

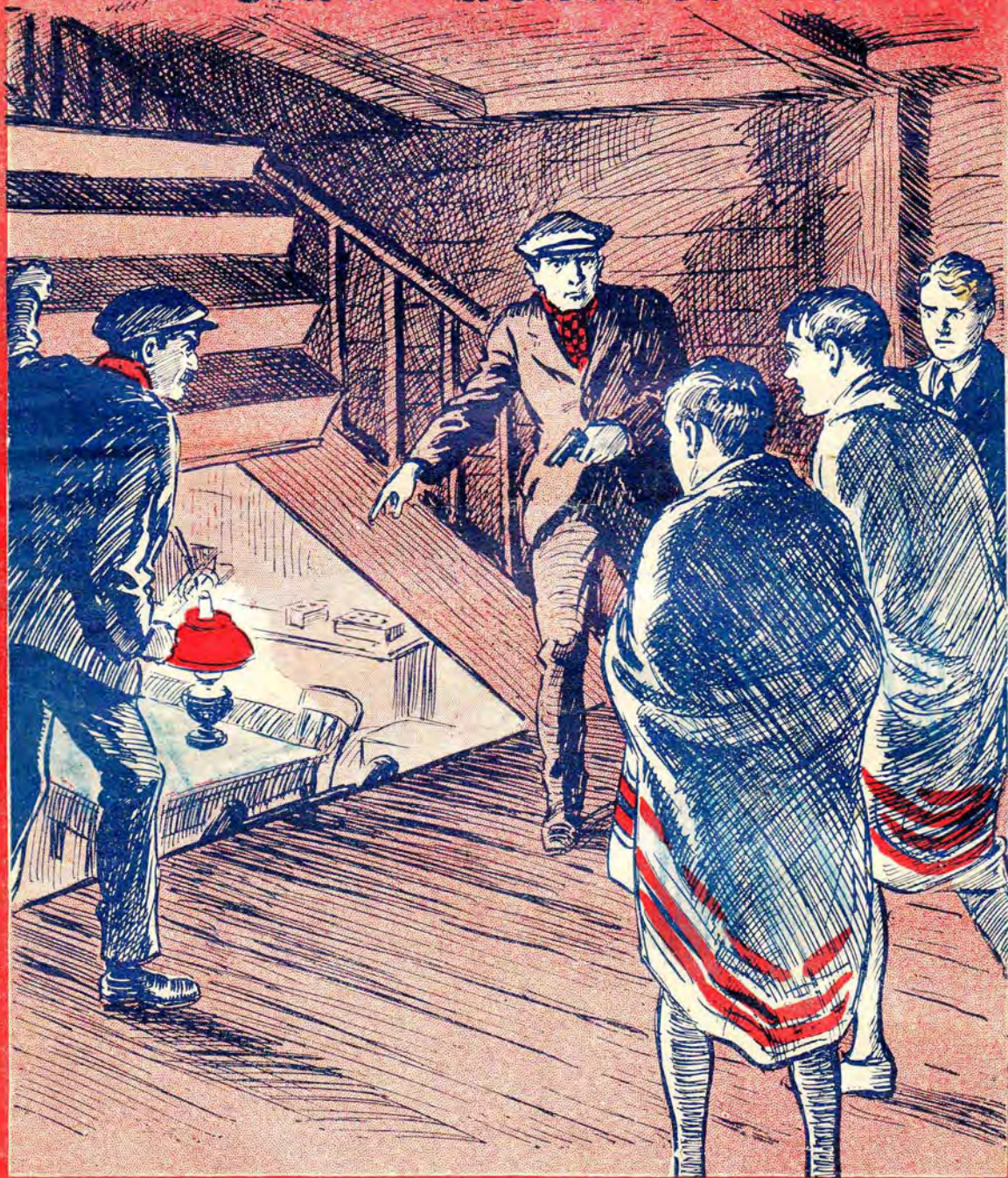
ANOTHER GREAT STORY OF TOM MERRY & CO. THIS WEEK, BOYS!

The GEM 2^D

EVERY WEDNESDAY.

No. 887.
Vol. XXVII
February 7th,
1925.

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SCHOOL AND SPORTING STORIES



THE SECRET OF THE MILL !

Tom Merry and Talbot stared in astonishment as a section of the stairs swung over, revealing a secret cellar ! 'Get down there !' ordered one of the villains gruffly. (A thrilling incident from the grand school story inside.)



Address all letters: The Editor, The "Gem" Library, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Write me, you can be sure of an answer in return.

MY DEAR CHUMS,—Always at the top of its form! That is where the GEM stands. The new programme of yarns beats anything. I have in preparation stories of the most exciting kind. St. Jim's has been in the public eye for a good many years, but there is always something fresh and brilliantly interesting to write about in connection with the famous characters. The GEM started the New Year well, and its popularity increases by leaps and bounds.

"THE BOY FROM BROADWAY!"

By Martin Clifford.

For next Wednesday I have an extra-long, grand complete tale by Martin Clifford. There will be heaps of speculation as to this fellow from New York. One may take it for granted that numerous questions will be asked as to why he should come to St. Jim's. Thereby hangs a most sensational tale—one which features the best-like characters in the series. In common justice to Mr. Clifford, I must keep it dark as to the identity of the Trans-atlantic visitor who causes such a stir in the school. The personality of the newcomer is remarkable. You will see next week how it is St. Jim's falls into the most amazing error on record. Probably you will feel that a certain mistake should never have been made. But if you glance round at what is happening in the big world outside the school you will be ready to admit that false impressions are quite as much the rule as the exception. Life is just like that. Of one thing I am sure—sure as eggs are eggs. There will be no lessening of the admiration felt for a certain fellow who has been a favourite for no end of a time with all Gemites. Don't forget! A special extra-long St. Jim's tale of the best on Wednesday next!

PEEPS INTO THE FUTURE!

It is one of the jolliest experiences possible to get a glimpse of good things which are going to happen. Now for one of them! I have a splendid new feature coming along very shortly. Every reader of the GEM has a good word for the thrilling yarns of Mr. Lester Bidston.

THE AUTHOR OF THE ULTIMA TALES!

Well, the news is just this. In a few weeks' time the GEM will start a fresh series of marvellous adventure stories by Lester Bidston. This writer has won a big reputation for his nervy, keen, intensely exciting narratives of the under-world of crime. His coming series goes one better than anything yet. We get more of those hammer-and-tongs struggles between master-rogues and the law. There is plot within plot, and a dramatic climax to each of these grand yarns.

THE TUCK HAMPER!

It was a happy idea to bring back the Tuck Hamper. Nothing can exceed the popularity of this feature. Send in your brightest and merriest yarnlet. Use the handy postcard. It saves postage, and a mile of smiles can be packed on to a postcard.

"FOOTBALL CHUMS!"

By A. S. Hardy.

You will find another gripping instalment of Mr. Hardy's topping serial in the GEM next week. Look out for further adventures on the field and off for Hal Chester. This is the fonder tale of the season—no question about it!

"ERRORS!"

There has been a mighty rush. Results will be published as early as possible, but the judges have had their work cut out. THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 887.

Patience, please! No crowding. "Errors" has been a roaring success, but I have in mind something even better.

QUESTIONS ABOUT ST. JIM'S!

In answer to several interested readers who have written in to me asking for further information concerning the characters, etc., I am putting in a fact or two about ages. Tom Merry is 16; he stands 5ft. 5½in. Reginald Talbot is 16 and one month; height, 5ft. 3½in. Ernest Levison is 15 and six months; his height is 5ft. 5in. Ralph Reckness Cardew is 15 and seven months; his height is 5ft. 4in. Gerald Cutts is 17; he stands only three inches short of six feet. It will long be remembered that Cardew's first experience at St. Jim's was a "mill" with the burly Cutts. The latter was ill-treating a fag, and Cardew, absolutely new to the school, chipped in, and gave Cutts something to remember the occasion. To the amazement of St. Jim's, Cutts got the worst of the encounter.

