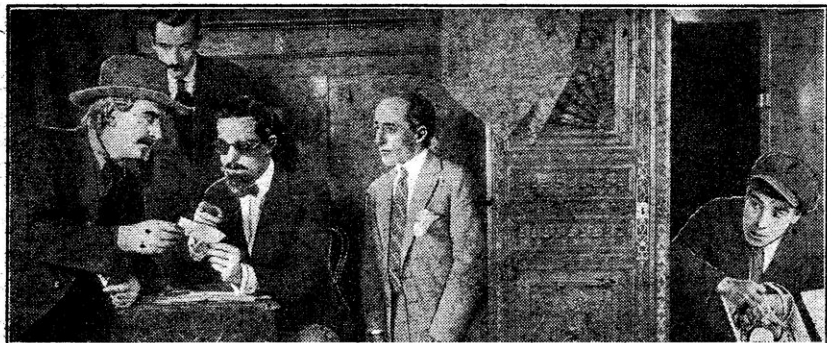
BLACK.
A supposed Secret Service agent, but really a member of Iron Hand's gang.



ANNE CRAWFORD,
who has gained admittance to the gang to help Sharpe, unknown to him.



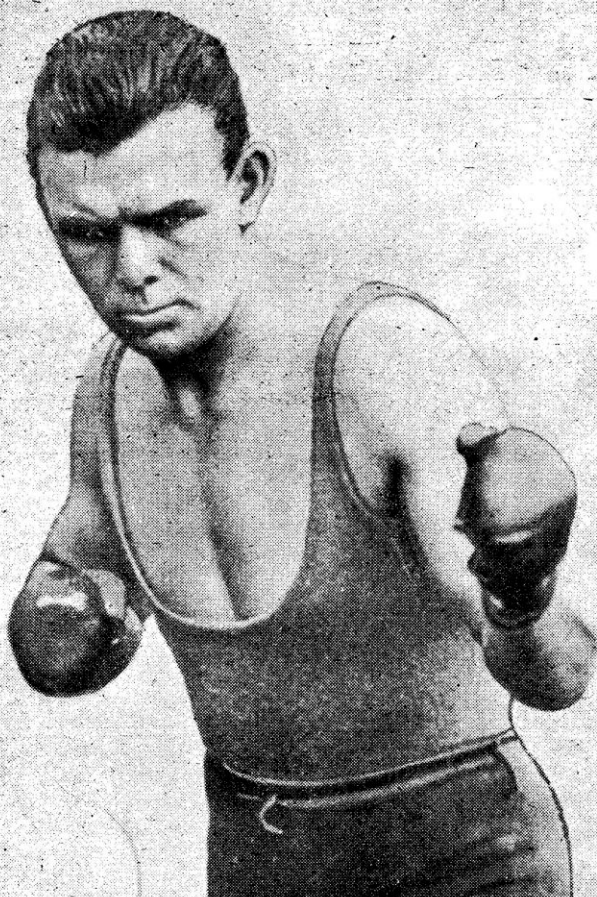
CHING WANG,
the leader of a Chinese secret society.



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PICTURES FOR YOUR DEN!

No. 6. JOE BECKETT.

Another Splendid Portrait of a Great Popular Hero in Next Week's "GEM". Don't Miss It!