THE BEST SCHOOL STORIES!

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TOM MERRY'S TASK!

Don't Miss Our Splendid Long Complete Story of the Chums of St. Jim's Inside.

EDITORIAL.

My Dear Chums,—

There is trouble brewing at St. Jim's! I hope you won't be too alarmed when you read this statement, but it is true, nevertheless. An incident of great importance occurred at the famous school which was much resented, and quite rightly, too, by all the chums. What really happened, and the reason for it, will be fully explained in our next yarn, which is entitled, "The Rebels of St. Jim's," so you must take great care to secure a copy of our next issue. This story is of the sort that you like most of all, and you will enjoy every word of it. I am so sure of its pleasing nature that I want every one of my chums to tell their friends about it, and to urge them not to miss next week's "Gem" on any account. They will thank you for bringing this information to their notice, and if they are not already acquainted with our splendid paper, they will undoubtedly become regular readers of the "Gem." Don't forget "The Rebels of St. Jim's" will appear in the next number, and you should make quite sure of obtaining your copy by getting it early before your newsagent is sold out. In addition to this splendid yarn, there will be the usual popular features, and another excellent art portrait, so you have a great treat in store for you next week.

YOUR EDITOR.

ANSWERS TO READERS.

"CHIPPY FLINT" writes: "Who is Joy? I like to read her weekly letter, but this week I fail to see eye to eye with her. Joy says that Ethel Cleveland does not get enough prominence in the stories. I must protest. I am afraid that if there were much more about the gentler sex (?) we poor boys would not have a moment to ourselves. Not that I dislike Cousin Ethel—I like her—but I have gradually watched the girls getting more masculine and trying to eclipse us in every way, and I think it is time for me to say that too many girls in the dear old GEM would be objectionable. Of course, I do not expect you will take any notice of me, but I have been a reader for a few years, and I should not like the GEM to change. This week's tale is superb. But where was Wildrake? Anyway, there is Gore next week. My five friends and I have a club-room with a library, and the GEM is included. We have framed some of the portraits. Cardew, Wildrake, and Kerr are my favourites. Cardew is best—a true pal, and an enemy to fear."

My "Chippy Flint" chum need have no fears about the GEM. There will be no invasion of girls. But is there any reason why they should not have their say at times?

"DORIS" writes: "I like Joy very much indeed. She is a girl after my own heart. But don't you think she puts on side just a leetle bit? That was my impression after I had read her chat about the wild bull, and how she jumped on its back and startled the natives. I absolutely agree with everything she says about the girls as artists picture them. We don't like boys saying, 'Oh, she's a girl, she can't do that!' And I think Cousin Ethel's clothes are rather out of date. Of course, I should hate to see her in gaudy stockings and too high-heeled shoes, but I think she might wear a sweater and a tam, and carry a hockey-stick. There! I can never keep hockey out of anything. I almost live for it. Gym is the only thing that comes near it, and it is a very close second. I do wish girls of my age—fifteen—could play football without being called fast and unladylike. I have a nice football, and I take it to school at Eastbourne, and I and some girl friends of mine play football a great deal, at the risk of being caught by a mistress. Cardew is my favourite character in the GEM. I wish Aubrey Racke's sister Gladys could be introduced, also the sisters of Baggy Trimble and Fatty Wynn—if they have sisters."

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This letter shows me that the good old GEM is steering the right course—the middle one—between the two opinions as to whether girls have any right to be heard, and that the paper should have nothing to do with them. The last idea is unthinkable. Some of the GEM'S best friends are girl readers.

"AN ADMIRER OF CARDEW" writes: "I think the GEM is a ripping paper! One of the best stories I have ever read is 'Through a Terrible Ordeal.' It made me feel quite sad. But I wish Gell had not died, because it seems to leave a cloud on Figgins. It was splendid the way his chums stood by him. I love the stories in which Doris Levison and Cousin Ethel appear, because it gets rather dry reading only about boys. I like the stories where Cardew plays a leading part. Could we not have a story in which Doris is the chief character, and with Cardew second? I have been a reader of the GEM for many years, and have recommended it in the North of England and in Wales. By the way, why is Cousin Ethel made to look so old and unattractive in the pictures?"

With regard to the last question, it may be just the mistake of the artist; but I do not remember an illustration in which Ethel Cleveland did not show a certain charm.

CHARLES H. (Harehills, Leeds).—The distance from St. Jim's to Rookwood is roughly about fifty miles. There are considerably more pupils in the Fourth than in the Shell. There is very little to choose between Kildare and Wingate as Boxers. In their last meeting Kildare was the victor. Blake comes from the West Riding, in Yorkshire, but I can't give the actual name of the town. Cardew's pocket-money is greatly in excess of Gussy's. Gussy receives a fiver about once in every three weeks.

E. M. H. (Hull).—Many thanks for your nice letter. It is quite evident now that the Cardew number made the required impression. However, it would hardly do to make the idea a regular feature. They would hardly be Special then, would they? Doris as a tomboy? I should like to hear how it could be done. You can bet all the years of your sweet life that Ralph Reckness Cardew will not reform.

PERCY P. (Croydon).—As you say, there is not very much information of the fellows you describe as "middle lights" published. If you see the name of a character published, and would like to know something about him, write up and ask me. So many new readers came along with the appearance of our new serial that we had to publish a "Who's Who" of the characters in every story for several weeks, to deal with their thirst for knowledge.

M. L. AND A. P. (Upper Addiscombe, Croydon).—Two more loyal readers who thoroughly enjoyed our Cardew Number! Good! That's the spirit! You now want a special Wildrake Number. You will have seen his portrait on the back cover by now.

"DOROTHY" (Kent).—I was very pleased to receive your interesting letter. Yes, I have a fairly good memory. At any rate, I can tell you just what you missed in a brief summary: The podgy impostor, staying in his cousin's name at St. Jim's, simply continued to carry on as you would have expected. He stayed there exactly a term. During that stay he took away all Gussy's patience—not to mention his pocket-money! In fact, he behaved very like a Hun Zep—raiding by day and night. He found it impossible to get a study which contained furniture and wealthy occupants, and thought of the idea of using Nobody's Study—at the top end of the Shell passage. After skinning every Fourth and Shell study clean of its viands, he commenced to settle down. His abode was named "The Owl's Nest." After that he resorted to his ventriloquism for a time. St. Jim's naturally being quite ignorant of his gift, he caused no end of trouble. Then the fellows saw completely through him, and he wore out. It ended by him breaking his promise, and letting Wally down very badly. It was only Mr. Penman's second offer which saved his bacon. Wally is now doing extremely well in a large business office in Paris, and it is quite likely that he will turn up for a short holiday at either school during the summer. I'll give your kind regards to Joy the next time she looks in at this office.

"PATSY, AN EXPECTANT READER."—The parents of Baggibus can neither be described as rich nor poor. Rumour has it that Trimble's father is a butler, or something of that kind. He can just contrive to pay his eldest son's fees. Baggy certainly hasn't a thing to boast about. Merry, Talbot, and Noble are the three best boxers in the Shell. Grundy—who is the only fellow one could describe as a fighter—as a matter of fact, is always telling a fellow whose nose he has just punched, that he is a very peaceable sort of chap. I will see what can be done about Kildare and Ratty in the portrait gallery.

Tom Merry's Task!



A Grand Long Thrilling Story of the Chums of St. Jim's, introducing Tom Merry & Co.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.
Startling News!

"ANYTHING wrong?"

Kit Wildrake of the Fourth asked that question as he came on Tom Merry in the quadrangle at St. Jim's.

Tom Merry certainly looked as if something was wrong.

He was standing under one of the old elms with a letter in his hand, at which he was staring blankly.

His handsome face had quite lost its usual sunny expression. It was almost white.

Wildrake could not help seeing the deep trouble in his look, and he stopped. Tom glanced up at him, but he did not speak for the moment.

"Excuse my butting in," said the Canadian junior. "You look as if you've had bad news."

"Yes," stammered Tom.

"I guess I'm sorry. Anything I can do?"

"I—I can't understand it," said Tom. "It beats me; but there's something awfully wrong at home, that's clear! I—I shall have to get leave from the Head and buzz off to-day. Read that letter, Wildrake, and tell me what you think of it."

He handed the letter which had so startled him to the Canadian junior.

Wildrake glanced at it, and his eyes grew wider.

Certainly it was a surprising letter.

It was written in a rather cramped, old-fashioned hand—the hand of a precise old lady. It was signed "Priscilla Fawcett." Wildrake remembered having heard that Miss Priscilla was Tom Merry's guardian. The letter ran:

"Darling Tommy,—I do not wish to alarm you, my dearest boy, but a dreadful thing has happened. It would be terrible to be blown up with bombs. I do not believe it was Thompson. Do not come home on any account. You must not come into danger. I am sure it was not Thompson.

"Your loving guardian,
"PRISCILLA FAWCETT."

Kit Wildrake whistled.

The letter was evidently written by an old lady in a state of terror; that was easy enough to see. But it was more difficult to make head or tail of it.

"Who's Thompson?" asked Wildrake.

Tom shook his head.

"I don't know."

"Do you know what he's supposed to have done?"

"Not in the least."

"Somebody's been frightening the poor old soul," said Wildrake. "That's plain enough. I guess I'd like to be close to the scallywag with a stock-whip in my hand. She thinks she's in some danger, and she doesn't want you to get into it, too. Of course, you'll go at once and see what's the matter?"

"I'm going to speak to the Head now," said Tom. "Of—of course, it may be only a fancy on her part, but I want to know for certain. I've only just got the letter, and it fairly knocked me over."

He nodded to Wildrake, and hurried away towards the School House. The Canadian junior looked after him thoughtfully. He would have been willing and keen to help in dealing with the "scallywag" unknown who had been scaring Miss Priscilla; but that was out of the question. The Head would not have been likely to give him leave from school.

Manners and Lowther of the Shell were waiting for Tom Merry in the doorway of the School House. They collared him as he came in.

"We've been waiting," said Monty Lowther severely. "We saw you cut across and intercept the giddy postman. Will it run to a spread in the study?"

"Don't rot now, old chap——"

"Isn't it a letter from home?" asked Manners.

"Yes; but——"

"Well, then, there's bound to be something in it," said Manners. "Miss Priscilla never forgets that her dear little Tommy has a way of running through his cash——"

"And two dear old pals to help him do it," said Lowther. "I hope it's a pound-note. I like pound-notes better than ten-bobbers. They go twice as far. I've worked that out in my head. The study of mathematics, my young friends, is a severe but beneficial training for the intellect——"

"Shut up, old chap!" said Tom. "Look at the letter; I'm awfully worried."

His chums became grave at once.

"Not bad news?" asked Monty.

"I'm afraid so."

The two Shell fellows glanced at the letter, and stared. They eyed the letter, and they eyed Tom Merry.

"The poor old soul's been scared by something," said Manners. "What are you going to do?"

"Ask the Head to let me go home by the next train," said Tom.

"You can't go alone," said Lowther decidedly. "If there's really any trouble at home, you'll want your pals to help you through. Ask the Head to let us go along with you."

"I hope he will," said Tom. "I'd be jolly glad to have you, if you can come. Wait for me in the passage."

He hurried on to Dr. Holmes' study.

Manners and Lowther waited, serious enough now. They knew, and liked, old Miss Priscilla, although they looked upon many of her little ways with a humorous eye. Terrified as the old lady evidently was, her first thought was to keep her ward out of the supposed danger; she did not realise that such a letter was certain to bring him home as fast as a train could take him there.

"It's some beastly trick somebody's playing," said Manners, after some thought. "She mentions bombs; there can't be any bombs in a quiet corner of the earth like Huckleberry Heath. Some awful cad has been frightening her for a fool joke, I should think."

Lowther nodded.

"All the more reason why we should go," he said. "I want to get hold of that practical joker, and teach him a little more sense. If it turns out like that, we'll jolly well make an example of him."

"Yes, rather."

Tom Merry came back from the Head's study in a few minutes.

"It's all right," he said. "The Head gave me leave at once when I showed him the letter. You fellows can come."

"Good egg!"

"There's a train at Wayland at two," said Tom. "Do you chaps mind missing your dinner, and chancing it on the train? We can get some sandwiches——"

"Of course, ass!" said Manners. "What the thump does dinner matter now? Let's chuck a few things into a bag and scoot."

It did not take the Terrible Three long to get ready for their journey. In a very short time they came out of the School House, bag in hand, and crossed to the gates.

"Best of luck!" called out Wildrake. "I hope you'll find it all right at home, Tom Merry!"

"Thanks, old scout!"

The Terrible Three hurried away on the road to Wayland. Wildrake watched them till they were out of sight. He could not help wondering what had happened at Tom Merry's home, and whether there really was some danger that threatened old Miss Priscilla, and he would gladly have made a fourth in

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the party going to Huckleberry Heath. Afternoon lessons seemed rather a bore that day to the junior from the Boot Leg Ranch.

CHAPTER 2.
Straight from the Shoulder.

"LAUREL VILLA!"

"Home at last!" said Tom Merry, with a sigh of relief.

The train journey had been unpleasant to the captain of the Shell. The juniors had lunched on sandwiches in the train, and counted the stations. The journey seemed almost endless to Tom. As he drew nearer to his home his anxiety intensified. It was possible, of course, that the old lady had been alarmed about little or nothing; but Tom could not think so.

And the thought of Miss Priscilla being frightened by some cruel, practical joke made Tom grit his teeth. If that proved to be the case, Tom did not intend to leave the village until he had found and dealt with the practical joker in the most drastic manner. But he could not help fearing that there was something more than that in it. The wave of lawlessness that had swept over the country, as a result of the war, might have touched even the quiet village of Huckleberry Heath.