Your Editor.

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OUR TUCK HAMPERS ARE PRIME!

Remember, boys and girls, we award a delicious Tuck Hamper for the best storyette sent us each week—also half-a-crown is paid for each other contribution accepted. Cut out the coupon on this page, and send it, together with your joke, to me.

GOOD OLD SCOTLAND!

A WAR-TIME TRAGEDY!

A sergeant was having the time of his life with a squad of raw recruits. At last he gave it up in disgust, and told them to stand easy. "My lads," he said, "I will tell you a story. When I was a boy of five, I was one day playing with some toy soldiers on the side of the river. Some of them fell in, and I ran crying to my mother. 'Never mind, my boy,' she said, 'when you are a man your soldiers will come back to you—'" He paused, then scratching his head, he said: "And believe me, I think they have!"—A Tuck Hamper, filled with delicious Tuck, has been awarded to Alex Llewellyn, 78, Glasgow Road, Wishaw, Scotland.

UNREASONABLE!

A smartly-dressed young man strolled up and down the roadway waiting for his lady-love. Getting tired, he leaned against some railings, but discovered to his horror that they had recently been painted. Further down the road he espied the painter still at his job. Going up to him, he said indignantly: "You idiot, why don't you put 'Wet Paint' on these railings?" The painter looked the dude up and down. "Well, and ain't I doin' that?" he exclaimed in surprise.—Half-a-crown has been awarded to Geo. W. Lightbody, Ardenla, Portland Park, Hamilton.

"EAR-IE!"

Swell (to cornet player in the street): "Do you always play by ear, my man?" Cornet Player: "Well, sir, it's either 'ere or in the 'igh street!"—Half-a-crown has been awarded to Denis, R.S. Condon, 29, Raleigh Road, Richmond, Surrey.

DOES THE DOG KNOW?

A Chinaman was worried by a vicious-looking dog, which barked at him in an angry manner. "Don't be afraid of him," said a friend. "You know the old proverb, 'A barking dog never bites.'" "Yes," said the Chinaman. "You know the proverb, I know the proverb; but does the dog know the proverb?"—Half-a-crown has been awarded to William Grainger, 65, Poplar Street, Poppleton Road, York, Yorkshire.

TUCK HAMPER COUPON. THE GEM LIBRARY.

No attempt will be considered unless accompanied by one of these Coupons.

Sudden and dramatic was the ending to the great cross-country run at St. Jim's. By a miraculous stroke of luck Tom Merry is saved from his perilous plight, but only to be brought right up against the remarkable mystery of the ancient mill!



THE MYSTERY OF THE MILL!

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

By

Martin Clifford.

CHAPTER 1. The Unknown Rescuer!

"GOOD heavens!" Reginald Talbot of the Shell Form at St. Jim's breathed the ejaculation in horror-stricken tones as he stood on the narrow plank bridge that crossed the Rhyl where the river was dammed above the old water-mill.

He was gazing frenziedly into the dark, whirling waters of the mill-pool some twenty feet or so below him.

A few seconds previously the unconscious body of Tom Merry, the junior captain of St. Jim's, had rolled down the channel of the sluice under the flood-gates and disappeared into the dark, turbulent depths of the mill-pool.

The two juniors had been laying the trail for a cross-country run of the junior school, and while crossing the old bridge Tom Merry had tumbled and fallen against the decayed handrail, which had collapsed and permitted him to fall through.

And in falling he had struck his head on the stonework of the sluice-channel and been rendered unconscious before he dropped into the water.

Talbot had been a few yards in front of Tom Merry at the time the accident occurred, so that he had been unable to do anything to prevent the catastrophe, though he had raced back along the bridge upon hearing his chum's startled cry.

Now he stood at the gap in the rail, leaning over and scanning the surface of the pool in the hope that he might see something of Tom Merry.

Nothing but ripples and eddies and white spume from the cascade of water pouring over the motionless mill-wheel a few yards away rewarded his anxious and well-nigh frantic scrutiny.

Somewhere in those dark, foam-flecked depths was Tom Merry, in all probability still in a state of unconsciousness, and powerless to help himself.

Talbot shuddered.

Even if Tom Merry recovered consciousness, it was extremely unlikely that he would be in a state to reach safety without aid.

It was not cowardice that withheld Talbot from plunging into the pool at once.

He realised that there must be a number of powerful and conflicting currents in the pool, consequent upon the enormous amount of water that was continually pouring into it, and that Tom might have been swept in almost any direction as a result.

He might be just under the water a yard or so away from where he had dropped into the pool, or he might be already twenty yards away and several feet down. To gain some idea of Tom's whereabouts was imperative if he was to be brought to safety within the least possible time.

And the bridge, high above the surface of the pool,

afforded Talbot a far better field of vision than he could have commanded had he been swimming about in the pool.

A few seconds up there might prevent the waste of many minutes of blind groping in the depths of the pool. Indeed, it might even mean the difference between success and failure.

Talbot was tearing off the empty "scent" bags as he stood there peering into the pool.

The thought that Tom Merry had been wearing two similar bags brought a chill to the heart of Talbot and a groan to his lips as he realised how they would fill with water and help to keep Tom submerged.

He tore off his running-pumps and flung them from him. One dropped into a clump of bushes on the bank of the mill-dam below him, while the other splashed into the water of the mill-race and disappeared into the torrent that poured over the old wheel.

Talbot drew a deep breath through his bloodless lips. His face had taken on a drawn, haggard appearance during the few terrible seconds that had elapsed since the waters of the pool had closed over Tom Merry.

For they were but seconds. Twenty of them, at most, had passed since Talbot had heard Tom's cry as he felt the handrail give way, and had turned to see his chum's deadly peril.

But time is merely comparative.

Talbot had lived through endless hours of anguish during those few terrible moments of suspense.

And the pool still refused to disclose its secret. Talbot's straining eyes could see no sign of Tom Merry, look where he would.

He closed firm lips over his set teeth and resolved to wait no longer. He would search the depths of the pool for what he could not find on the surface.

To his own peril he gave no thought.

Yet he was taking a desperate risk in venturing into the icy, seething water, deep as a pit and full of treacherous currents powerful enough to overcome his strongest efforts if he suffered himself to be caught in their grasp. And then there was the deadly peril of the weeds.

He dropped down from the bridge on to the steep bank of the dam, and climbed down to the level of the water. It was impossible to dive straight into the pool from the bridge because of the long sluice-channel.

Talbot had nearly reached a point from which he could have plunged in when he heard a shout from somewhere above his head.

He threw back his head and looked towards the only possible place from which the sound could have originated—the gloomy, forbidding old mill itself, that towered high above him.

It was a three-story building, with five or six long-shuttered windows breaking the monotony of the huge

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expanse of brickwork that rose directly from the mill-pool. It was towards these that Talbot looked.

There was no sign of life about them. They were like great blind eyes peering sightlessly into the gathering dusk.

Then something moved high up against the roof, and Talbot saw that there were two tiny windows, almost invisible from below, right under the eaves.

A figure was climbing swiftly out of one, and even as Talbot caught sight of it he swung himself by means of a projecting balk of timber to the roof.

"I see him! Go in below the mill and help me out!"

The words came floating down to Talbot, who at once realised the intention of the speaker. He turned and commenced to scramble back to the bridge.

In spite of himself, he could not resist the temptation to turn his head for a brief instant.