The junior was relieved to see Laurel Villa in the distance, as he came up the road, looking as quiet and sedate as when he had left it. Certainly the place did not look as if anything startling had happened there. It was difficult to imagine anything of a startling nature happening in that old-world corner of Hampshire.

"Looks all serene," remarked Manners.

"What's that thumping row?" exclaimed Lowther, as the three juniors walked up the leafy lane leading to the villa.

The loud howling of a dog came to their ears from an adjoining field. A high hedge shut off the field from their view. Manners and Lowther paused; and Tom Merry, in a hurry as he was to get home, stopped and looked about him.

"It's some brute beating a dog," said Manners. "Listen!"

They could hear the lashes of a stick through the hedge as well as the yelping of the animal.

"Come on!" said Tom abruptly.

He ran along to a gap in the hedge. Tom had all a healthy boy's love of dogs, and detestation of cruelty; and the pitiful howling from the field went straight to his heart. He burst through the gap in the hedge, with his chums at his heels.

The sight that met his gaze made his eyes sparkle with anger.

The dog was tied by a short cord to a tree-stump close by the hedge, and a man, whose flushed and brutal face showed that he had been drinking, was lashing it savagely with a stick. He did not cease as the St. Jim's juniors came running up.

"You brute!" shouted Tom Merry. "Stop that!"

The man paused for a moment, and stared at him surlily. He was a weedy-looking fellow, with a thick red nose and sunken eyes, dressed shabbily, and with a two days' growth of bristly beard on his sharp chin.

"What the thunder are you butting in for?" he demanded savagely. "It's my dorg!"

"Whether it's your dog or not, you've no right to treat it like that!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Ain't I? I'll please myself, I fancy."

And the red-nosed man raised the stick again, and brought it down upon the dog. There was a yelp of pain.

Tom Merry did not waste more time in words. The brutality of the action was too much for his temper.

He ran straight at the man, and hit out; and his blow landed on the point of the sharp chin with a force that hurt his knuckles. It hurt the chin still more!

There was a yell, and the man went staggering back, to collapse in the ditch that ran alongside the hedge.

Splash!

"Well hit!" ejaculated Monty Lowther in great delight.

A stream of curses came from the ruffian as he scrambled out of the wet and muddy ditch.

His stick had flown from his hand, and Manners promptly picked it up and sent it whirling away over the hedge. Manners considered that that stick was safer at a distance.

Tom Merry untied the cord that fastened the dog to the tree-stump.

"You let that dorg alone!" said the dog's owner hoarsely. "That there's my dorg!"

Tom did not heed.

The ruffian came towards him, his fists clenched, and his sunken eyes glittering. Manners and Lowther promptly lined up to meet him, and the rascal paused. There was a lump on his chin where Tom Merry had struck, and he rubbed it savagely as he stood.

The dog was released now, and Tom waved his hand to it, to set it running. Instead of clearing off, however, the ragged little mongrel crouched at his feet, instinctively recognising a protector in the sturdy schoolboy.

"Hallo, he's going to stick to you, Tommy!" grinned Lowther.

"Let him, if he likes." said Tom. "I'll see that that brute doesn't touch him again, anyhow."

"Will you give me my dorg?" said the brute, in tones of concentrated rage. "Are you goin' to steal my dorg?"

"You're not going to touch him," answered Tom coolly. "You're not fit to have a dog. A brute like you oughtn't to be allowed to keep a dog at all."

"I'm goin' to skin him, if I like!"

"Try it on, that's all!" said Tom contemptuously.

The man eyed him savagely, but he did not come on. Over the hedge a helmet showed, and a ruddy, plump face looked into the field.

"Hallo, what's this 'ere?" asked a fat voice.

It was Mr. Blades, the police-constable of Huckleberry Heath.

"Master Merry!" he exclaimed, and he touched his helmet. "Glad to see you 'ome again, sir! What's the trouble 'ere?"

"'Master Merry,' as you call 'im, is trying to steal my dorg——"

"I've stopped him beating the dog, Mr. Blades," said Tom. "I can't let him have the poor little beast again, to beat it."

"Oh!" said Mr. Blades, nonplussed.

Mr. Blades had known Tom Merry since that youth was in short frocks, and he had a great liking and admiration for him. But this was a question of the rights of property. No doubt it was wrong for anyone who did not love animals to own them, but the law was not yet in a state of perfection on that point; and Mr. Blades had to uphold the law as it stood, however defective it might be.

"You tell that young thief to give me my dorg, officer!"

Mr. Blades wagged a plump forefinger at the man over the hedge.

"You keep a civil tongue in your head, Joe Sleath," he answered. "You're a bad character, you are, and I've had to run you in myself for being the worse for drink. You're a disgrace to the district, you are, and you ought to clear out of it, as you don't belong here. Boozing at the Red Cow and beating your dog——"

"Never you mind about that," said Joe Sleath. "I ain't drunk now, and you can't run me in; and I asks for my dorg. If that young 'ound don't 'and over my dorg, I'll charge him with stealing it."

Tom Merry drew a deep breath.

Manners and Lowther looked rather dubious, wondering how the matter was to end.

Certainly Joe Sleath was not entitled to have the dog, but taking it away from him did not seem exactly a lawful action.

Mr. Blades looked puzzled.

"That dog looks bad," he said. "He's been beat something cruel. Do you want to be charged with cruelty to animals, Joe Sleath?"

"I'll chance it," said Sleath sourly. "I'm goin' to 'ave my dorg."

Then Mr. Blades had a brain-wave.

"Have you got a licence for that dog?" he demanded.

Sleath did not answer that question.

"If you've got a licence, show it," said Mr. Blades victoriously.

"I don't carry a dorg's licence around in my trousers' pocket," said Sleath surlily.

"I'll step home with you and see it," said the constable. "If you can't show that licence, Joe Sleath, either the dog ain't yours, or you'll be charged for keeping a dog without a licence. You can have it which way you like."

Joe Sleath gave the plump constable a bitter look. It was pretty evident that he had not taken the trouble to pay for a dog licence. Mr. Blades took out his notebook.

"I shall want you young gentlemen as witnesses," he said. "You'll witness that this man——"

"'Old on," said Sleath hastily. "The dorg ain't mine."

"You said it was yours jest now!" said the constable sternly.

Sleath gritted his teeth.

"Jest a manner of speaking," he said. "It ain't mine."

And with that he turned and slouched away across the field.

Mr. Blades replaced his notebook in his tunic, and bestowed a fat wink on the chums of St. Jim's. He considered that he had settled the difficult affair in a rather masterly manner.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Blades," said Tom Merry gratefully. "It would have been rotten to leave the dog in that brute's hands."

"As it ain't got a owner I shall have to take it away to be destroyed in doo course of law," said the constable.

"Oh, no, no!" Tom glanced at the dog, snuggling and whimpering at his feet. "I'll take it home, Mr. Blades. I suppose I can do that?"

"I s'pose so, Master Merry, if you want to, seeing as it hasn't any owner," said Mr. Blades, with another wink.

And Tom Merry led the dog away with him when the chums of the Shell went on to Laurel Villa.

CHAPTER 3.
The Suspected Man.

"MY dearest Tommy! You should not have come!"

Miss Priscilla Fawcett was seated in a deep armchair by a sunny window, with her smelling-salts by her side, and her faithful Hannah in attendance, when Tom came in. He had left his chums outside with the dog while

he went in to greet his old guardian, not knowing in what state he might find her.

Miss Priscilla looked very pale and worn, but her kind old face lighted up at the sight of her dearest Tommy.

She rose from her chair, and hugged him affectionately.

"You should not have come," she repeated. "I warned you in my letter not to come." But she hugged him as she spoke, evidently delighted to see him. "You poor dear, darling boy, always running into fearful danger, like your poor father! I am terrified to see you here, Tommy. If there should be a bomb——"

"Sit down, dear," said Tom Merry gently. "I came at once, of course. If there's any danger——"

"It is terrible!" said Miss Priscilla, in a hushed voice. "The house may be blown up!"

"The—the house——"

"And everything in it hurled to destruction!" said Miss Priscilla. "All my old china, and the parrot, and poor Hannah——"

"Never mind me, mum!" said Hannah. That practical woman evidently took a less serious view of the danger than did the frail old lady in the armchair.

"But I do mind you, Hannah," said Miss Priscilla. "It is terrible—terrible! But I will not leave the house. I shall remain, Tom, however fearful the danger!"

"Yes," said Tom soothingly. "And I shall stay with you. We'll face it together, dear."

Miss Priscilla shook her head.

"You must return to school at once, darling," she said. "I cannot allow you to share my danger."

Tom smiled.

"But what is the danger?" he asked. "You haven't told me that yet. Would you like to see my friends, dear? Manners and Lowther have come down with me."

"The dear, good boys!" said Miss Priscilla. "Bring them in at once. But you must all return to school immediately."

Tom opened the door again, and his chums came in, Lowther leading the ragged mongrel that had been rescued from Mr. Sleath. He had already named it "Rags"—a name very appropriate to its looks.

Miss Priscilla's favourite poodle, Fido, immediately took refuge in the armchair. Fido was an aristocratic dog, and evidently did not like the looks of Rags. From Rags there came a growl and a snap, and he tugged at the cord in Lowther's hand. Rags apparently had a desire for closer acquaintance with Fido.

Miss Priscilla put up her glasses, and glanced at Rags in surprise.

"Dear me, a strange dog——"

"A little chap we found in the lane, dear," said Tom Merry hastily. "I—I hope you'll let me keep it here, auntie. It hasn't a home!"

"The poor little creature!" said tender-hearted Miss Priscilla. "That is just like your good, kind heart, Tommy. Certainly it shall remain—at least, if the house is not blown up——"

"Blown up!" ejaculated Manners.

"Yes, my dear boy, the house is in danger of being blown up by a cruel and dastardly wretch, unless I give him another twenty pounds!" said Miss Priscilla.

"Another twenty pounds!" said Manners.

"I have refused, on the advice of Inspector Hook," said Miss Priscilla. "I am not sure that I acted legally in paying the first twenty pounds—— Oh dear! What is the matter?"

Rags had made a sudden jump, and jerked the cord away from Monty Lowther. He landed in the armchair, and there was a shrill, terrified squeal from Fido.

Miss Priscilla gave a cry of alarm.

Tom Merry seized the little mongrel by the collar, and jerked him away, just in time to save Fido's well-brushed skin from a set of very sharp teeth. Fido crouched behind his mistress, and squealed dolorously.

"My hat! Better get Rags outside, I think!" gasped Lowther.

"Fido!" gasped Miss Priscilla. "Fido!"

"Fido's all right, ma'am," said Manners. "Safe as houses! We've got Rags safe now."

"Oh dear! Tommy, darling, perhaps you had better take your new dog out, and ask Thompson to put him somewhere."

"Thompson?" repeated Tom Merry, remembering the name in the letter.

"Yes, the new gardener, my dear."

"I didn't know you had a new gardener, auntie," said Tom.

"I really did not need one," said Miss Priscilla artlessly, "but the poor man has lost his right arm in the war, so he can no longer work at his trade. I think he was a wheelwright, or a carpenter, or something of that kind, Tommy. He can garden quite nicely with one arm. He is very nice and well-behaved, and I am sure he did not write that wicked letter, as the inspector thinks. Take the doggie to him, Tom."

"Yes, dear."

Tom Merry led the dog out, leaving his chums in converstion with Miss Priscilla. Tom was rather anxious to interview Mr. Thompson, the new gardener, who was suspected of having had a hand in the still mysterious happenings at Laurel Villa.

He found the man in the garden, weeding with his left hand—his right sleeve being empty and pinned. He was a quiet-looking man, with a grave and somewhat careworn face. He touched his cap to the junior as he came up with Rags.

"Thompson?" asked the Shell fellow of St. Jim's.

"Yes, sir."

"I'm Tom Merry; I've come home," said the junior. "I've picked up this dog, and I'm going to keep it here. Can you put him somewhere?"

"Certainly, sir!" said Thompson. "I'll look after him for you with pleasure, Master Merry. He looks as if he's been badly treated," he added, scanning the dog.

"He has," said Tom. "The skin's broken in places. If you know anything about dogs you may be able to do something for him."

Thompson smiled.

"Know all about 'em, sir!" he answered. "I'll soon have him all right, and I'll fix him up in the shed now. You leave him to me."

He patted the dog, and Rags nuzzled his nose into the demobbed man's hand. Tom Merry returned to the house, feeling pretty well satisfied about the gardener. Rags evidently liked him, and that was a point in his favour. And if he looked after Rags kindly, that would be another point in his favour. Certainly the old soldier did not look like a man who was capable of frightening and blackmailing an old lady.

Miss Priscilla was talking quite cheerfully with Manners and Lowther when Tom came back. Although she was unwilling for Tom to share her supposed danger, it was evident that his arrival had "bucked" the old lady considerably. Hannah was laying tea for the juniors—a very welcome meal to them after their journey.

"And now we want to know what's happened, auntie," said Tom.

"You must have your tea first, dearest," answered Miss Priscilla. "I am sure you are hungry. And—and the



Tom Merry ran straight at the brute, and hit out; and his blow landed on the point of the sharp chin with a force that hurt his knuckles. There was a yell, and the man went staggering back, to collapse in the ditch behind. (*See page 4.*)

house will not be blown up until night."

"Great Scott!"

"I will tell you all about it after tea," said Miss Priscilla, "and then you must go immediately, while your lives are safe, my dear boys!"

At which the Terrible Three smiled. They were prepared for tea, and for hearing the tale of alarm; but certainly they weren't prepared to leave Laurel Villa until this mysterious matter had been thoroughly cleared up.

CHAPTER 4.
Blackmail!

"AND now!" said Tom.

"I will tell you all, darling," said Miss Priscilla, with a pale smile. "Where are my smelling-salts, Hannah?"

"Here, mum!"

"Thank you, Hannah!" Miss Priscilla glanced at the clock. "Inspector Hook will be here shortly, my dear boy, but I shall have time to tell you all before he comes."

"I'm anxious to know what's happened," said Tom.

"Of course you are, my dear! It was last Saturday that the dreadful letter was found on the sun-dial in the garden——"

"A letter on the sun-dial in the garden!" repeated Tom.

"Yes. He demanded——"

"Who?"

"The dreadful person who wrote the letter, dear. He signed himself 'J. J.,' which may be his initials; but Inspector Hook thinks he would use false initials, which I am sure would be very deceitful. The letter stated that unless twenty pounds in currency notes was placed in the same spot on the sun-dial on the following night the house would be blown up with bombs."

Tom Merry set his lips.

He did not need telling that it was an empty threat; that some unscrupulous rascal had been playing on the nervous fears of the poor old lady.

"What did you do?" he asked.

"I was greatly shocked," said poor Miss Priscilla. "I was very frightened, too. It seemed so dreadful for the house to be blown up. Fido, you know, and the cat, and the parrot, as well as Hannah, all would have perished. So I placed the money on the sun-dial, and the next night it was taken away."

"Oh dear!" said Tom.

"I suppose you heard from him again?" said Lowther.

"Yes, my dear boy. Inspector Hook thinks the bad man was encouraged by getting the money so easily."

"Of course he was!" said Tom. "You ought to have called in the police in the first place, you know."

"So the inspector said," answered Miss Priscilla, with an affectionate look at her ward. "You are so clever, Tommy. Yesterday there was another letter on the sun-dial. It was placed there with a stone to keep it from blowing away. Some person had placed it there in the night. You know I always have my garden-chair placed by the old sun-dial in the mornings, so I was sure to see the letter."

"Then this 'J. J.' knows the ways of the house," said Tom.

"My dear, clever boy, that's just what the inspector said, too."

"And what was in the second letter?" asked Tom.

"Another demand for twenty pounds," said Miss Priscilla. "I was very shocked and agitated. I asked Hannah's advice. Hannah almost ordered me to call in Mr. Blades, the policeman. I gave way, and Mr. Blades was called. Mr. Blades brought Inspector Hook. The inspector has taken the case in hand. He suspects Thompson."

"Why?" asked Tom.

Because the letters were in a left-hand writing, I think, and poor Thompson has no right hand."

"Oh!" said Tom.

"But I am sure Thompson is innocent, because he is so kind to my cat!" said Miss Priscilla.

"Oh!"

"Of course, he is dreadfully poor," said Miss Priscilla. "There is some difficulty about his pension, I think, but he has an excellent character—he told me so when I engaged him. He came one day and asked for a job, so I made him my gardener. It seemed so dreadful that he should not have a job when he had lost his right arm in defending his country. You know, the old gardener left to open a shop in the village with his savings, and I was going to do without a gardener—for economy, you know; but I decided that I had better have a gardener, after all, or else poor Thompson——"

"I understand," said Tom, with a smile. "Have you the two letters that were found on the sun-dial?"

"Mr. Hook has them. He is investigating the case. He is going to bring a hand-writing expert to compare the writing with Thompson's, and they are to be here, soon," said Miss Priscilla. "He wishes me to charge Thompson, but, of course, I should do nothing of the kind. A man who is so kind to cats is quite incapable——"

"Inspector Hook and Mr. Stuckey!" announced Hannah.

"Dear me! It is the inspector."

Miss Priscilla rose to greet the inspector as he came in. He was followed in by a stout, rather important-looking gentleman, with gold-rimmed pince-nez, and a bald spot on his head. This was evidently Mr. Stuckey, the handwriting expert.

Miss Priscilla greeted them very politely, though a little nervously. She also explained that Tom Merry and his friends wanted to know all about the affair—a piece of information which did not seem to please the inspector very much; and which made Mr. Stuckey give a sound very like a grunt.

But Tom Merry & Co. intended to see the matter through.

"You have the letters, Mr. Hook?" asked Miss Priscilla, when the inspector was seated.

"Yes, madam."

"Please show them to my ward."

"Really, Miss Fawcett——"

"I wish to have Tommy's opinion," said the good lady innocently.

Mr. Hook's complexion grew purplish, and Mr. Stuckey emitted another grunt. It was evident that neither gentleman attached the slightest importance to the opinion of Tommy.

However, it was scarcely possible to refuse Miss Priscilla, so the inspector opened his pocket-book and laid the two letters on the table.

Tom Merry examined them.

Both were written in the same hand—evidently a left-handed writing—on rough, coarse paper, in pencil. The first ran:

"Deer Miss Fawcett,—Take warning! Place twenty pounds in currency-notes on this here sun-dile to-night, or take the consequences. Refuse, and the house will be blown up with bombs! I mean business!

"J. J."

Tom Merry frowned impatiently. It was the crudest blackmail on the part of an ignorant and unscrupulous man. No one but an innocent old dame like Miss Priscilla could possibly have been frightened by it. But that was a point to be noted; it was evidently someone who knew Miss Priscilla's timid character well who had written that rascally letter. The second epistle, in the same hand, ran:

"Deer Miss Fawcett,—I am sorry to trubble you again so soon, but I have lost the twenty pounds. This is the last time you will hear from me. Place twenty pounds on this sun-dile to-night, without fail, or else the house will be blown up with bombs. I mean it! Mark my words! If you go to the pleece, the house will be blown to bits, anyhow! I will not trubble you again.

"J. J."

"I am looking into this for my guardian, inspector," said Tom Merry quietly. "I understand that you suspect Thompson, the gardener."

"Huh!" said the inspector.

Apparently, he did not care to enter into a discussion of the matter with a schoolboy.

But Miss Priscilla came to the rescue.

"Please tell Tommy everything, Mr. Hook," she said. "Tommy is going to see into the matter. He is a wonderfully intelligent boy. I have every faith in his judgment. When he was only six he——"

Mr. Hook interrupted hastily. He did not appear to be anxious to learn of the intellectual wonders performed by Tommy at the early age of six.

"If you wish it, ma'am——" he said stiffly.

"Please!" said Miss Priscilla winningly.

"Very good. Master Merry, my suspicions have certainly fallen upon the man Thompson," said Inspector Hook. "He is left-handed, and the letters have been written by a left-handed man——"

"Possibly by a man who was not really left-handed, but wanted to disguise his fist," suggested Tom.

"Very possibly," assented the inspector; "that very obvious possibility did not escape my attention. But that is only one point."

"The letters show a familiarity with the household," said Tom. "The man 'J. J.' knows my guardian is in the habit of sitting by the sun-dial in the morning——"

"Exactly."

"He also knows that she is not unlikely to be scared by such threats——"

"Quite so."

"But that knowledge might have been obtained by anybody in the village," said Tom. "There are some bad characters in Huckleberry Heath, as in other places."

"A few, undoubtedly," said the inspector. "But, as I have explained already to Miss Fawcett, there is some presumptive evidence against the man Thompson, and none whatever against any other person. But the matter is to be set definitely at rest by Mr. Stuckey. I do not suppose you have heard of Mr. Stuckey at your school"—the inspector smiled rather satirically—"but he is a very celebrated handwriting expert, and there are a number of criminals now in gaol who have been sent there by Mr. Stuckey's valuable aid."

"Poor men!" sighed Miss Priscilla. "I cannot help thinking that if they were spoken to very kindly and considerately it might turn them from their bad ways."

"H'm!" said the inspector. "Possibly. H'm, h'm! Do you wish the boys to remain while Mr. Stuckey examines the letters, Miss Fawcett, and compares them with a specimen of Thompson's hand?"

"Certainly," said Miss Priscilla innocently. "I am very anxious to hear Tommy's opinion."

The inspector gulped, and the Terrible

Three tried hard not to smile at the expression on his face.

"Very good," gasped Mr. Hook. "I—I am sure that—that Tommy's opinion will be most—most valuable!" The crushing sarcasm of this remark was quite lost on Miss Priscilla, who only nodded and smiled assent. "Have you obtained a specimen of Thompson's writing, Miss Fawcett?"

Miss Priscilla shook her head.

"Then I suggest that the man be called in."

"Very good."

Miss Priscilla touched a bell.

"Hannah, my dear, please ask Mr. Thompson if he would mind stepping in for a few moments."

"Yes, mum!" said Hannah.

And a couple of minutes later the new gardener of Laurel Villa stepped into the room, hat in hand, with a clouded brow.

CHAPTER 5.
The Proof.

THOMPSON stood before the assembly, clouded in his looks, and with a flush in his cheeks.

And Tom Merry, looking at him, guessed that the old soldier was aware that he was looked upon with suspicion. Miss Priscilla turned her glasses upon him.

"Thompson," she said kindly, "will you kindly sit down and take pen and paper——"

"Certainly, ma'am!"

"You will write from my dictation, please," said Inspector Hook. Mr. Stuckey sat silent, watching Thompson through his gold-rimmed pince-nez.

The soldier glanced at Miss Priscilla as if disinclined to take his instructions from the inspector.

"Please do as Mr. Hook requests," said the old lady gently. "This is to clear you of any suspicion of being concerned in the attempt at blackmail, Thompson."

The man gave her a grateful look.

"Thank you, ma'am!"

He drew the sheet of paper towards him, and took up the pen in his left hand.

Inspector Hook read out the second of the two letters, and Thompson wrote it down word for word.

He finished, laid down the pen, and rose to his feet and stood at attention. His face was perfectly composed.

"You may go now, my man," said the inspector.

"You may go, Thompson," said Miss Priscilla, as the soldier did not stir. "Thank you so much for obliging Mr. Hook!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

Thompson marched out, and the door closed behind him. Mr. Stuckey murmured something in the inspector's ear, and the official gentleman smiled.

"Blades is there, and has his eye open," he answered. "He will not get away."

Inspector Hook passed Thompson's writing and the other two letters to Mr. Stuckey.

There was silence in the room as the great expert set to work.

He examined the letters, and he examined Thompson's sheet, and he examined them all over again with the aid of a magnifying-glass.

He made a number of notes in a fat pocket-book, and nodded his head several times with an air of owl-like wisdom.

Tom Merry watched him anxiously.

Tom was not much impressed by the pompous and important manners of Mr. Stuckey, who evidently had a tremendous opinion of himself and his powers and gifts. But the man was an expert in handwriting, and was to be supposed to know his business. A very great deal depended on his decision. Evidently Inspector Hook intended to place Thompson under arrest if the expert's decision went against him. So far the evidence against the demobbed man amounted to little more than vague suspicion. But the evidence of Mr. Stuckey was a much more important matter; it was evidence upon which a magistrate would be prepared to commit the man for trial at least.

The minutes passed slowly.

Mr. Stuckey took his time.

No doubt he was aware of the anxiety with which his decision was awaited, and he was not averse to being in the limelight and the centre of anxious attention.

For more than half an hour he did not speak.

Monty Lowther closed one eye at his chums several times, but otherwise there was no break in the monotony of waiting.

Mr. Stuckey looked up at last.

"You wish me to state my opinion here, Mr. Hook?" he asked, with a glance of disfavour at the juniors of St. Jim's.

"If you please, Mr. Stuckey."

"Please do!" said Miss Priscilla. "I am sure you have found that it was not poor Thompson who wrote those wicked letters."

"On the contrary, madam," said Mr. Stuckey, balancing his gold-rimmed glasses on his manicured fingers, "I find that all three of these papers were written by one and the same person."

"Bless my soul!"

Miss Priscilla was startled and shocked.

Inspector Hook smiled. He had expected it.

There was a slight jingling sound as the inspector put his hand in his pocket. The handcuffs were there ready.

Tom Merry interposed quietly.

"Would you mind explaining a little, sir?" he asked very respectfully. "I can see that the letters look alike, as they are all written with the left hand. But——"

Mr. Stuckey gave him a very superior smile.

"If you would care for me to enlarge upon the matter, Miss Fawcett——"

"Pray do," said Miss Priscilla timidly.

"The hands are the same," said Mr. Stuckey calmly. "Anyone, of course, could have written with the left hand for purposes of disguise."

"Especially if he knew there was a left-handed man about the place," suggested Monty Lowther.

The great expert did not deign to hear that remark.

"But handwriting cannot be effectually disguised when under the examination of a trained eye, Miss Fawcett. There are certain tricks and peculiarities in every man's hand which are bound to recur in the most carefully disguised writing."

"I have read of such things," said Miss Priscilla. "Of course, I know how great your knowledge must be."

"Thank you, madam," said Mr. Stuckey, with an expansive smile. "I certainly think I may claim to have some knowledge on this subject, to which I have devoted twenty-five years. I am very frequently called to give evidence on such points in law cases and in criminal cases. But, to continue, I do not wish to make a mystery in any way. Take the crossing of the t's. At the first glance, Thompson does not appear to cross his t's exactly like those in the threatening letters."

"Quite so," said Miss Fawcett, peering at the papers.

"But the dissimilarity is only superficial," explained Mr. Stuckey. "There is an undoubted resemblance upon further investigation. You will note, too, the dotting of the i's. In all these letters the dots are very far away from the i's——"

"So they are in my fist," said Tom Merry. "Is that uncommon?"

Mr. Stuckey remained deaf.

"Then there is the tail of the y, Miss Fawcett," he resumed. "There are fifteen distinct ways in which the tail of the y may be curled, as well as thirty-seven minor distinctions."

"Bless my soul!"

"You would probably not follow me if I should go into scientific detail,"



Tom Merry seized the little mongrel by the collar, and jerked him away, just in time to save Fido's well-brushed skin from a set of very sharp teeth. Fido crouched behind his mistress, and squealed dolorously. (*See page* 5.)

said Mr. Stuckey. "But after a very careful examination of these papers I have no hesitation in saying that all of them were written by the same hand. I am prepared to give such evidence at the trial of the man Thompson, and I have no doubt whatever that it will secure his conviction."