The figure on the roof straightened itself, took as secure a foothold as the sloping roof permitted, standing for a brief second silhouetted against the evening sky, swayed backward from the knees, and then launched itself out from the high roof of the mill in a magnificent dive that ended in a clean-cut plunge into the very centre of the mill-pool.

Talbot leaped upwards, clutched the planks of the bridge, hoisted himself on to it, and ran swiftly round the mill to the lower ground beyond.

He cast a hasty glance over the pool.

The unknown diver had just come to the surface, but not, as Talbot judged, for the first time. He trod water for a few moments, and again plunged under the surface.

As his throw-up feet disappeared, Talbot dived in and trudged swiftly towards the spot.

He was suddenly conscious of a violent commotion in the water below him, as something rose directly beneath him, forcing him to turn over and kick out vigorously in a new direction.

He spluttered and cleared the water from his eyes with a quick shake of the head.

The first thing he saw was the face of Tom Merry, as white as newly-laundered linen, his eyelids fast closed.

Talbot breathed a swift prayer of thanksgiving, for all that he was stricken with fear at Tom's ghastly appearance.

"Can—can you hang on t-t-to him f-f-for a bit?" inquired a voice breathlessly. "I—I I'm about d-done, and he—he's a dead weight."

The water swirled round Talbot as he made a rapid stroke that brought him to the side of Tom Merry and the unknown rescuer.

He trod water for a second, took Tom Merry under the armpits from behind, and turned on his back.

"Thanks!" panted the unknown, breathing jerkily, in great gulps. It was obvious that he was fairly near exhausted himself. "Let the current carry you along—only for Heaven's sake mind the weeds!"

Talbot realised that both the advice and the warning were worth taking.

The water in that part of the pool was moving swiftly towards the river beyond, and it was better to swim with it than to attempt to cut across it and reach the nearest bank.

In a few moments they would be able to—

Talbot felt a clutch at his ankle. He kicked out vigorously, and failed to free himself. His other foot was caught by something that coiled round his ankle.

He was helpless. He could not use his hands, with which he was holding Tom Merry's head above the water. And his feet were gripped as tightly as by a vice.

The pressure of the current forced him under. He made a desperate effort and came to the top again for a moment, gasping and spluttering.

He knew well what had happened. His legs had been caught by some of the strong, clinging weeds that filled the mill-pool.

It was impossible for him to release himself without the use of his hands—nay, more, without his hands he could not even keep afloat.

And he could not make use of his hands without letting Tom Merry go, to sink below the surface from where it would be unlikely that he could be rescued a second time.

Yet if Talbot did not free himself from the deadly grip of the weeds, he would drown.

He could not even call out for help from the unknown who had rescued Tom Merry. His head was under water four seconds out of every five.

Talbot of the Shell was drowning!

Yet he still clung to Tom Merry and held his chum's head out of the water.

The water pounded in his ears, and his lungs felt as if they would burst.

Suddenly he felt something clutch his ankle tightly.

Another weed?

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No, it was a hand. Fingers fumbled with the strands that held him captive.

One leg was at liberty! A few seconds afterwards the other leg was freed!

Talbot came to the surface, and gulped air into his tortured lungs as the unknown rescuer of Tom Merry, who had at last seen his peril, and dived to tear the weeds from around his limbs, rose beside him.

He kicked out again with his feet, and the current bore him down to where the pool narrowed to the river.

A minute later he was clinging with one hand to the overhanging branch of a tree on the river bank.

CHAPTER 2.

The Old Mill!

IT was no easy task for two exhausted boys—for when he had an opportunity for glancing at him, Talbot saw the unknown was a boy of about his own age—to get the unconscious captain of the Shell out of the river and on to the bank.

But they accomplished it at last, by dint of strenuous exertions, and, aided by the fact that the bank was firm and almost level with the surface of the river at this particular point.

Tom Merry's eyelids flickered when his rescuers laid him down on the short grass and commenced to rub his chilled limbs, heedless of their own fatigue and cold-numbed bodies.

"Good!" said the unknown, in a tone of satisfaction.

"He's beginning to come round. He must have had a nasty crack on the head when he fell."

"You saw him fall in, then?" said Talbot inquiringly, glancing up rather curiously at his companion.

The other nodded briefly.

"Yes!" he replied. "He went down like a stone as soon as he struck the water. Jolly good job he'd got light-coloured running togs on. They showed up in the water. Of course, I was in a much better position than you to see down into the pool."

They were vigorously chafing Tom's legs.

"I don't think I ever saw anything as plucky as your dive," commenced Talbot warmly. "It—"

"Rot!" interrupted the other. "It was nothing! You were just going to do the same thing. I happened to be better placed, and I can swim like a fish, anyway. The weeds were the worst. Your pal was caught in them. I had to dive three times before I could get hold of him. The place is a death-trap!"

Talbot, remembering his experiences of the weeds fresh in his mind, shuddered.

The boy was quick to observe it.

"You're feeling the cold," he said, in a concerned voice.

"I think we'd better—Hullo, your pal's beginning to sit up and take notice!"

To Talbot's unspeakable joy, Tom Merry had indeed opened his eyes, and was gazing round him in a puzzled, uncomprehending fashion.

His hand went wearily to his head, on the side of which a lump was forming where it had come into contact with the stonework.

"W-w-what happened?" murmured Tom feebly. "I—I— Oh, I remember now. The rail gave way. I fell into the pool, didn't I? Who fetched me out?"

There was a few moments' silence. Talbot looked towards Tom's rescuer as though urging him to speak, but he merely shrugged his shoulders slightly, and looked away.

"Did you go in after me?" asked Tom Merry, his eyes on Talbot.

"No!" disclaimed Talbot, shaking his head. "It was this—this chap here. I don't know his name, so if that sounds a bit curt, I'm sorry."

The boy smiled rather bitterly.

"This chap" is quite good enough for me!" he said indifferently. "I've been called worse things than that."

Tom Merry struggled up and held out a rather shaky hand.

"Thanks!" he said simply.

The other boy flushed and held out his own hand rather awkwardly. It was obvious that he had a healthy horror of anything approaching a "scene."

"Rot!" he muttered curtly, with evident embarrassment. "I did nothing out of the way." He looked across at Talbot.

"You're telling crams, you know. You did go in after your pal."

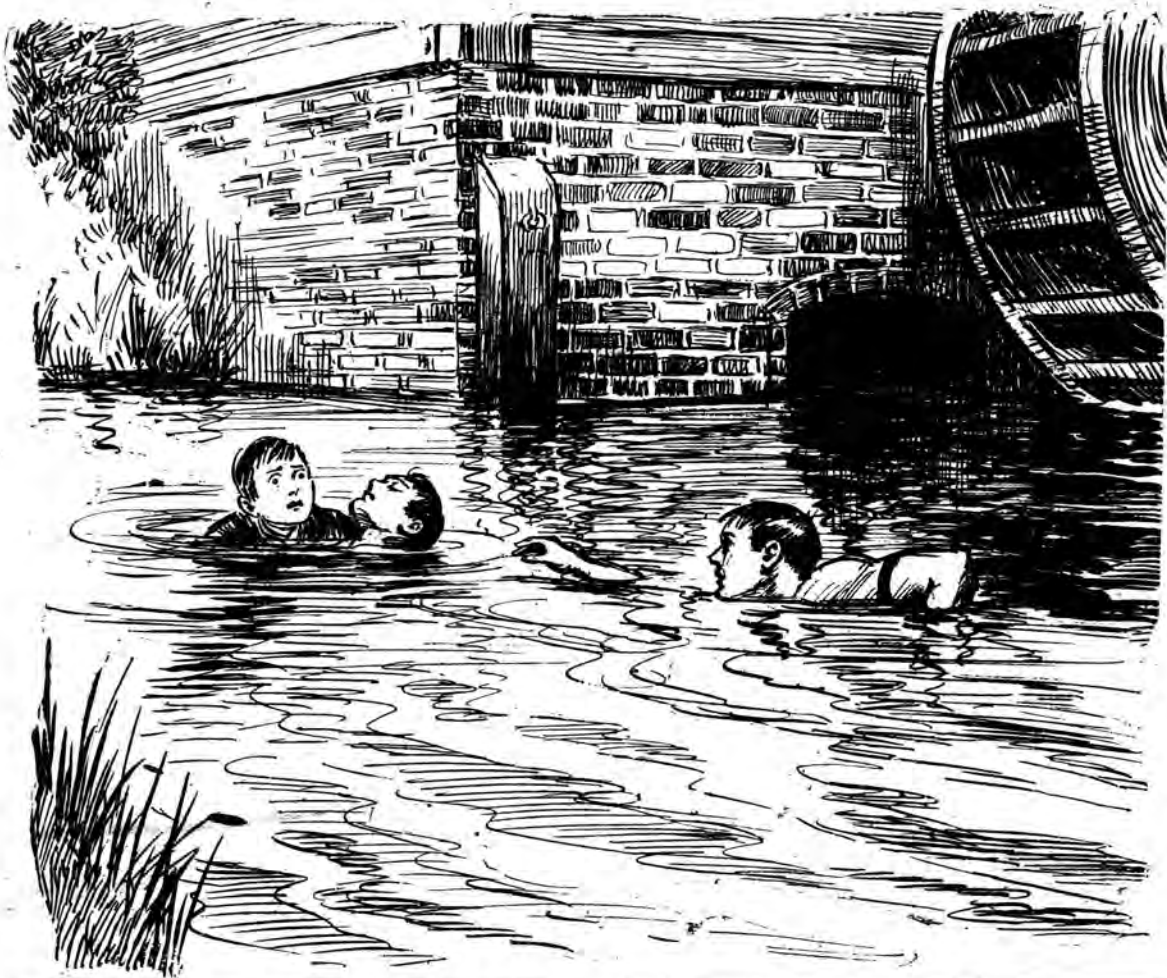
"I only helped to carry him to the bank," protested Talbot.

"You came thumping near being drowned among the weeds, though, didn't you?"

"If I did, it was you who rescued me," returned Talbot steadily.

"Oh, shut up!" growled the other, in a disgusted tone.

"What's it matter, anyway? I don't suppose there'll be any medals given away, and if there were I shouldn't put in a



"Can—can you hang on t—t—to him f—f—for a bit?" inquired a voice, breathlessly. "I—I—I'm about d—done, and h—he's a dead weight!" The waters swirled round Talbot as he made a rapid stroke that brought him to the side of Tom Merry and the unknown rescuer. (See page 4).

claim. Your pal's safe, and that's all there is to it as far as I'm concerned."

"Yes, but—" began Tom Merry.

"For goodness' sake don't let's have any more jawing about it," interrupted the other in a manner that virtually amounted to a snub. "You two fellows can't be hanging about in wet togs on a cold day like this, and for the matter of that, I don't want to, either!"

"We ought to be getting on towards St. Jim's," said Talbot. "A good sharp sprint—"

The stranger laughed shortly and glanced towards Tom Merry.

"He looks as if he's prepared to sprint a mile or so, doesn't he?" he commented satirically. "A clump on the head and a minute at the bottom of a pool of icy water makes most fellows feel as fit as fiddles, I suppose. What you two chaps want is a rub down and a drop of something warm—and at once, too!"

"That's so!" assented Talbot. "And as soon as we get back to St. Jim's we shall—"

"You can't go back in that condition!" put in the stranger decidedly. "That's settled! Your pal here couldn't do more than crawl, and by the time you reached the school he'd be booked for a dose of pneumonia. You'll have to come into the mill. I must take the risk," he added, in an undertone, as though speaking to himself.

"The risk?" queried Talbot, in surprise, having caught the words. "What risk is there in—"

"None as far as you're concerned," returned the stranger brusquely. "I was thinking aloud, that's all. Forget it! Catch hold of your pal's other arm and help him along!"

The three of them soon reached the mill, the door of which was standing wide open.

There was nothing unusual in this. The door always did stand open, since the place was a derelict ruin in which no one had lived within the memory of anybody at St. Jim's—with the possible exception of Taggles, the porter.

Therefore the suggestion of the stranger that the juniors should go into the old mill rather than set out for St. Jim's had considerably mystified Talbot.

Was it possible that the boy was really living in the place?

It seemed a fantastic notion, yet he had talked of "a rub down and something warm" as being essential to the juniors, and immediately afterwards had dissuaded them from making for the school, where these things could be obtained.

The only assumption was that he was in a position to provide such necessities as towels and hot coffee, or something of the kind.

As they stepped through the doorway, Talbot stared curiously around him.

The ground floor consisted of a single apartment, at the far end of which was the rusty machinery for controlling the mill-wheel outside, and harnessing the power of the river to the task of turning the massive mill-stones.

The dull roar of the water falling over the broken paddles of the motionless wheel filled the place with a noise like sustained thunder. The very floor quivered beneath their feet.

To the right of the machinery was a staircase leading presumably to the upper floors. The stranger nodded briefly towards it, and the party made their way in that direction.

As they ascended the dozen or so stairs Talbot noticed they were in a fine state of preservation compared with the rest of the tumbledown structure. They had apparently been constructed of seasoned oak, which had defied the ravages of time and neglect.

Reaching the top, they came out into a smaller room, evidently one of those comprising the residential part of the mill. It was clear that the upper floors, unlike the lower one, were divided up into compartments.

But that was the only difference, for this room was as bare and grimy with dust and dirt as the huge compartment below had proved to be.

By this time Tom Merry was beginning to recover himself to a greater degree, and when the party stepped from the tiny landing into the room he was able to stand without assistance.

"Feeling a bit more fit?" said the stranger. "That's good! Now, look here, you two. I can fix you up with towels and things, but before I go for them I want your promise that neither of you will leave this room while I'm away. I know you're public school fellows, and though I'm not one myself, yet I've met a few in my time; your word's good enough for me."

"Thanks!" said Talbot. "You've got it!"

"That includes mine, of course!" said Tom Merry.

"Good enough!"

The boy turned to leave the room.

He looked back as he reached the door.

"You'd better be taking off your wet-togs," he said over his shoulder. "I shan't be more than a couple of minutes."

He closed the door after him, and the sound of his feet were heard on the stairs.

Talbot paused in the act of stripping off his soaked running-vest and stared at the closed door.

"That's jolly queer," he murmured wonderingly. "He's gone downstairs again. How's he going to get towels in that barn of a place below?"

"Perhaps there are two rooms downstairs," suggested Tom Merry.

Talbot shook his head.

"I'm thumping certain there aren't," he said. "I was expecting to see him go upstairs. Especially as he was there when we first came here."

Tom Merry looked bewildered.

"When we—" he commenced inquiringly.

"As we were crossing the bridge, before you fell into the pool," explained Talbot. "He shouted to me from an upstairs window a few seconds after the rail gave way, while I was trying to see where you were before I dived in."

"An upstairs window?" echoed Tom Merry. "Then how did he—"

Talbot anticipated the question.

"He climbed out of the window and dived from the roof," he replied.

Tom Merry was silent for a moment as he drew upon his memory of the place and measured the height in his mind's eye.

"Pheew!" he whistled softly at length. "He's a plucky beggar, whoever he is. It's a dive I shouldn't care to venture, into a pool like this."

"I'm afraid you'd have been done for if he hadn't taken it," said Talbot quietly. "You were well below the surface, caught in the weeds. And I couldn't see anything of you from where I was."