And Mr. Stuckey rose to his feet.

Evidently he regarded the matter as settled beyond dispute. Miss Priscilla was deeply distressed.

Her awe and admiration for the celebrated expert were great. Yet in her heart of hearts she clung to her faith in Thompson. That faith was founded chiefly on his kindness to animals, which was not perhaps very reasonable; but Miss Priscilla could be obstinate.

The inspector rose, too, with another musical clink of handcuffs.

"With your permission, Miss Fawcett, I will take the man into custody," he said.

The juniors were grim and silent.

Little as they admired Mr. Stuckey personally, they could not help respecting the opinion of a well-known expert. And of Thompson they knew nothing, excepting that they rather liked his looks.

Miss Priscilla gave a little cry of alarm.

"Please do nothing of the sort, Mr. Hook!" she exclaimed.

"What!" ejaculated the inspector.

"I cannot believe that he is guilty," said Miss Priscilla, in great distress. "He was so very kind to my cat——"

"Really, Miss Fawcett——"

"I could not find it in my heart to charge him," said Miss Priscilla, with tears in her eyes. "If he has done this wicked thing, I am sure it is due to shell-shock, or something of that kind. It would be better, I think, for me to send him away, and give him a small pension to keep him out of the way of temptation——"

The inspector snorted. He couldn't help it. He gave a snort like an excited war-horse.

"Miss Fawcett, I fear I must tell you that the matter is now out of your hands," he said. "I have ample evidence to charge this man with threatening letters and blackmail, and it is my duty to take him into custody."

"Oh dear! If you really insist, Mr. Hook——"

"Most decidedly I do!"

"Please be very gentle with him," said Miss Priscilla anxiously. "Remember he has lost an arm, and I am sure he is a very nice man at heart, Mr. Hook."

"You shall not hear a sound, madam," said the inspector.

He quitted the room, and Mr. Stuckey took his leave. The juniors exchanged glum looks. Miss Priscilla was quietly shedding tears. From somewhere came the sound of raised voices, and Tom Merry stepped quietly from the room.

CHAPTER 6.
Wildrake Wanted.

INSPECTOR HOOK had secured his prisoner quite easily. Constable Blades was in the hall, with a hand on Thompson's arm; Mr. Hook had made sure of him. The demobbed man's face was crimson.

"Anything you say," said Mr. Hook, "will be taken down in writing, to be used in evidence against you."

Thompson breathed hard.

"I've nothing to say, excepting that you're making a mistake," he said. He caught sight of Tom Merry, and half-turned towards him. P.-c. Blades' grasp tightened on his arm. "I only want to speak a word to the young gentleman," said Thompson.

"What is it?" asked Tom, advancing.

"I'm arrested," said Thompson. "They think I wrote those rotten, wicked, blackmailing letters. I never did, sir! I ain't afraid to stand up and speak for myself in court, but it's hard, sir, for Miss Fawcett to believe that I'd serve her in such a way, after her kindness to me." His voice faltered. "There was a lot of delay about my pension, Master Merry, and I was fairly on my uppers when I tramped along here, and Miss Fawcett gave me a job, just on my word, like the kind angel she is. I'd die for her any day, Master Merry, after the way she's treated me, and to think that I could play her a dirty trick like this——" He broke off.

"You'd better come along," said the inspector gruffly. "Now, then, Blades."

"Tell her I say I never did it, Master Merry!" said Thompson, as he was led away.

"Certainly I will!" exclaimed Tom.

"You'll find the dog in the shed, sir, and you'll find he's better," said Thompson. "The ointment I've used for him has done him good already. You'll find it there, with directions for use on the box, sir."

"I'll see to it," said Tom. "I—I don't half-believe this against you, Thompson. I hope you'll come out all right."

"Thank you, sir!" said Thompson.

The arrested man left the house in charge of P.-c. Blades, and Inspector Hook followed in company with his friend Mr. Stuckey. Tom Merry returned to Miss Priscilla with a thoughtful frown upon his brow.

Somehow, Thompson's declaration had impressed him deeply, and he could not help doubting whether the inspector had found the right man. Yet the evidence against Thompson was strong enough.

Miss Priscilla was in a state of great distress, and being ministered to by the faithful Hannah. Tom Merry and his chums withdrew to Tom's den, upstairs, to discuss the matter. Manners and Lowther shared Tom Merry's doubts on the subject. They were feeling troubled and concerned, and not at all satisfied that justice was being done in the mysterious affair.

"I wish we'd brought Wildrake with us," said Tom abruptly.

"Wildrake? Why?" asked Lowther.

"I think he would have been of some use here; much more use than that pompous ass Stuckey!" said Tom.

"I don't quite see——"

"To-day's Thursday," said Tom. "The second threatening letter was found on the sundial yesterday morning. The money was to be placed there last night. As Miss Priscilla called in the police yesterday, the money wasn't, of course, put there. If the rogue came for it he was disappointed."

"I suppose he would come, to see if it was there," said Manners.

"Bound to!" said Lowther. "But what——"

"That's where Wildrake would come in," said Tom. "You know what a wonderful eye he has on a trail. If the rascal left any sign behind him, Wildrake would pick it up."

"Good egg!" said Manners. "I never thought of that. It's dark now; too late for us to try our scouting skill. We'll have a nose round in the morning, Tom."

Tom Merry nodded.

"If I'd been the bobby man," remarked Lowther, "I'd have put a dummy packet on the sun-dial, and watched the place from cover."

"He seems to have had it fixed in his mind that it was Thompson," said Tom Merry. "That would be a good dodge against an intruder from outside. But, of course, it wouldn't work if Thompson was the man; he lived on the premises, and would know that a watch was being kept."

"True!"

"Besides, the blackmailer wouldn't be quite fool enough to run into a simple trap like that, I should think," said Tom thoughtfully. "He must have been on his guard against such a dodge. He would keep a jolly keen look-out when he came to the sun-dial. Anyhow, the inspector had his own methods, and if he's got the right man, it's all right. If he hasn't——"

"If he hasn't, there will be more threatening letters, perhaps, from the real rogue, and that will clear Thompson!" suggested Manners.

"I hardly think so. The rogue is some rotten character in this neighbourhood, of course; and now the police are on the job, he's pretty certain to be scared off, I should think."

"Leaving Thompson to foot the bill!"

"Yes. Of course, there's nothing in these threats. The rascal hasn't any bombs, and wouldn't dare to use them if he had. He was just frightening a simple old lady with gas." Tom clenched his hands, and his eyes glittered. "I can't believe it was that soldier chap, but I must find out who did it. I want to smash him! I—I wonder if Wildrake could come here. If he made an examination of the ground first thing in the morning, he might find out something. You remember how he picked up a man's trail in Rylcombe Wood at St. Jim's——"

"Send him a wire," said Lowther; "or, rather, get Miss Priscilla to send the Head a wire, asking for him to come. The Head couldn't refuse."

Tom Merry thought it out.

"Blessed if I don't!" he said. "I know Wildrake would come like a shot, to lend a hand. I'll try it on."

Tom hurried downstairs. He returned in a few minutes with a telegraph form in his hand.

"We shall have to get over to Olkham to send this," he said. "You fellows like a long walk before supper?"

"You bet!"

"We'll take Rags with us for a run," said Tom.

"Good egg!"

The Terrible Three went round to the shed where Rags had been bestowed. The mongrel was on a chain, in a bed of straw, in a corner of the shed. He jumped up in delight as Tom Merry entered, and frisked round him. Evidently Rags had not forgotten his rescuer.

In company with Rags, the chums of the Shell walked across to Olkham in the pleasant spring evening, and the telegram was despatched to the Head of St. Jim's, and a second one from Tom to Kit Wildrake. Then the Terrible Three walked back to Huckleberry Heath.

The hour was rather late as they came through the village. The Red Cow was disgorging its latest revellers. A weedy man, with a red nose and sunken eyes, lurched past the juniors, and Rags gave a low whine and crouched on the other side of Tom Merry. The next moment the juniors recognised Joe Sleath. He recognised them at the same moment, and his eyes glittered.

"You've got my dorg, you young 'ounds!" he muttered.

Tom gave him a glance of contempt.

"Show your licence, old scout!" grinned Monty Lowther. "You told the bobby man that it wasn't your dog."

"Read it," he said.

Study No. 6 read the telegram together.

"Dear Wildrake,—Come down to Laurel Villa at once if you can—ask Head. Want you badly.

"TOM MERRY."

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus. "There is somethin' goin' on at Lauwel Villah, then. I wondahed why Tom Mewwy wushed off to-day——"

"Looks like it," said Wildrake.

"Some cad's been writing threatening letters to old Miss Priscilla," said Blake. "I heard Tommy telling Talbot before he started. You're wanted to lasso him, I suppose, Wildrake."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I guess I'm going if the Head will let me," said Wildrake. "I guess I'd have been glad to go along with them this afternoon, for that matter. I want to get near the hobo who has been scaring the old lady. This is just pie, isn't it?"

"I suppose there is no mistake about that telegwam bein' diwected to you, Wildwake."

"Eh! No!"

Arthur Augustus polished his eyeglass thoughtfully.

"It is vewy odd!" he remarked.

"What's odd about it?"

"If Tom Mewwy is in a difficult posish, it would have been wathah wisah of him to wish to me, don't you fellows think so? I should have been vewy pleased to help him out."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, you fellows, I see nothin' whatevah to cackle at in that wemark," said Arthur Augustus warmly.

But Study No. 6 evidently did. They roared.

"Without detwactin' fwom your abilities, Wildwake, I think it is pwetty cleah that in a case of doubt I am just the chap to point out the wight and pwopah thing to do," said Arthur Augustus with dignity. "If you like to wequest the Head to let me go instead of you, Wildwake, I shall not wefuse."

"Bow-wow!"

"For the genewal good, you know——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Kit Wildrake quitted the study, leaving Arthur Augustus shaking his head very seriously. Arthur Augustus did not quite see how matters were to progress favourably at Laurel Villa without the assistance of his celebrated tact and judgment.

Wildrake lost no time in reaching the Head's study.

He found Dr. Holmes there, with a telegram on the desk before him, and a thoughtful expression on his face.

"Come in, Wildrake," said the Head kindly. "You have, I suppose, heard from Tom Merry——"

"Yes, sir, a telegram——"

"Quite so. I have received a message from Miss Fawcett," said the Head. "It appears that there is some trouble at Laurel Villa, and the police have been called in to deal with a writer of threatening letters; and Miss Fawcett asks me to let you join her ward there. I think it quite possible, Wildrake, that you may be of assistance. I do not forget how you helped the ends of justice recently with your really wonderful skill in scoutcraft. You would like to go?"

"I guess so, sir, rather—I—I mean, yes, sir, certainly!"

"Very good. Miss Fawcett wishes you to arrive as quickly as possible; but the night express——"

"I could catch the night express easily enough, sir," said Wildrake eagerly. "To-morrow it may be too late to be of any use."

The Head considered.

"Very well, Wildrake. I have the greatest respect and regard for Miss Fawcett, and I desire to meet her wishes in every way. I will provide you with the money for the journey, and Taggles shall drive you over to Wayland to catch the express."

"Thank you very much, sir!"

"Now, prepare for your journey, my boy."

"Yes, sir!"

Wildrake almost ran from the Head's study.

In a remarkably short space of time his bag was packed, and he was ready to start. Blake & Co. came down to see him off. Taggles in the trap loomed up in the dusk outside.

"Good luck, old top!" said Jack Blake. "I wish I were coming. Tell Tommy to telegraph for me next."

"Ha, ha! All right!"

"Or little me!" said Digby. "I don't know whether I could trail down this merry blackmailer, but I'd like to cut lessons to-morrow morning. I'm a bit doubtful about my construe."

"Weally, Dig——" said Arthur Augustus.

"Here's the trap, Wildrake!" said Talbot of the Shell.

"Good egg!"

Arthur Augustus touched the Canadian junior gently on the arm.

"Wildwake, old chap——"

"Good-bye, Gussy!"

"Wait a moment! You are quite suah that you think you had bettah go?" asked Gussy.

"Eh! You bet!"

"You do not considah it would be bettah to wequest the Head to send me instead?" asked Arthur Augustus anxiously.

"Not a bit, old scout!"

"Vewy well. I twust it will turn out all wight," said Arthur Augustus, with a dubious shake of the head.

"I trust so!" grinned Wildrake.

And he ran out to the trap, and disappeared into the darkness with a clatter of hoofs and a whir of wheels. Arthur Augustus adjourned to the Common-room with his chums, with a thoughtful cast upon his aristocratic countenance. He could not help feeling dubious; but he hoped for the best.

And Kit Wildrake whirled away in the best of spirits, and in a short time was in the express speeding westward, on his way to Huckleberry Heath and Tom Merry & Co. From Wayland Junction he dispatched a telegram, and he followed it as fast as the express could carry him. And in the fresh spring night the sturdy Canadian junior walked up the drive to Laurel Villa, and was greeted by three sleepy youths who had waited up for him.

CHAPTER 9.
In the Night!

"JOLLY glad you've come, old top!" said Tom Merry heartily.

"Yes, rather!" said Lowther.

"We're relying on you, Wildrake. We've got a terrific problem for you!"

"Beats chess problems hollow!" said Manners.

Wildrake smiled.

"Let's have it before we go to bed," he said.

"We've kept supper ready," said Tom. "You shall have the yarn over supper, kid. Here we are!"