The door reopened, and the subject of their discussion stepped into the room again. In his arms were two big rough towels and a couple of blankets. He tossed the towels towards the juniors.

"They're not over-clean," he said, "but they're the best I can do for you. You'll have to take things as they come, for once."

"We don't mind that!" smiled Tom Merry.

"I suppose not—for once!" said the other, with the slightly bitter twist of the lips that Talbot had previously noticed.

"It's when you have to make a habit of it that the shoe pinches—till you get accustomed to it. Here are a couple of blankets. If you'll wrap yourselves up in them when you're dry, I'll see what I can do about your togs. What's that?"

He broke off suddenly and stepped to the grimy window, looking out anxiously through a broken shutter.

Tan-tarara! Ta-ra-ra-ra!

"Crumbs!" said Talbot, looking up. "Blake's bugle! And jolly close, too. They'll be here in a minute!"

He wrapped the towel round him and went across to the window. Half a dozen running figures were coming towards the mill. At present they were about three hundred yards away. As Talbot watched them, three or four more appeared over the crest of the hill.

"Friends of yours?"

It was the boy at Talbot's side who had spoken.

"That's so!" answered Talbot. "They're the pack who were following us, you know. We were on a cross-country run, as I suppose you guessed."

The boy nodded.

Tan-tarara!

The notes of Blake's bugle sounded clearer. The leaders of the pack had almost reached the bridge over the mill-dam.

The boy turned suddenly and faced Talbot in the semi-darkness of the room.

"Would you chaps care to do me a favour?" he inquired abruptly.

Talbot regarded him in some astonishment.

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"Why, of course!" he said. "Anything you like! What is it?"

"Simply this! Don't let those fellows know you're here, in the mill!"

"But—"

"If you're going to ask me why, you can save your breath. You either do me the favour of keeping quiet and letting them go by, without knowing my reasons for asking it, or else you do the other thing—call out to them, and make me wish that I'd left you to drown. No," he added, in another tone, as if suddenly realising the full meaning of what he had just said, "I shouldn't wish that, whatever happened; but still—"

"Of course we'll keep quiet, if you want us to," put in Tom Merry. "It's precious little to ask after what you've—"

"It's merely that I don't wish anybody to know I'm living in this place," went on the boy. "I have my reasons for being here, and my reasons for wanting to keep the fact a secret. And while I'm about it I may as well ask you chaps to promise that when you leave here you'll forget all about me and never mention my existence to a living soul."

"But, I say, we can't do that!" expostulated Tom Merry.

"It's absolutely—"

"Why not?"

"Because— Why, hang it, man, you've saved my life this afternoon, and—"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Dash it all, you can't expect us to go away and say nothing at all about one of the most heroic deeds I've ever heard of anybody doing!"

"That's exactly what I do expect you to do," said the boy calmly.

"But—but it's only right that you should get some sort of recognition," began Talbot, to be pulled up short with an almost sneering laugh.

"Recognition? That's the very thing I want least of all. Not that you meant it in that sense, of course. You mean the gallant hero stunt, I suppose? Medal presented by the mayor, and all that sort of Bank Holiday rot. My name—perhaps my photograph—in the paper, eh? No, thanks!"

Talbot looked steadily at him.

"Have you any objection to your name appearing in the paper?" he inquired quietly.

"The only excuse you have for asking such a fool question is that you don't happen to know exactly how much of a fool question it is," returned the other. "It might interest you to know that I've already had the privilege of seeing my name in the public press on several occasions, and I didn't find it pleasant reading. No. If you really do think you owe me a ha'porth of thanks for that spectacular cinema stunt in the pool, you can show your gratitude by keeping quiet about the whole affair."

"We can't very well do that," objected Tom Merry. "The fact that we shall arrive home after the pack will take some explaining, and I don't see what we can say other than the truth."

"Then your chum had better have the credit of the rescue," returned the other indifferently.

Talbot's face flamed.

"Thanks very much! That's no end complimentary!" he said. "Do I look the sort of fellow who'd take credit for somebody else's pluck?"

The other regarded him for a few moments with a rather mocking expression.

"You're St. Jim's fellows, I think you said?" he remarked at length.

"That's so. Why?"

"Oh, I was just thinking that all your fellows aren't so dashed scrupulous."

"Meaning?" inquired Talbot, rather blankly.

"Oh, nothing in particular. Merely thinking aloud, that's all. One of my bad habits, but not the worst of them by any means. I'll make you fellows some coffee. I expect the kettle's boiling by now. And I may as well take your togs and put them where they'll dry."

He picked up the wet running-kit that the juniors had discarded, and moved towards the door. Just as he was stepping out of the door Talbot spoke to him.

"By the way, I believe you said you aren't a public school man?"

"I did, and I'm not. Why?"

"But your accent and bearing are those of a public school."

"And I thought you said you are a public school fellow?"

"I am."

"But your inquisitiveness and silly deductions are those of a fifth-rate private detective. Which only goes to show that it isn't always safe to judge by appearances. I'll be back with the coffee in a minute or two. Don't forget your promise not to leave the room while I'm away."

The door closed behind him.

CHAPTER 3. The End of the Run!

TAN—tarara!
The notes of Blake's bugle did not ring so true as they had done at the commencement of the run, when he had plenty of breath to spare for the job; but if the result of his efforts was not very melodious, it was at least efficacious in holding the pack together.

Blake, Digby, Manners, Lowther, Arthur Augustus, D'Arcy and Levison were bunched together in the van of the pack, with Figgins a few paces behind, abreast with Kerr.

Herries, Julian, Clive, Noble, Dane and Lumley-Lumley were spaced out within a couple of hundred yards or so of the leaders, and after them—a long way after in some cases—straggled a motley assortment of puffing and panting juniors, grimly determined to stick it out to the finish and be in at the death.

There were one or two noteworthy absentees.

George Alfred Grundy was somewhere in the rear—the extreme rear. It would have been very unsafe to hazard a guess as to how many miles away he was. It might have been one—it was possibly five.

In fact, there was every likelihood that he was at that moment pursuing the hares into the next county.

Quite early in the run he had struck out a line of his own, having decided that the trail the pack was following was a false one, laid for the purpose of misleading them while the hares went off in another direction altogether.

It did not occur to him to wonder how the hares could possibly have laid a trail in one direction while they were going in another.

Wilkins and Gunn, of course, had accompanied their leader, though very unwillingly, it is true.

Ralph Reckness Cardew had dropped out at some spot convenient to himself—possibly within the first few hundred yards—and was almost certainly at that moment enjoying himself in some fashion more suited to his particular tastes.

Blake, as whipper-in, ought really to have taken precautions against runners dropping out in that unsatisfactory fashion, but Blake did not take quite that view of his duties. He was far too keen on being in at the death himself to have any time to waste upon weaklings, slackers and born idiots, as he would have promptly informed anybody who had been sufficiently ill-advised to discuss the matter with him.

His chief anxiety as they drew near to the mill was not how the rest of the pack were faring, but the amount of lead the hares had got.

For the last mile or so the trail had been very thinly laid, showing that Tom Merry and Talbot were running short of paper. Blake, however, wasn't worrying about that matter. Once the pack reached the other side of the river they were at liberty to make straight for St. Jim's, trail or no trail.

"When we get across that bridge we shall have to put the pace on," he said breathlessly.

"What are we supposed to be doing now?" panted Monty Lowther sarcastically. "Sauntering, I suppose?"

"No; we're running at Shell pace," retorted Blake. "In a couple of minutes we shall be hitting up a Fourth Form gait, and that'll be the last you Shell duffers will see of the rest of us between here and St. Jim's."