A bright fire was burning in Tom Merry's "den," and the room looked very cosy. By the fire Wildrake's supper was keeping warm, and the three Shell fellows transferred it to the table. Wildrake, who showed little sign of fatigue, but was quite hungry, sat down to supper with a contented smile. And while he ate, the Terrible Three, talking in turns or all together, apprised him of the state of affairs at Laurel Villa.

Wildrake gave adequate attention to his supper, but he listened very intently to the strange story.

"So you see how the matter stands," said Tom, when the Canadian junior was in possession of all the facts. "Thompson's arrested on suspicion, and the handwriting expert's evidence may be enough to send him to chokey. Miss Priscilla doesn't quite believe he's guilty, and we don't quite. But unless the blackmailer makes another move he seems done for."

"The blackmailer won't, I reckon," said Wildrake, with his mouth full. "He knows he can't get any more money out of Miss Fawcett, now that the police have taken the matter in hand."

"Just what I thought," agreed Tom. "The man will give it up as a bad job, and be satisfied with the twenty pounds he bagged at first. Very likely he may clear off from the neighbourhood altogether, and leave poor old Thompson to pay the piper. That would see him safe."

Wildrake nodded.

"I haven't seen Thompson," he said. "Of course, it looks as if he's guilty. What do you fellows want me to do exactly? I'm not a giddy handwriting expert."

Tom Merry laughed.

"You're a giddy trailer," he answered. "Last night the money ought to have been placed on the sundial, according to 'J. J.s' demand. Well, isn't it pretty certain that he came along some time to see whether it was there?"

"I guess so."

"Last night it rained," added Tom.

"Yep."

"That's where you come in. You can pick up a trail where a gnat has crawled——"

"Ha, ha! Not quite."

"Well, very nearly," said Tom, with a smile. "My idea is to search the ground around the sundial as soon as it's light, and see whether you can pick up any sign. If there's a track it may lead to something. Of course, we could try—we're going to, in fact—but you can beat us at the scouting game, hands down. So that's why you're sent for."

Wildrake looked thoughtful.

"I guess it's a good chance," he said. "If the man left any sign behind him, and it's not been trampled out of existence, I reckon I'll pick it up O.K. And if it doesn't suit Thompson's feet, that's a point in favour of Thompson."

"Just so!"

"It's only a slim chance," said Manners. "But when it's a question of an innocent man being charged, it's worth while trying the smallest chance."

"Sure!" said Wildrake.

And after a little further discussion the juniors adjourned to bed, at a very late hour indeed.

But, late as the hour of retirement was, Kit Wildrake was out of bed when the first glimmer of the spring sun came in at the windows.

After a cold bath he did not show any sign of fatigue or drowsiness, and he came out into the gardens of Laurel Villa quite briskly with the Terrible Three in the rising sunshine.

Tom Merry went to the shed to let out Rags for an early run. He uttered a startled exclamation as he came up to the shed door.

"My hat! Somebody's been here."

"Hallo, what's that?" asked Lowther.

"The padlock's busted!"

Tom Merry threw open the door and looked anxiously into the shed. The bed of straw was vacant. Rags had disappeared.

"Gone!" exclaimed Tom.

"What's gone?" asked Wildrake, following the Terrible Three into the shed.

"Rags," answered Lowther.

"Rags!" repeated the Canadian junior, mystified. "What the thump——"

"It's a dog," explained Tom Merry.

"Oh, he's been stolen!"

"Well, I don't know whether it can be called stolen," said Tom doubtfully. "There's not much doubt who's been here for him, I think."

"That rotter Sleath, of course," said Monty Lowther. "He meant to have him back."

"I don't catch on," said Wildrake.

Tom Merry explained the affair of Joe Sleath and Rags.

"The man must have come in here during the night and bagged him," he said. "The dog wasn't worth stealing, anyhow; quite a nice little beggar, but only a mongrel in breed, and no cash value. But that brute wanted him, though he couldn't treat him decently. I wonder if you could pick up any sign of the brute here, Wildrake?"

The Canadian glanced round.

"Lots!" he answered. He stepped out of the shed and surveyed the ground. "You can see that he hoofed it over this lawn and the flower-beds there. He didn't care what damage he did. Here's the dog's paws marked in wet soil. I guess he yanked him away pretty roughly. You can see here that the poor beast was dragged along the ground. I guess he didn't want to go with Mr. Sleath——"

Tom Merry's brow darkened.

He thought of the savage punishment that most probably had already been inflicted upon the hapless dog by Joe Sleath. He clenched his fists at the thought.

"What's behind the garden wall at the back?" asked Wildrake.

"A meadow, and a lane beyond it."

"Then I guess that's the way Mr. Sleath went with the dog. Are we following this up or looking into the sundial bizney first?" asked Wildrake.

"The sundial," said Tom; "that's more important. But we'll get Rags back from that brute sooner or later. Come on! It's in quite a different direction."

Tom Merry led the way through the wide and well-kept gardens of Laurel Villa.

In a secluded little lawn, almost at the end of the old-fashioned garden, was the sundial, with the morning sunlight glimmering on it.

"There it is!" said Tom. "We'll stand back, Wildrake, and you can pile in, old chap."

"Sure!"

And the Terrible Three watched, in great interest and curiosity, as the junior from the Boot Leg Ranch began his investigations.

CHAPTER 10.
"Sign"!

KIT WILDRAKE set to work quietly and methodically.

Considerably more than twenty-four hours had elapsed since the supposed visit of the blackmailer to the sundial. Tom Merry & Co. were keen enough as Boy Scouts, but they would have had little hope of picking up any "sign" after that lapse of time. But they had great faith in the boy from the Boot Leg Ranch.

Wildrake made a careful examination of the ground about the sundial, wet now with thick dew. After a time he rose and mounted on a rustic seat, and took a survey of the gardens and the walls that surrounded them. Then, bending low and examining the ground, he moved off, the chums of the Shell still watching him.

If there was anything to be found, they were confident that Wildrake would find it. But their hopes were rather faint.

The Canadian junior stopped at last at the ivied wall, and made an examination there. Then he turned and beckoned to the Shell fellows, and they hurried up to join him.

"I guess there's 'sign' in plenty," said Wildrake. "I reckon I wouldn't undertake to say that it happened on Wednesday night, but I guess it did. You can see here where somebody slithered over the wall and dropped down over the ivy. There's several tendrils broken here, and it's pulled away from the wall in two or three places. And that indentation in the turf is where he dropped."

The Terrible Three examined the sign carefully, and nodded assent.

"Somebody's been over this wall recently, and not last night," said Wildrake. "The night before—Wednesday night—was the time 'J. J.' should have come to see whether the money had been placed on the sundial. I reckon he came, and left these tracks behind him."

Tom Merry drew a deep breath.

"It's plain enough," he said. "And that clears poor Thompson, for he has quarters here, and had no need to climb over the wall from outside."

"Right as rain!" said Manners.

"That isn't all," said Wildrake quietly. "I've figured out more than that. The man who climbed this wall had a dog with him."

"A dog!" exclaimed the Terrible Three in chorus.

"Yep! Look here! If he had a dog, of course he had to pull him up over the wall on a cord when he cleared. You can see that something has been dragged up here—where the twigs are broken upward."

"That's so!" said Tom breathlessly.

"And there are traces of a dog's paws round the sundial," said Wildrake. "And close up under the wall here—look!—near where the man's boots show where he dropped."

"Hold on," said Lowther. "It might have been Miss Fawcett's dog——"

Wildrake smiled.

"I guess I've thought of that," he answered. "But the 'sign' of man and dog are together, and that looks as if they were together here. We've got to find out more, of course."

"Why should he bring a dog into a walled garden with him?" asked Manners. "It was risky, and I don't see——"

"It wasn't risky; it was the only safe way," answered Wildrake.

"How do you make that out?"

"My dear chap, he was frightening an old lady into giving him money. But the chances were that she would tell the police—as she actually did. The rascal couldn't know that the coast was clear for him. He would naturally be suspicious that a dummy packet would be put on the sundial, with a couple of bobbies in cover to watch it, and nail the blackmailer when he came."

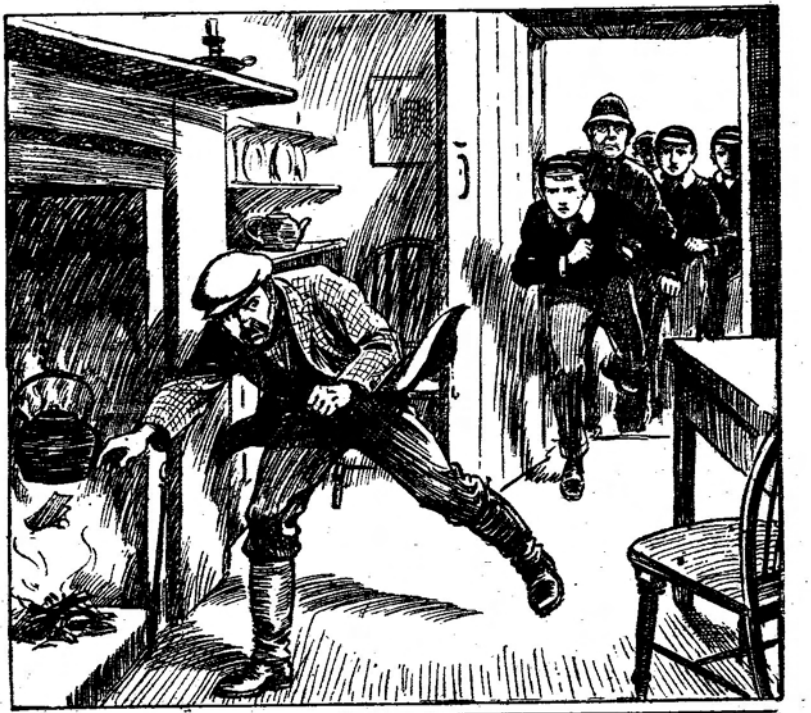
"Ah!"

"I thought of that," said Tom Merry. "But——"

"Well, a cunning rogue would be on his guard, of course, against an obvious thing like that," said Wildrake. "I guess he dropped the dog into the garden first. If there had been police in cover, watching for him, the dog would have spotted them and given tongue. Then he would have cleared off without coming into the garden at all. Catch on?"

"My hat!" said Tom. "It's clear enough. Of course, he wouldn't dare venture into the garden at all without some precaution like that."

"I guess not. I reckon we can take it that the blackmailer is a man who owns a dog," said Wildrake coolly. "That's one point gained. Now let's shin over this wall and look in the meadow. I



Sleath jumped back into the cottage with a gasping snarl. A fire was burning on the hearth, and the ruffian rushed towards it, dragging something from his pocket as he did so. Mr. Blades and the juniors rushed into the cottage after him as he hurled a crumpled handful of paper upon the fire. (*See page* 13.)

guess we're more likely to find tracks in wet meadowland than here."

"Good!"

In a few minutes the juniors had clambered over the ivied wall, and were in the field on the other side.

Low-lying meadows stretched away to the lane in the distance.

Wildrake was quickly at work.

In a few minutes he uttered an exclamation of triumph, and called the chums of the Shell to his side.

"Look!"

In a hollow of the meadow, in a direct line towards the lane, there were tracks as clear as print. The hollow had retained the damp, and was still oozy; and in the soft soil the most careless scout could have read the print of two thick, heavy boots, and the paw-trail of the dog beside them.

With beating hearts the chums of St. Jim's followed the track till it was lost beyond the hollow.

They kept on. Here and there "sign" was found again across the meadow, ending in a gap of a hedge that gave egress upon the lane.

"I guess that settles it," said Wildrake. "The man came from this lane with his dog, crossed the meadow, and hustled into the garden over the wall, by the ivy. He came back the same way. He had his dog with him all the time. I guess this lets Thompson out."

"Yes, rather!"

"Not much chance of following the track down the lane," said Lowther, looking through the gap in the hedge.

In the lane beyond the ground was cut up in heavy ridges of mud by the wheels of farm carts.

"I guess we might find something," said Wildrake. "But there's no need."

"We haven't got the man yet."

The Canadian junior laughed.

"Nope! But as we know his name, we can find his address easily enough."

The Terrible Three blinked at Wildrake.

"Know his name?" repeated Tom Merry.

"Yep!"

"Bravo, Mr. Sherlock Holmes!" said Monty Lowther, with playful sarcasm. "You've found out this man from his footprints, have you?"

"Not at all! I've found out his name from Tom Merry."

"From me?" said Tom dazedly.

"Sure!"

"I suppose you're not pulling our leg, Wildrake?" said the captain of the Shell. "Tell us what you mean."

"You don't see it?"

"No."

"Come back to the hollow."

The wondering Shell fellows followed Wildrake back to the hollow in the meadow. The Canadian junior pointed to the tracks of dog and man in the muddy soil.

"Look at those tracks!" he said.

"Well?"

"My dear chap, you're wool-gathering," said Wildrake. "They're the same tracks that I picked up an hour ago outside your shed, where the dog was stolen last night."

"Wha-a-at?"

"The tracks at the shed were made last night," said Wildrake, "and last night the rascal scuttled away over the nearest wall to the shed. He didn't come in this direction. Besides, you can see that this trail is older than that. Don't you catch on? The man who bagged the dog last night was the same who left this track the night before."

"Wildrake!"

"Tracks can't lie!" said the Canadian junior quietly. "Here's a clear print—you see he has heavy nails in his right boot, and one is missing. He's a slovenly galoot, I reckon. Well, it's the same boot, with a nail missing, that left a track last night in the flower-bed near the dog's shed. It was the same man."

"Joe Sleath——"

"Sure! If you're sure that it was Sleath who took away the dog last night, sure enough it was Sleath who nosed round the sundial on Wednesday night."

"My only hat!"

CHAPTER 11.
The Right Man.

"TAKE that — and that — and that!"

Lash! Lash! Lash!

Loud howls rang out on the morning air. Joe Sleath grinned savagely as his stick lashed on the hapless dog's skinny ribs. And poor Rags, held by a chain in the ruffian's other hand, dodged wildly round his legs in futile attempts to escape the blows.

Joe Sleath was standing outside the tumbledown cottage he lived in, on the outskirts of Huckleberry Heath. The cottage was in bad repair, the garden unkempt and running wild. It was evidently a long time since any work had been done in either. What Joe Sleath did for a living, besides occasional poaching, was a mystery.

Generally he was poor; but there were times when he was flush with money, and spent it freely at the Red Cow. And of late certainly he had been very flush with cash, and had astonished his pals at the Red Cow by the way he threw about currency notes; and he had never left the inn sober. And for the effect that drink produced upon his nervous system poor Rags had to pay. He was beating the dog now with concentrated malice.

Lash! Lash!

"You'd hike off, would yer?" he remarked, as the hapless animal howled and whined. "You'd turn your back, would yer, and git a new master, what? I'll learn yer!"

Lash! Lash!

The howling of the dog rang far and wide. Suddenly the animal made a jump, with such force that the chain was jerked out of Joe Sleath's hand. The tormented animal bounded away, with a whimper, towards a group of figures that came hurrying down the lane towards the cottage.

Joe Sleath started after him, with a curse; but he stopped suddenly at the sight of four juniors of St. Jim's and the helmeted figure of Police-Constable Blades of Huckleberry Heath.

Rags was frisking round Tom Merry the next moment. Joe Sleath set his jaw, with a savage scowl, as the party came up.

He could see that the party had come for him, and the sight of the constable made him feel extremely uneasy.

"You cruel brute!" said Tom Merry, his eyes blazing at the rascal. "So it was you who took the dog, as I guessed."

"I dunno wot you're talking about!"



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said Sleath sullenly. "The dorg came 'ome last night of his own accord."

Wildrake glanced at the ruffian's boots, and at the heavy tracks that showed in the muddy patch outside the cottage door.

He smiled.

"I guess they're the boots," he said. "Nail missing from the right boot, as you fellows can see."

Sleath stared at him.

"What are you gassing about?" he demanded.

"Which I warn you, Joe Sleath," said Mr. Blades portentously, "that anythink you may say will be took down, to be used in evidence agin you. I takes you into custody, Joe Sleath——"

The ruffian started back.

"I tell you the dorg came 'ome," he answered savagely, "and you'll 'ave to prove——"

"You ain't charged with stealing a dog," said the dignified Mr. Blades. "You're charged with a-writing of threatening letters, my man——"

"What?"

"And extorting money with threats of——"

Sleath's unhealthy, drink-sodden face became pale.

"You're dreaming!" he said huskily. "Who charges me?"

"Miss Fawcett, of Laurel Villa."

"I don't know nothing about it. I ain't never been near the bally sundial——"

"How do you know the sundial occurs in the matter at all?" asked Tom Merry quietly.

The ruffian bit his lip. He saw that he had committed himself.

"I've warned you not to say anything that can be took down in evidence, my man!" said Mr. Blades impressively.

"You young 'ound!" muttered Joe Sleath, with a venomous look at Tom Merry. "I tell you I don't know anything about it, Blades."

"You can tell that to the magistrates!" said Mr. Blades, with heavy sarcasm. "You can also tell 'em where you got the currency-notes you've been blowin' at the Red Cow the last few days."

"Which can be identified, as Miss Fawcett keeps the numbers of currency-notes!" said Tom Merry.

Sleath's jaw dropped.

Mr. Blades stretched out a large gloved hand to take possession of him, and Sleath jumped back into the cottage, with a gasping snarl. A fire was burning on the hearth, and the ruffian rushed towards it, dragging something from his pocket as he did so. Mr. Blades and the juniors rushed into the cottage after him as he hurled a crumpled handful of paper upon the fire.

In an instant Wildrake had kicked it out again, before it had had time to catch alight.

Clink!

The ruffian was in Mr. Blades' grasp now, and the handcuffs jingled upon his wrists.

Tom Merry picked up the crumpled paper.

He smoothed out three pound-notes, and held them up to view. Mr. Blades grinned, and held out his hand for them.

"I reckon that's wot's left of the twenty pun he got out of Miss Fawcett," he said. "This 'ere is evidence."

Sleath spat out a savage curse.

"You can't prove——" he panted.

"You was trying to burn good money," smiled Mr. Blades. "If it was your own I don't fancy you'd burn it, my pippin. You says as Miss Fawcett keeps the numbers of these 'ere, Master Merry?"

"Always!" said Tom. "She's very precise on such things."

"That will settle it, I fancy."

Joe Sleath seemed to realise it, too. He poured out a stream of fierce curses, in which he included Mr. Blades and all the juniors. The plump constable dropped a hand upon his collar and led him away.

Tom Merry & Co. looked at one another.

"I guess that lets Thompson out," said Wildrake.

"What-ho!"

"The notes can be identified, and that will settle this rogue. I guess we've earned our brekker," said the Canadian junior.

"You have, at least!" said Tom Merry, with a smile.

And the juniors returned to Laurel Villa, while Mr. Blades marched off his sullen, savage prisoner to the lock-up. And with Tom Merry & Co. went Rags, frisking joyously round the juniors, forgetting his late thrashing in his glee at recovering his new master again.

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There was a late but very merry breakfast at Laurel Villa. Miss Priscilla presided at the table, with a smiling face. She had listened in wonder and awe to the story of what Wildrake had done since his arrival. And though she still regarded her dearest Tommy as the most wonderful specimen of British boyhood that ever had, or could have, adorned the earthly globe, she showed that the Canadian junior came a good second in her estimation.

. . . . . .

Wildrake's coming had, after all, solved the problem.

For Joe Sleath's guilt was very quickly made manifest. Owing to Miss Priscilla's extremely precise habits, it was easy to identify the currency-notes, once they were traced. The three pound notes that Sleath had attempted to burn were what remained of the twenty pounds he had scared Miss Priscilla into placing on the sun-dial. And the fact that he had attempted to burn them when arrested was conclusive enough. And that was not all. At the Red Cow several more of the notes were still in the possession of the innkeeper, who gave evidence that he had received them from Sleath. And still more evidence was found in Sleath's cottage when it was searched—a letter, written in left-hand writing, identical with that on the threatening letters received by Miss Priscilla, which the ruffian had doubtless been prevented from using by learning that the police had been on the scene.

Mr. Sleath did not take the trouble to deny the charge, but his plea of guilty did not serve him much, and from his trial he went to a well-deserved term of imprisonment. Which was a great relief to Rags, who was never likely to see his rascally master again.

Thompson, of course, was released at once, and came back to Laurel Villa in triumph, and was given a warm reception there. Miss Priscilla assured him that she had never lost faith in him, her faith being founded upon his kindness to cats, as upon a rock. Thompson's gratitude to Kit Wildrake was deep, though expressed in few words; but Inspector Hook's feelings were of quite a different variety. The worthy inspector was, perhaps, sorry for his mistake, but certainly he did not like losing his prisoner, and when he came upon the juniors in the village he fixed a very steely eye on Kit Wildrake. Indeed, he really looked as if he would have liked to "run in" the Canadian junior for rescuing his prisoner in such an inconsiderate way. On the other hand, Mr. Blades openly rejoiced—he had made an arrest, a piece of good fortune that seldom came his way, and he had scored over the inspector, which was still more pleasing. As for Mr. Stuckey, the wonderful expert in handwriting, Tom Merry & Co. never knew what he thought of the end of the affair. Possibly he was pleased, but probably he wasn't. No doubt he continued cheerfully his distinguished career as an expert, and expounded to impressed and admiring judges and juries the fifteen different ways in which the tail of a 'y' may be curled, and the thirty-seven minor distinctions thereof.

Tom Merry & Co. left Miss Priscilla happy and comforted when they went back to St. Jim's. And when they arrived at the old school, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was very eager to hear how it had all turned out.

"Extwaordinawy!" he remarked, when he had heard. "So Wildwake managed it, aftah all!"

"I don't see anything extraordinary in that, I guess," said Wildrake.

Arthur Augustus smiled.

"I wegard it as vewy extwaordinawy," he said. "But I congwatulate you, old top. I could not have done it bettah myself."

"Praise from Gussy," said Monty Lowther, "is praise indeed. And I think we can all agree with Gussy—he couldn't have done it better. And, in point of actual fact, he couldn't have done it at all."

With which everybody, excepting Gussy, concurred heartily.

THE END.

(Another grand long story of Tom Merry & Co. next week, entitled: "THE REBELS OF ST. JIM'S," by Martin Clifford. Make sure and order your copy RIGHT NOW! "The Rebels of St. Jim's" is just the sort of story that "GEM" readers revel in. Full of fun, quick action, and plot. You will be sorry if you miss this extra special yarn.)

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Joy's Gossip

It was a great pleasure to spend a week with Doris Levison. She has been staying with a relative near St. Jim's, and she begged me to go and see her. Doris is the most forgiving girl I know. She never harbours resentment, which is more than most of us can say, I suppose. It is so frightfully easy to remember bad things. You trot them out of a night, and think over all the caustic, telling remarks you can make when the next opportunity comes along. Of course, I went with Doris to the charity concert which had been got up in the village. A good many of the St. Jim's fellows were present. The affair was under distinguished patronage. Dr. Holmes was there, likewise Mr. Ratcliff. I shall have something special to say about Mr. Ratcliff later on.

They asked me to contribute to the entertainment, and I gave them a few bits out of my Australian repertory, but the programme contained other things besides music. For instance, Skimpole was down for a short lecture on philosophy. Cardew whispered to me that this would constitute the treat of the evening, but as he said the words there was that dangerous smile on Cardew's face which speaks volumes. That was just what Skimpole did—poke volumes. He came on with a massive book under his arm, and he bowed to us as if he had a hinge in his back. He started right away into the depths, and told us "he had been investigating with considerable trepidation the association of animals with man.

"Take the garden snail, for instance," he said. "You will rarely find a more friendly neighbour. I have been looking into the character of snails of late, ladies and gentlemen. They are charitable, kindly-minded, and ever ready to listen to reason. They set an example to us all. They rise early, their patience is phenomenal. Distance is no object to them, any more than it is to the go-ahead tradesman. Place them in the next garden. They will come back, like a cat."

Skimpole was making an impression. He warmed to his subject, and there was a glow of pride on his wobbly face as he saw Dr. Holmes lean forward.

"Now he's wound up, he'll go on for ever," said Ernest Levison, who was sitting next to me.

Skimpole suddenly made a dive for a box he had placed just below the platform. He kept on talking. He said he had brought a few ferrets and tame rats to show the audience the degree of intellectual development animals could attain. It was unfortunate, I know, that the animals had all escaped. Not that I minded. I found a ferret asleep in my lap, the dearest little thing imaginable. But the incident caused the most shocking confusion. Nervous people shrieked, though they were not hurt. I thought it would be the end of the evening. Skimpole was rushing round retrieving the fugitives. I handed him my ferret; but Baggy was the worst about it all. He had been asleep. I heard him snoring in the row behind me. Suddenly he gave a horrid squawk. One of the ferrets was sitting on his shoulder. It seemed much interested in the mighty Trimble. Skimpole gathered in the animal. We thought all the runaways were captured. The audience, however, was unsettled. It did not want to hear any more of Skimpole's science, but wanted the next item on the bill, and that proved to be the interval, with musical selections from Miss Carrie Brandon, the daughter of the local chemist.

Mr. Ratcliff can wait. He had to that night. I caught a glimpse of him in the "green room." He was dressed in the fancy style of Queen Elizabeth's Court, and he was striding up and down, a book in his hand, with his sword going pippety-pop on the floor. I thrilled. Cardew saw the vision, too. He told me in confidence that he did not regret his life any more, for he had seen Mr. Ratcliff's thin legs. Cardew is always sarcastic.

We had light refreshments in the reception-room. Everybody who was anybody was there. Baggy was busy with the ginger-pop. Skimpole edged his way up to me where I sat, just as Cardew had handed me the cream buns, and Ernest Levison approached with the cheesecakes, and wanted to tell me more about snails. Skimpole thinks I am so sympathetic. He said so. Cardew dug his elbow into Skimmy, and advised him to have a search for any more of the animals. Skimpole said all his specimens were quite safe. He thanked Cardew for his kindly thought, gave me a bow, and marched off with his everlasting book under his arm.

D'Arcy came up just as Cardew was speaking about Mr. Ratcliff, and wanted me to have another supper.

"Oh, you are too late!" said Cardew. "Miss Joy has refused everything, and we are just going back to see old Ratty make a prize ass of himself!"

It was a shame to talk like that. I said as much. Cardew assured me he meant it, and it wasn't old Ratcliff's fault. The hall was filling again, but we three—Cardew, Ernest Levison, and I—got our old place, and Mr. Ratcliff stalked on—a step and a stop, measured and slow, etc.—and started right away with a chunk out of "Hamlet," which he had got off by heart. Cardew touched my arm. "He's forgotten his line," he whispered. Something had happened. Mr. Ratcliff toyed with his sword, hummed and ha'd, and then he gave a scream and took a flying leap. We had forgotten all about Skimmy. He was sitting with Doris just behind me. Mr. Ratcliff could not have forgotten Skimpole. One of the rats had scampered over his buckled shoe. I cannot understand why he should have been so frightened, but he ran for his life, and the rat, evidently thinking he was Skimmy, raced after him.

Baggy was in the buffet place. His voice sounded very sticky. In the big room Dr. Holmes was making a wind-up speech, and I must say it was very good. He never mentioned Mr. Ratcliff, but just pointed out that we were all immensely obliged to the ladies and gentlemen who had contributed so greatly to the entertainment of the evening. Cardew said that Sir Walter Raleigh ought to have special mention, but he did not get it. I am afraid all he got was a cold.