"I'll bet I know a couple of Shell chaps you won't see till you get to St. Jim's," put in Manners—"Tom Merry and Talbot."

"Rats!" snapped Blake, shortly and elegantly.



GEORGE GORE.

Shares Study No. 9 in the Shell passage with Reginald Talbot and Herbert Skimpole, the genius of the Form. Was at one time one of the worst eads at St. Jim's. Although a much better fellow now, Gore is still inclined to be a bit of a bully. Owes a great debt of gratitude to Talbot, for whom he would do more than for any other fellow in the school. Can play footer, but is not good enough to gain a regular position in the Junior XI. Is also fairly skilful with the gloves.

"Take it easy across the bridge," warned Levison. "It's a shaky old box o' tricks. Good grief, part of the hand-rail's missing!"

"Bai Jove! I wondah it doesn't weceive pwopah attention. It is positively dangerous, y'know."

The juniors picked their way carefully across the frail structure.

Blake was leading, and just as he reached the other side he bent down and picked up something from under a bush.

"I say, this is a bit too thick!" he protested. "Here's an empty 'scent' bag! One of the cheeky blighters has actually chucked it down!"

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "What feahful cheek!"

"Dash it! Do they think we're giddy porters?" went on Blake in an aggrieved voice. "I've a good mind to leave the thing where it was!"

"Can't do that," put in Monty Lowther. "Scent-bags cost money!"

"I know they do. And the Shell chump who dropped this one ought to be made to pay for another. Brr-rrr-rrr!"

"It's a funny thing for them to do," said Levison thoughtfully. "Dashed queer, in fact!"

"They might have put it there as a sign to us that they've run out of paper," suggested Kerr. "You see, there's no trail beyond this point."

"Oh, come on!" snapped Blake. "We can't waste time. I shouldn't wonder if those Shell fish didn't plant it here to make silly asses lose time arguing about it."

"Well, I like that!" said Manners indignantly. "Who started the—"

Tan-tarara! Ta-ra-ra-rara!

The strident notes of Blake's bugle effectively blotted out the conclusion of Manners' protest as the pack moved off again.

"I'll bet they're not far in front," vowed Blake. "Ten to one they really chucked the bag away to lighten themselves for the run-in. I expect they heard my bugle and know we're gaining on them, and they've got the wind up."

"I dare say you're right," panted Lowther, for all that breath was precious to him just then. "That bugle is enough to put the wind up anybody."

"Oh, shut up!" gasped Blake. "Use your legs, not your jaw!"

They were now going through the gate leading into the lane, and with a better surface under their feet they redoubled their effort and swept along with swift moving feet and thrown-back heads.

Every time they turned a bend they looked to see if their quarry was in sight, but always did the lane show up lonely and deserted before them.

When the towers of St. Jim's were showing in the distance between the tree-tops, Blake began to realise that he had been wrong in his conclusions. The hares could not have been so hard pressed as he had assumed on the evidence of the discarded scent-bag.

He did not, however, despair. After all, they had scarcely expected when they started out that they would actually catch up with the hares. The main thing was, by how much could they reduce the lead that Tom Merry and Talbot had received? But if they could reach St. Jim's within ten minutes after the Shell fellows had arrived, the honours were to the pack.

There was a stern tussle for the leadership of the pack during the last few hundred yards, which resulted in Lowther and Figgins arriving at the gates in a dead-heat. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was only a few paces behind, with a whole

bunch of runners-up, Blake, Manners, Clive, Lumley-Lumley, Levison, and Digby at his heels.

A dozen Third-Formers were clustered at the gates to watch the finish of the run, together with a couple of the Fifth-Formers and several of the unathletic fellows of the Fourth and Shell.

Kildare also stood there with a puzzled expression on his face, and he stepped forward at the same moment that the little crowd of fags came rushing up to surround the newcomers.

"Where's Tom Merry?" called out Curly Gibson.

"Where's Talbot?" yelled Manners minor.

"Shut up, you fags!" snapped Kildare impatiently.

"What does this mean, Blake? Where are Merry and Talbot?"

The runners stared at Kildare in amazement.

"T—T—Tom Merry!" stuttered Blake. "T—T—Talbot! Why—why, they— Aren't they here?"

Kildare made a gesture of impatience.

"Of course they're not!" he said curtly. "Do you suppose I should ask you where they are if they were here? Mean to say you haven't seen anything of them?"

"Not a sign," replied Blake. "My only aunt! This is a new stunt, isn't it, when the pack get home before the hares? This is what comes of letting Shell duffers lay the trail. I suppose they've lost themselves!"

"Humph! There's something queer about this!" said Kildare in a worried voice. "I can't understand it. Have you fellows followed the trail all the way?"

"Absolutely," replied Blake. "At least, so long as there was a trail to follow. As far as the old mill, that is. Afterwards there wasn't one. They'd run out of paper. But, of course, that didn't matter once we were this side of the river."

"Well, it looks to me very much as if something was wrong," said Kildare anxiously. "Look here! Half a dozen of you cut back to the place where you last saw the paper actually on the ground, and look out for any sign of them on the way. Be back here within half an hour, and then if you haven't seen anything of them, or they haven't turned up, I shall have to put the matter before Mr. Railton."

Manners and Lowther, as Tom Merry's chums, naturally included themselves in the party. Levison asked to be taken, while Arthur Augustus insisted upon going.

They met a number of stragglers panting towards St. Jim's, but none of these could give any information regarding the missing hares.

Half-way to the mill Blake stopped suddenly, with an annoyed exclamation.

"Dash it all, I forgot to tell Kildare about that scent-bag!" he said. "Never mind, I can mention it when we get back, if the mystery isn't cleared up by then."

It was not long before the mill loomed up, gaunt and forbidding in the gathering dusk. But there had been no sign of Tom Merry and Talbot.

"We may as well go right on while we're here," said Blake. "I dare say those Shell bounders are sitting down to tea by now, laughing at us for being mugs enough to come back like this. The last time we saw the trail was when we were the other side of the river. And, by Jingo, that bridge isn't very safe now the handrail's gone, is it? Especially for anybody crossing in the dark."

"I wonder how long it's been like that?" observed Manners. "Months, I dare say."

"It hasn't," came Levison's voice quietly. "My young brother and I came for a walk in this direction on Sunday, and it was all right then. It's been broken quite recently."

"What?" gasped Monty Lowther, in a startled voice.

He was the only one who spoke, but each of the juniors was conscious of a sudden chill of horror at his heart on hearing Levison's statement.

They stood by the gap in the rail and stared down into the wide, deep pool.

Each had the same thought in his mind: Suppose Tom Merry and Talbot were somewhere in those dark depths? Suppose the broken handrail was a mute testimony to some terrible tragedy that had occurred within the last hour? But that dreadful thought was not put into words.

"We might as well have a look over the mill," suggested Levison abruptly.

"Good notion!" approved Blake in an exaggeratedly cheerful voice.

He was grateful to Levison for having broken the oppressive silence that had descended upon them.

Blake & Co. found the big ground-floor room, with its ponderous machinery, gloomy and deserted, and went up the old staircase to the next floor, which was divided into four smaller rooms. These were as empty and deserted as the room below. Another flight of stairs, not so well preserved as the first, led to more empty rooms on the next floor. Rats squealed and scuttled as the St. Jim's juniors walked from room to room.

A loft ladder enabled them to gain two attics under the

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eaves, with a small open window in each. They were as bare as the downstairs rooms had proved to be.

"Ugh!" shivered Blake. "It's as cold as an ice-house in here! Let's be getting back."

The juniors spoke very little on the return journey.

When they reached the gates Kildare was standing in the lane waiting for them. He looked them over eagerly, and the muscles about his mouth tightened as he saw their number.