JOY.



"Ratty" Ratcliff and the rat.



The INVISIBLE HAND



This wonderful story has also been filmed by the popular VITAGRAPH Film Company, and readers of the "GEM" should make a point of seeing the picture week by week at their favourite cinemas.

JOHN SHARPE. IRON HAND.

New Readers Start Here.

John Sharpe, the great analytical detective, is engaged by Chief Burnett, of the Secret Service, to track down the band of organised and dangerous criminals operating under the guidance of Iron Hand, a fearless, clever man of dominating personality. Marna Black, one of the band of crooks, is captured, and Burnett induces Anne Crawford, a woman agent of the Secret Service, to assume Marna's identity and get into the confidences of Iron Hand.

She is instructed to keep her real identity a secret even to Sharpe; but she often assists him and sends him information concerning the movements of the gang, and he is puzzled to know just where it comes from.

Iron Hand has a number of hiding-places in different parts of the country, which are referred to as "Nests," the most important of which is Eagle's Nest, situated on a deserted cliff. The leader's chief assistants are Potsdam and Black Flag. John Sharpe has had many big tussles with the gang, and has foiled many of their deepest schemes. Iron Hand employs Wong Li, a Chinese member of the gang, to obtain some valuable jewels from Colonel Bledson. He makes use of a mysterious bowl containing powerful fumes.

The Stolen Jewels.

IN the outer office Wong Li, standing with the handkerchief tied tightly round his nose, instructed the boy to do the same.

Meanwhile, Cactus Bill had now lifted the lid of the bowl, and both men bent over closely to it to inspect the contents. At that moment a dense cloud of thick smoke and incense rose from the bowl and enveloped the two cowboys.

They inhaled the fumes, and started to rise, but the deadly smoke had already commenced its work, and the pungent fumes overpowered them. Both cowboys fell back in their chairs, and sat absolutely rigid.

They were completely unable to move; they remained erect, and stared straight ahead, unblinking out of wide-open eyes, presenting an extraordinary appearance.

Wong Li at the doorway was peering through with an exultant look on his face. He knew that his bowl of mystery would not be long before it accomplished its work. He smiled slightly as he saw the effects of his drug. The Chinaman made a few mesmeric signs with his hands towards the cowboys, and then, followed by the boy, he walked up to the table. They both had handkerchiefs fixed to their faces.

Wong Li hastened to the bowl, and immediately replaced its cover, while the boy, at his directions, rushed to the window and opened it.

The Chinaman moved the table away, and then knelt down in front of the safe, and immediately set to work upon the lock. The little boy was scared out of his life as he caught sight of the cowboys, who were still sitting upright in their chairs.

Wong Li, having gained the secret of the lock from the boy, was soon able to open the door, and, removing the jewel-case, he forced the lid open and removed the valuable contents. Before leaving the room he smiled sardonically at the two cowboys, who were still under the influence of his mysterious fumes. He motioned to the boy to follow him.

For a moment the lad hesitated, for he was nervous of what would happen when his master came back, but Wong Li repeated the sign of the High Binders, and the boy submitted. Both left the room by the window, and descended the emergency fire-escape.

While these extraordinary happenings had been going on detective John Sharpe had arrived in San Francisco. He decided on this step after reading the item of news concerning Colonel Bledson and the jewels.

Sharpe made his way over to the nearest telephone booth, and, obtaining the directory, he searched it in order to find the name of Bledson. He soon achieved his object, and, noting the address of the Cattle King, he made his departure.

The atmosphere in the room had now cleared considerably, and the cowboys, who were still sitting erect and staring before them, commenced to breathe and pant heavily as the good air was again entering their lungs. Soon after, they both recovered.

They moved in their seats, shivered a little, and then, with the full realisation of what had happened, as their thoughts came back to them, they rushed over to the window to see if there was any sign of the Chinaman.

Both men grabbed their revolvers, and they certainly looked very businesslike. The fact that they had been drugged and fooled annoyed them intensely. They decided to climb out of the window at once, and descend by the fire-escape.

Sharpe Turns Up.

IRON HAND, Potsdam, and Anne were sitting talking after finishing the refreshments which had been considerately provided for them by the Chinaman. They looked up interested as Wong Li and the Chinese boy entered.

The Chinaman set the jewel-case on the table in front of Iron Hand. Iron Hand grabbed it greedily, and a look of great pleasure entered his eyes as he examined the contents.

Potsdam was equally enthusiastic over the great capture, and Anne took great care to conceal her real feeling of annoyance over their success.

By this time Colonel Bledson had returned to his office, expecting to find the cowboys faithfully on guard, according to his instructions. He looked around the room, and was amazed and alarmed when he saw that the room was empty, and that the door of his safe was wide open. The truth of the situation dawned on him immediately.

He called out the names of the cowboys loudly, but there was no response, and he walked over to the safe to make quite sure that the jewels had been stolen. There was no doubt about this, and he stood bewildered for a moment or two, bemoaning his great loss, and not knowing what to do.

Suddenly there was a noise in the outer office, and the Cattle King heard the unmistakable sound of footsteps. His hand flew to his revolver pocket, and he drew out his weapon, preparing to shoot the intruder.

The next moment detective John Sharpe, having found no one to greet him, walked straight into the office. Colonel Bledson covered him with his gun, then, recognising his visitor, his hand fell limply to his side.

He rushed towards Sharpe with evident relief, and was obviously very pleased to see him.

"Thank Heaven you're here, Sharpe!" he said delightedly. "I put the jewels in the safe, and left my men to watch them. I have been away about half an hour, and when I return I find the men and the jewels gone! What do you make of it?"

The Cattle King waited eagerly for Sharpe's reply, but the clever detective was already at work. He sniffed the air suspiciously, and then went over to the safe and examined it. He discovered the cards, and also the covered bowl.

Again Sharpe sniffed the air, and then, standing as far away from the bowl as he could, he put his handkerchief over his nose, and motioned Colonel Bledson to go over to the window. The detective lifted the cover from the bowl, and immediately the thick smoke started to pour out again.

This was more than sufficient for Sharpe, and, hastily jamming the lid on the bowl again, he went over to the window to join Bledson. Both men were almost overcome by the terrible fumes.

"Good heavens! What's that stuff?" roared out Colonel Bledson.

"It's Chinese sleep powder," replied Sharpe quietly. "It suspends animation

temporarily, and turns a man, for a time, into a lifeless object."

Bledson started at the word Chinese, and he rushed to the doorway of his outer office, at the same time calling the name of his office-boy. Failing to get a reply, he returned to Sharpe, who was again examining the safe.

"It's that infernal little rat-eater!" remarked Bledson. "Ah Ling, my office-boy!"

Sharpe shook his head.

"Somebody bigger than that," he replied. "They don't trust boys with that secret!"

The detective thought for a moment, then muttered:

"Old Wong Li, of course! Bledson, your jewels are in Chinatown by now. Your men have apparently gone after them, or probably they have been taken there, too!"

A look of intense anger entered Bledson's face. He wanted to start for Chinatown at once, and shoot up everybody he came across in the Chinese quarter of San Francisco.

Sharpe, however, persuaded him to cool down and follow his instructions.

"I know the place well," he said. "I've had to work in it before. I can work better alone. You wait for me here. But if you fail to hear from me by night, go to the police, and get in touch with the Secret Service."

Bledson very much wanted to accompany the detective, but he was sensible enough to see that he would only be in the way. He agreed with the detective's proposals.

Sharpe had now gone over to the window, and he was examining the marks on the sill. Then he started to descend by the fire-escape.

Left alone, Colonel Bledson stormed up and down the room, cursing himself for being fool enough to let the jewels out of his possession. He began to wish that he had left them alone. They had already brought him far more trouble than he desired.

In Chinatown.

THE leader of the gang listened patiently to Wong Li's story as he related how he managed to secure the jewels. Suddenly a sensation was caused by the appearance of the Chinaman's assistant, who had been instructed to shadow Colonel Bledson. He now reported that the two cowboys had followed Wong Li to the headquarters, and were, in fact, just outside.

Wong Li ordered both the men to be taken prisoners.

"Tie them up, Lee Poh," he said, and place them in the cellar. We will deal with them later, poor fools!"

Lee Poh bowed humbly before his master and walked out.

Meanwhile, John Sharpe had not taken long in reaching the Chinese quarter. He stealthily walked to the corner of a big building and peered around it. A short distance away he saw the outside of Wong Li's warehouse.

The Chinese merchant's name appeared on a large sign on the building, and just then a lorry, loaded with big boxes, arrived on the scene. The driver dismounted, and made his way into the office.

Sharpe was taking every detail in, and, assuming a slouching walk, he made his way towards the dray, and started to read the inscription on the big packing-cases. He noted the name on the label nearest to him. It said: "Wong Li, Importing Company, San Francisco, by Steamer Boroda, via Shanghai."

The detective made a mental note of this, and then the driver of the dray and a Chinese clerk came out of the office. The clerk ordered the cases to be carried into the warehouse.

Sharpe then wandered away, apparently unconcerned. There were one or two Chinamen hanging about the vicinity, evidently waiting for work. The detective hurried past these, and then, when he reached the corner, he broke into a fast walk, and disappeared down the street. He had a big scheme on hand, and immediately made his way to the wharf, where he was convinced he would find the steamer Boroda. His judgment proved correct, and the captain was on board, tending to details of business while the ship was being unloaded.

The detective introduced himself, and showed his badge, thus making his identity quite clear. The captain at once explained that he would place himself entirely at his disposal, and he listened eagerly as Sharpe outlined his proposals.

He was quite pleased with the idea of rendering what assistance lay in his power to the renowned detective.

Sharpe followed the captain to his cabin, and the sailor pressed a button and summoned a steward. He gave this man instructions to have the ship's carpenter report to him, and Sharpe continued to outline his scheme as the man left the room.

In celebration of their great capture, Iron Hand had arranged a little feast, and during the progress the subject of the valuable jewels which they now had in their possession was discussed. It was a great pleasure to Iron Hand to finger them, and he could not keep his hands off the sparkling gems. He examined them time and again. At last he replaced them in the case.

"I must find a place to keep them in," he muttered, "until I investigate Nest No. 1, and see that it is still safe."

Then an idea where they could be hidden occurred to Wong Li, and he drew the other Chinaman away from the group as he consulted with him in whispers. Presently he stepped forward and spoke to Iron Hand.

"I know a safe place to keep the jewels," he said.

Iron Hand looked interested.

"Where?" he inquired of the Chinaman.

"Come with me. I will show you," Wong Li replied.

The party moved towards the door, but they were delayed by a clerk, who entered with an invoice, which he presented to the Chinese merchant. It concerned the arrival of the recent load of packing-cases.

Wong Li first glanced at it, and then handed it to one of his Chinese assistants.

"Go down to the storehouse and check up this list," he said. "See that all is there."

The man addressed took the invoice, and prepared to obey his instructions, while Wong Li and the others walked out.

At the big warehouse belonging to the Chinese merchant, Wong Li's employees were carrying in the last of the packing-cases. It was deposited alongside the others, and when this was done the Chinese labourers departed.

After a while the lid of one of the boxes was raised slightly, and a man, after first peering carefully around, commenced to climb out of the box. It was John Sharpe!

With stealthy movements, he tiptoed towards the door, and then stopped suddenly as the sound of approaching footsteps came to his ears.

The detective's first thoughts were to enter the packing-case again. But, seeing that he was too late to do this, he rushed over to the doorway and hid close behind it.

The door opened, and the Chinese clerk who had been sent down by Wong Li to check the cases entered, carrying the invoice in his hand. He could not see the detective hiding behind the door. But when he entered, and closed it, he came face to face with him. It was a dramatic moment.

Without hesitation, the detective rushed at the Chinaman, leaped upon him, and grabbed him by the throat. The two men fell struggling to the floor, and the detective saw to it that the man could not shout out and give the alarm.

This was not an occasion for studying the feelings of his adversaries, and so, bumping the Chinaman's head on the ground, he soon rendered him unconscious.

Sharpe rose, walked towards the door and listened for an instant, in order to make quite sure that the noise of the struggle had not been heard. Then he returned to the unconscious form of the Chinaman.

An idea had formed in his brain, and he started to remove the outer clothing of the man.

The Temple of Buddha.

IN a sumptuously-furnished room in Chinatown were three Chinese dignitaries, dressed in picturesque costume. They were chanting some strange Chinese song, when Wong Li, his two assistants, Iron Hand, Anne, and Potsdam entered.

There was a good deal of bowing and ceremony as Wong Li greeted the high priest.

Presently this important personage gave Wong Li permission to speak. Then the Chinese merchant took the casket which Iron Hand was holding, exhibited it, and said:

"I wish to place this under the eye of Buddha, and in his care. It is of great value."

The high priest nodded, saying:

"Buddha will protect it. Come!"

He led the way, and the party followed the stately and dignified tread of the three Chinese priests.

Anne was very interested and somewhat awed in her strange surroundings, and she was glancing around and taking everything in.

Presently the party arrived at a passage at the end of which were double doors. The high priest and the others entered, and when they reached the double doors the high priest unlocked them. Then the party entered what was apparently the temple-room.

It was a very large place, furnished as a Buddhist temple and handsomely appointed with draperies and screens. In the centre, at the far end, was a large statue, with hands clasped.

The altar extended about three feet out from the image, and was about six feet long. On either side of it were two square-topped pedestals, on each of which rested a Chinese candle.

The room was dimly lighted, and there was a weird light showing on the god. Presently the high priest went over to the wall, pressed a button, and the room was then flooded with light.

All the Chinamen immediately bowed to the idol with great religious solemnity. Iron Hand, Potsdam, and

Anne looked on the scene with great awe.