"No luck?" he said quietly.

"None," replied Blake. "Haven't they—"

"They haven't come in," said Kildare. "I'm going to report to Mr. Railton. He's with the Head. You'd better go and get some tea."

The six juniors walked through the gates and across the quadrangle in the dusk.

Monty Lowther reached out, found Manners' arm, and pressed it gently. Manners did not even look up. He was thinking, as was Monty Lowther, of that deep, dark pool, with the gap in the handrail of the bridge above it.

Blake, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, Digby, and Levison turned aside at the Fourth Form corridor without speaking.

They had no words; neither was it a time for words.

Manners and Lowther walked on to Study No. 10 in the Shell passage.

There was no fire in the grate, and they did not turn on the light.

Monty Lowther went across and stood against the window, looking out with unseeing eyes into the dark quad. Manners stood against the table. He made a sudden quick movement.

"Tea!" he said bitterly, and dropped into the armchair sobbing.

Monty Lowther still stood by the window motionless.

When Darrell of the Sixth looked into the study at half-past nine he found the chums still in the dark. They had not even changed out of running-gear. It was more than possible they had not moved at all.

Very gently Darrell reminded them it was time to go to bed.

CHAPTER 4.

"Snide Sam."

TALBOT and Tom Merry quickly wrapped themselves up in the two blankets, and sat down upon the bare wooden floor to await the return of the stranger with the promised coffee.

They were glowing from the effects of the brisk rub-down to which they had subjected themselves, but Tom Merry's head was aching dreadfully as a result of the blow he had sustained.

"Queer sort of fellow," said Talbot reflectively. "I don't quite know what to make of him. I've got an impression he's seen a little of the rough side of life, and it has soured him more than a bit."

Tom Merry nodded.

"He's the right stuff, though, no doubt about that," said the Shell captain. "A chap who'd risk his life for a stranger as he did isn't likely to be much of a rotter!"

"That's so!" agreed Talbot. "Though I've met with pluck in some very unpromising quarters."

"I dare say!" was Tom Merry's comment. "I suppose very few people are absolutely rotten to the core."

He knew that Talbot had seen life from many angles. The Shell fellow had passed through experiences that very few boys of his age has passed.

At one time he had not only lived in the underworld, but he had been an integral part of that furtive and mysterious region generally termed "criminal circles."

Indeed, it was not so long since Talbot of the Shell had been a protégé of the leader of one of the most daring and skillfully organised gangs of international criminals, and had been valued for his precocious ability as a manipulator of locks. In those days he had been known far and wide, among that section of the community that seeks to gain wealth by means at variance with the law, as "The Toff."

But those days had gone for ever, and the erstwhile leader of the gang and patron of Talbot of the Shell—John Rivers once known as "The Professor," was now a trusted servant of Scotland Yard, having redeemed himself and gained the right to make a fresh start in life by virtue of his gallantry on the stricken fields of Flanders.

Sometimes Talbot's thoughts strayed back to that period of his life, and occasionally the shadow of it had fallen across his path in these happier days at St. Jim's.

His experiences had sharpened his wits to an almost preternatural degree, and at the present moment Talbot was rather puzzled and vaguely apprehensive. He sensed something out of the common in the atmosphere that pervaded the tumble-down old structure in which they were taking temporary refuge.

It was not due entirely to the manner of the unknown boy who had so mysteriously evolved from the apparently deserted mill, though that afforded much food for thought



As the notes of Blake's bugle sounded nearer the unknown boy turned suddenly and faced Tom Merry in the semi-darkness of the room. "Don't let those fellows know you're here, in the mill," he pleaded. "But—" "If you're going to ask me why, you can save your breath. Call out to them, and you'll make me wish I'd left you to drown!" (See page 6.)

to such a student of human nature as Talbot, by inclination and training, undoubtedly was. Nor was it due to the amazing discovery that a boy was living in such a place, and so evidently anxious to keep his presence secret.

These circumstances merely served to heighten the impression that had been made on Talbot's mind that there was an air of mystery about the place, a vague intangible—

Talbot pulled himself up sharply. He was letting his thoughts run away with him in the most fantastic manner.

The explanation was probably that the boy was destitute—or practically so, and glad to make use of any kind of shelter that he could obtain. Naturally he had no wish to advertise his presence, for fear that the owner of the property, or the police, would eject him.

His bitterness might well have been bred by adversity, and some sort of ill-fortune. He spoke like an educated fellow, and had undoubtedly enjoyed at least comparative prosperity at one time or another—possibly quite recently.

But even then—well, Talbot realised that the theory did not really fit in with all the facts.

For instance, the blankets in which the two juniors were wrapped, were of excellent quality, and had probably cost a couple of pounds or so the pair. They were certainly not the kind a destitute sojourner in a ruined building would be likely to possess. Of course, they might be stolen, but Talbot's opinion was that the stranger was not a thief, whatever else he might be.

And then there was the amazing circumstance of his descending into a bare, empty room and returning with towels and blankets, and talking of a fire, before which clothes might be dried, and hot coffee.

There was a footstep on the stairs.

The stranger was returning.

He stepped into the room carefully carrying a jug of coffee and two large mugs, which he set down on the floor against them.

"Here you are!" he said. "I've sweetened it and put milk in. Sorry I haven't anything better to offer you to drink out of. I've brought a tablet in case Tom Merry would like—that is, your chum," he amended hastily, and stopped abruptly as he caught the eye of Talbot who was regarding him with amazement.

"Tom Merry!" echoed Talbot. "How do you know that—"

But the boy had recovered himself.

"He may wish to take it if his head is bad," he went on steadily, disregarding Talbot's half-spoken question. "Sorry I can't stop now! I'll bring your tugs up as soon as they're dry. I expect you'll be wanting to get off again as soon as possible."

"But—"

Slam!

The door had closed behind the stranger.

Tom Merry was already pouring out the coffee.

"That's dashed peculiar," said Talbot, staring at the closed door. "Did you hear that chap call you by name?"

"Yes," replied Tom Merry casually. "What about it? I suppose you spoke to me while you were helping me into the mill. Can't say I heard you mention my name, but I was dizzy most of the time and don't remember much anyway."

Talbot shook his head.

"I'm prepared to swear I didn't once make use of your name," he said.

"You must be mistaken, old chap," grinned Tom Merry. "It stands to sense you must have done. How would he know it, otherwise? Hark, what's that?"

There was the sound of feet moving about in the room below. The two juniors held their breath and listened. Voices were to be heard indistinctly. At least, two people were talking, and neither voice was that of the boy.

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Talbot and Tom Merry looked wonderingly at each other through the gloom.

Then somebody came up the stairs, the door was flung open with some violence, and a man stood on the threshold peering into the room. It was several moments before his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, enabling him to see the juniors.

"Blazes!" he gritted savagely. Then he raised his voice. "Hi, there, Sam! There's somebody 'ere. Come up, quick!"

"What!" came the reply in a rough, startled voice. "Who is it?"

"Ow do I know, yer fool! Come up, I tell yer!"

He struck a match, and the flame revealed a heavy, coarse face under a cloth cap. The man uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

"S'welp me, if it ain't a couple o' kids!"

"Wot's that?"

Another man had clattered up the stairs and was now peering into the room.

"Couple o' kids! That's all! But 'ow the crimson 'eck they come to be 'ere is more than I— Hey, you young rats, who told yer as yer could—"

He was interrupted by a sudden cry from the second man.

"Ain't them our blankets?"

"Wot! Why, perish me if they ain't! Now, 'ow the blazes 'ave they got 'old o' them?"

"That there other young 'ound, I'll lay a dollar!" broke in the second man, with a violent oath. "I told the boss as it weren't safe to trust 'im."