While this strange scene was going on, John Sharpe had succeeded in dressing himself in the Chinese clerk's clothing, and, going over to the body of the man, which he had bound and gagged, he lifted him up and placed him in the same case as he had previously used as a hiding-place.

Before further action, Sharpe produced a small disguise-box, which he always carried with him, and, with a few clever touches, he converted his eyebrows into the slant peculiar to the Chinese race, and made a few other important alterations to his face. Then he walked over to the door, and satisfying himself that there was no one about, he left the warehouse.

Sharpe found himself in a narrow passage-way, which was in semi-darkness, and he was about to proceed farther, when he heard a slight noise. Then he crouched down, making himself as inconspicuous as possible.

The detective glanced down a passage-way, and saw ahead of him an extraordinary scene. There before him, in the Chinese temple, he saw his old enemies Iron Hand & Co., in company with the other Chinamen, whom he rightly believed to be Chinese priests.

The members of the gang were intent upon the ceremony which was taking place, and they failed to see the detective as he tiptoed into the temple from the other end.

When the high priest and others had finished their prayers, the chief went over to the idol and pressed a lever which was artfully concealed from view. This had the effect of setting in motion the mechanism of the idol.

He next opened two small doors in the altar, disclosing a receptacle, and instructed Iron Hand to examine it. The leader of the gang stepped forward and peered into the opening. For a moment the crafty Iron Hand hesitated about placing the jewel-case in the opening, and he looked around to Wong Li.

The Chinaman explained that it was quite safe to do so, and Iron Hand placed the casket in the altar. The high priest then closed the lids, and drew the altar-cloth over them, hiding them from view.

Turning to Iron Hand, the priest said in a clear voice:

"Buddha will guard the treasure of the stranger."

Iron Hand did not quite like the idea of parting with his jewels in this way, and he walked over to Wong Li, still feeling rather sceptical.

"Is it all right to trust the jewels there?" he asked the Chinese merchant.

Wong Li nodded.

"I also will watch," he replied. "This temple has but one door."

The leader of the gang appeared to be more satisfied with this. The high priest again pressed the lever that released the mechanism of the idol, and he stepped back hurriedly, as though fearful of remaining too close to it. He explained to Wong Li that it was now set for a trap, and, bowing to the idol with outspread arms, he walked slowly away.

John Sharpe had been such an interested spectator of this strange ceremony that he almost forgot that he was not supposed to be present, and, seeing that the party was about to leave the room, he darted off down the passage so that he could escape their notice.

When Iron Hand and his party had reached the doorway, the high priest turned off the lights in the temple again, leaving the image faintly illuminated as before. The high priest was the last to leave the temple, and when the others had entered the passage he closed and locked the door.

John Sharpe had now regained the safety of the warehouse, and he closed the door behind him. Then he applied his ear to a crack so that he could hear what was going on.

Wong Li and Iron Hand, followed by the rest of the party, made their way again to Wong Li's private office.

"Potsdam and I will take a look at Nest No. 1!" he announced. "John Sharpe knew all about it, but he's dead now, thank Heaven! We threw him down a deep ravine. If we find Nest No. 1 O.K., we'll take the jewels there."

Wong Li nodded. He was a man of few words.

Iron Hand prepared to leave, but catching sight at that moment of Anne, he realised that she would be somewhat in the way of their investigations. Turning to Wong Li again, he said:

"Can you give Marna Black some refreshment and a room until we come for her?"

Wong Li bowed, and replied that he would be only too pleased. He touched a bell, and in answer his assistant, Lee Chow, entered. Looking around, the newcomer caught sight of Anne's face, and he started suddenly, for he recognised the girl's face only too well.

The Wrath of the Idol.

ANNE was puzzled when she saw the look of recognition on Lee Chow's face, but Wong Li and the others did not notice this curious interchange of looks. Wong Li turned to Lee Chow, and instructed him to conduct Anne to a room, and provide refreshments for her. Before following Lee Chow, the girl waved what was pretended to be a fond farewell to Iron Hand, for it was more than ever necessary for her to play her part well.

When the two had departed, Wong Li directed his attention to Potsdam, and, indicating another part of the room, he said:

"Will you go by the secret way?"

The second-in-command looked at his leader with a meaning expression. Iron Hand understood the significance of this, and, in answer to the Chinaman's query, he replied decidedly:

"No; by this street. We might run into a trap in the secret passage."

Wong Li bowed in an unconcerned manner, and Iron Hand and Potsdam departed, leaving the Chinese merchant alone with his thoughts.

There was one of Wong Li's followers whose desire to possess the valuable jewels outweighed his fear of the wrath of Buddha. His greed gave him courage. Stealthily and craftily the man glanced around furtively, and made towards the passage leading to the temple.

In his eagerness he did not see the man who was fumbling with the lock on the closed door. Suddenly this man, hearing the sound of footsteps, glanced round, and the face of John Sharpe, the detective, was revealed in the dim light. He realised the approaching footsteps meant danger to him, and he immediately looked round for a place to hide.

Meanwhile, the Chinaman continued to slink slowly and stealthily towards the temple, thinking all the time of the wonderful jewels which would soon be in his grasp.

Every now and again he glanced furtively around, to make sure that he was not being followed. Searching for a hiding-place, the beams on the ceiling caught the eye of the detective. He leaped up towards one, and pulled himself up. Hardly had he done so than the Chinaman entered.

Approaching nearer to the temple door, he produced a key and a flash-light, and at once set to work to unfasten the door.

John Sharpe, from his seat up above, was an interested spectator of what was going on, and he watched the movements of the yellow man, tense and interested. Soon the Chink succeeded in opening the door, and he disappeared into the temple.

John Sharpe slipped silently down from his perch, and slipped through the doorway after him. The Chinaman walked over to the front of the altar.

He was trembling violently, and was obviously making a big fight to overcome his fear of the idol, which certainly looked very queer and strange in the dim light of the building.

John Sharpe slipped behind the screen, unnoticed by him, and from here he would be able to see everything that was going on with perfect ease.

The Chinaman halted before the idol for several minutes before he could summon up sufficient courage to carry out his intention. Then, overcoming his fear of the idol, he prepared to steal the jewels.

His first action was to remove the altar-cloth, then he opened the door in the same manner as he had seen the high priest do on a previous occasion.

John Sharpe looked intently all the time, expecting to see the tragedy which he knew would happen.

Opening the doors, the Chinaman reached down into the well of the altar for the jewel-case. At last he had the precious casket within his grasp.

Then suddenly the figure of the idol bent over him. The two massive arms rose swiftly, and the clasped hands of the great god fell down on his head, crushing him to the altar. Thus did the jewels claim one more victim!

Sharpe could no longer remain where he was at the sight of this horror, and he left his hiding-place and moved over towards the Chinaman. He was now lying face downwards against the altar, with the jewel-case held limply in his hand, and was quite unconscious.

As soon as the detective arrived on the scene he looked into the face of the Chinaman; but the man was quite dead. When he looked up again it was to see that the idol had settled back in its normal position, with its hands clasped as before. The next instant something else happened which somewhat startled the detective.

At the rear of the idol a gong was ringing loudly. Sharpe immediately sprang into action, and, forcing the casket of jewels from the hands of the dead man, he looked about for a way of escape, for this was evidently an alarm, and soon, no doubt, someone would arrive on the scene.

(Get next week's GEM for the continuation of this splendid story.)

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MY READERS' OWN CORNER.

DAWN.

Dawn breaks once more, and with it all things wake.
A new day born, and new hopes born afresh,
To fade once more when twilight soft descends,
And clothes the world in garments of black night!
How many are the tales that dawn could tell,
Of laughter in the world that's now so grey—
Grey with the grief of thousands who have lived
To see the end of war, which raged and killed—
Which stopped the smiles on many boyish lips,
And stilled for e'er the laughter in the hearts
Of those who died that Freedom should live on!
—Miss Blanche Benjamin, 121, Wilberforce Road, Finsbury Park, N. 4.

AN ARTIST IN SAND.

A curious sight in the streets of Tokio is that of an old man seated on a smooth piece of ground. Around him are small piles of coloured sand—yellow, black, red, blue, etc. Placing a pinch of each in his hand, he will draw by trickling the sand through his fingers. His pictures include portraits of men and women all properly coloured, and he works with great swiftness.—J. Douglas, 196, Janet Street, Byker, Newcastle-on-Tyne.

"ROCKY" JOURNALISM.

A good specimen of journalism as run in the Rocky Mountains:

"We begin the publication ov the 'Roccay Mountain Cyclone' with some phew diphphículties in the way. The type phounders phrom whom we bought our outphit phor this printing-opphice phailed to supply us with any ephs or cays, and it will be phour or phive weexs bephore we can get any. We have ordered the missing letters, and will have to get along without them until they come. We don't lique the looxs ov this variety ov spelling any better than our readers, but mistax will happen in the best ov regulated phamilies, and iph the ph's and the c's and x's and q's hold out, we shall ceep—accent on the 'c'—the 'Cyclone' whirling aphter a phassion till the ephs and cays arrive. It is no joque to us; it's a serious aphphair."—Norman Craven, 96, Blackwell Road, Carlisle.

TESTIMONIALS.

Employer: "You say you were last employed in a Government department?" Typist: "Yes, sir." Employer: "Any testimonials?" Typist: "No, sir; but I've got six topping jumpers I did there, if you'd like to see them!"—Len Walkerdine, c.o. 36, Byron Street, Derby.

THAT HAT.

"Every day for a week," the young wife said wistfully, "I've gone down to look at a hat in a shop window—a wonderful hat, Dick, the kind of hat a woman dreams of, but sees, perhaps, once in a life-time. Of course, I knew that I could not hope to buy it, as it was far more expensive than we could afford. The price was——"

"Perhaps we could manage it, dear, if you wish for it so much," responded Dick fondly. "Business has been a little better the last month. I have two new contracts. How much is the hat, dear?"

"That is sweet of you, Dick!" she responded, with a grateful smile, though her eyes grew sad. "But it is too late. Our cook happened to pass the shop. I saw her wearing it home."—S. Berdinner, 45, Mildmay Street, Lincoln.

LITERAL CORRECTIONS.

"But I thought——" began the typist.

"It's not your business to think," snapped the employer. "All I require of you is to take down my letters word for word."

"Very good, sir," said the typist.

Half an hour later a letter, which conformed to the new regulation in every particular, was handed to him to sign. It read as follows:

"Dear Sir,—No, I believe he is worth buttering up a bit. Dear Mr. Browne writes it with an 'e.' Pure pedantry. His father was a gardener. With regard to your letter of whatever the date is, I can't be expected to read writing like this, I can quote you the following prices. Mr. Thomson it's that outsider Browne, how much shall we stick on? Fifty per cent? Make it sixty? Right-ho! Thirty bob, two quid, and two-ten per ton. Awaiting your respected commands. I am, yours truly. Thank goodness that's done!"—Miss Irene Cain, c/o Pearl Office, Prospect Hill, Douglas, I.O.M.

THOSE IRISH NAMES AGAIN.

A Frenchman was waiting at a railway-station, when a couple of natives sat down beside him.

Said one: "Shure, Pat, it's down to Kilmary Oi've been, an' Oi'm on me way back to Kilpatrick."

"Ye don't say so," said the other. "It's meself that's just after bein' down to Kilkenny, an' Oi stop here a bit before Oi go to Kilmor."

"What assassins!" exclaimed the Frenchman. "Would that I were safely back in my beloved France!"—Miss Leila Simmons, 81, Nora Street, Sunderland.

CHAT ABOUT ST. JIM'S AND GREYFRIARS.

We have just been informed of the fact that David Llewellyn Wynn, the Falstaff of St. Jim's, has had the misfortune to lose his appetite. This is probably due to the fact of his having walked under a ladder the other day.

Mention has recently been made respecting Bernard Glyn, the inventor, to the effect that he has proved himself successful rather young. Well, all of us start rather young, don't we?

Ralph Reckness Cardew's ambition seems to be to make a rise in the world. Well, anyway, he can rest assured that he will receive every assistance from his Form-master, Mr. Philip Lathom—who has been on the verge of "blowing him up" more than once.

Rumours are rife at the moment that a shocking calamity has happened in Study No. 3 of the Shell Form of St. Jim's. Reports state that William Cuthbert Gunn, an inmate of that study, has been "fired."

I am told that William George Bunter, of the "Boys' Herald," has recently approached Dr. Herbert Henry Locke, D.D., with a view to his giving a helping hand in the kitchen. I fear myself were the Head to accept the Owl's kind offer, it would be very much a case of the helping hand helping itself.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy seems very much hurt owing to his having been severely cautioned for practising his tenor solos in the study. According to his own estimation his voice would be instrumental in assisting him perhaps in time to come to keep the wolf from the door. I fully agree with the swell of St Jim's that his voice would keep the wolf from the door—if it heard it.

Referring to the galleries which appeared in early issues of the "Gem Library," readers have written to tell me that they think Gerald Crooke looks too straight-faced. Well, it's common knowledge that many a straight face hides a "crooked" mind.

I hear indirectly that there is one thing Mr. Horace Ratcliff, the tyrant of the New House, hates more than the cane. Well, knowing him as I do, I can only come to the conclusion that it is the absence of it.

Yes, it was undoubtedly a dirty trick of Aubrey Racke's to try and blackmail Gore's uncle like he did. Thank goodness Mr. Railton made it his business to give him the thorough good "cleaning" that he did.

According to information to hand, I hear that Paul Pontefex Prout has purchased another rifle. It can only be supposed that he is about to carry out a private war.

What a pity neither team scored in the St. Jim's versus Greyfriars match. Both teams put their backs into the game, too—not to mention their half-backs, forwards, etc.

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