"E'll get flayed alive for this," declared the first man furiously. "I bet— 'Ere 'e comes!"

More footsteps sounded on the stairs. The first man stepped into the room, taking an electric torch from the hand of his companion, who turned to grasp the newcomer as he reached the head of the stairs.

"Bring 'im in 'ere, Sam!" gritted the man with the torch. "Twist 'is dratted neck if 'e won't come quiet."

"I've got 'im, Blakey!" replied Sam grimly. "Now, then, yer young rip, wot's this 'ere mean, eh?"

By the light of the torch the astonished juniors saw the boy struggling in the grasp of the man who had been addressed as "Sam."

"Let me go!" panted the lad. "You bullying cad! It's nothing whatever to do with you, these fellows being here."

"Ho, ain't it?" said Blakey ominously. "We'll see about that! When the boss comes, 'e'll—"

"If I know anything of the boss, he'll chaw you two fools up pretty thoroughly for making a fuss about nothing," retorted the boy scornfully. "If you'd—"

"Shut up!" growled Sam, striking the boy across the mouth to enforce the injunction. "Now, then, 'oo are these 'ere youngsters—pals o' yourn?"

"No!" returned the boy quietly. "They're not!"

"I s'pose you'll be sayin' next as it weren't you as brought 'em in 'ere an' give 'em our blankets?" said Blakey, with heavy irony.

"Look here," commenced Tom Merry. "What's all this—"

He was checked from an unexpected quarter. A hand pressed his arm, and he turned his head to see Talbot staring through the gloom at the men, a peculiar expression on his face.

The three by the door ignored Tom Merry's interruption.

"I brought them in here," confessed the boy steadily. "They had an accident—fell into the pool. One of them struck his head badly, and they were both wet through and chilled to the bone. I only did what anybody with a spark of decency would have done—brought them in here and let them rub themselves down while their togs were drying."

"Yer blamed fool!" rasped Blakey. "A fine mess you've made o' things, ain't yer?"

"Let's 'ave a look at 'em, anyway," said the other man. "Shine that light over 'ere 'arf a mo, Blakey."

The electric torch was turned on the two juniors. Tom Merry sat blinking in the sudden radiance. Talbot lifted the corner of the blanket as though to shield his eyes.

"'Oo are yer?" snapped Sam roughly. "Village kids?"

"No," replied Tom Merry; "we're not. We're from the school."

"Oh, the school, eh? That there place they call St. Jim's? Wot's yer name?"

"Look here, I don't see what the thump—"

"It don't matter to me wot yer see or wot yer don't see. I want to know wot yer name is?"

"Well, if you must know, my name's Tom Merry, and if you'll let us have our togs, we'll—"

"An' yer pal—wot's 'is monnicker?"

Talbot made no reply. Neither did he lift his head.

"Eh, you!" snarled the man. "I'm talkin' to yer! Ain't deaf, I s'pose?"

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"My name is Talbot," came the curt reply from the folds of the blanket.

"Oh, yer name's Talbot, is it?" mimicked the man. "Well, Mister Bloomin' Talbot, let's 'ave a look at yer face!"

He stepped across and put his hand on Talbot's head, forcing the junior's face into the beam of light from the torch.

For a moment he stood staring down at Talbot, then he stepped back with a loud-mouthed imprecation of utter amazement.

"Good gad!" he said. "Ef it ain't the 'Toff'!"

CHAPTER 5.

The Secret of the Mill!

THERE was a few moments' tense silence in the little room.

It was broken by the man who had been addressed as Blakey.

"The Toff?" he echoed wonderingly. "Who's the Toff, eh?"

Sam turned his head in the direction of the speaker.

"Mean to say as yer 'a' not never 'eard o' the Toff!" he said. "Lumme, where was yer brought up—in Timbuctoo? 'E's the kind wot used to belong to the 'Perfesser's' gang—'im wot's a copper's mark now. I s'pose yer've 'eard of 'im, anyway? Rivers 'is real name is. Well, w'en the Perfesser chucked 'is 'and in—got cold feet, 'e did, an' backed out the game—the gang broke up, an' this 'ere kid was sent to school. Not as 'e wanted any schoolin', 'im knowin' more nor any two put together, in a manner o' speakin'. I were in the stone jug w'en it all 'appened, but I 'eard all about it after I come out, though I never did 'ear the rights on it. Them as could talk wouldn't, and them wot knew nothink was shooting their mouths about wot they didn't know. I never 'eard wot school the Toff went to. It was this 'ere St. Jim's place, o' course. An' now 'e's 'ere. Come to visit 'is old pal." The ruffian chuckled. "You remember me, don't yer, Toff? Yer knows Snide Sam all right, eh?"

"It isn't a memory I care to dwell on," Talbot assured him scornfully.

"Now, that ain't nice between old pals," protested the man, in a voice of mock reproach. "Why, in the old days you an' me was—"

The other man ripped out a furious oath.

"Quit this 'ere foolin'!" he snarled. "This 'ere is a pretty kettle o' fish, ain't it? If that there blamed kid's wot you say 'e is, the game's cooked!"

"Eh?" said Snide Sam. "Don't yer believe it, Blakey. Nothink o' the kind. The Toff ain't the one to give 'is old pals away, are yer, Toff?"

"Don't be a fool!" snapped Blakey. "Yer say yerself as 'e's turned goody-goody, an' that 'e's a pal o' that there cursed 'tec, Rivers. It's likely as 'e'll keep 'is mouth shut, ain't it? 'E knows you, an' he knows yer lay, an' 'e must 'ave 'eard about them notes, so 'e must know what our game is."

"It's all right, Blakey," said Sam soothingly. "The Toff ain't goin' to give 'is old pal away."

"No, he ain't," agreed Blakey grimly. "An' shall I tell yer why? 'Cause he ain't goin' to get the chance!"

The last words were uttered in such a tone of deadly significance that his hearers drew in their breaths sharply and audibly. There was something chilling about the words and the manner in which they had been spoken.

Even Snide Sam was startled.

"I say, Blakey," he protested nervously, "I ain't goin' to stand for no—"

"Stow yer gab, yer white-livered maunger!" hissed Blakey. "I'm seein' to this 'ere business. Now, then, you two," he went on, taking something from his pocket and making an ominous clicking noise with it, "get up!"

"Look here," said Tom Merry indignantly, "the best thing you can do is—"

"Shut up!" snarled the ruffian. "I know the best thing to do, so yer needn't worry." The object in his hand glittered in the light of the torch as he moved it forward.

"Get down them stairs—quick!"

Tom Merry looked towards Talbot, who was staring towards the man with the revolver as though endeavouring to gauge how far in earnest he was, and how much bluff there was in his attitude. For a few seconds he stood thus, and then he shrugged his shoulders lightly and moved towards the stairs.

Snide Sam chuckled softly.

"That's right, Toff," he leered. "Glad to see yer ain't lost yer sense. Always had plenty of it, didn't yer, especially for a kid?"

"Will yer shut yer row?" rasped Blakey. "Go in front of 'em, yer chatterin' fool, an' see they don't play no tricks on the way down. It won't pay 'em to try, neither. Bear that in mind, yer young rips. Yer've bin in that there pool once ter-day, an' yer can take it from me if yer give any trouble

yer'll go back there—only next time yer won't get out agin'!"

Tom Merry could not repress a slight shudder as he heard the threat. He had few doubts regarding the ruffian's being capable of carrying it out.

They filed down the stairs, and when they reached the bottom Snide Sam halted them. The bigger man came last, with the other boy in front of him. The revolver was very much in evidence, and it was clear that he was determined to take no chances.

Tom Merry was utterly bewildered by the turn of events, though he suspected that Talbot had some idea of what it all meant. At the present moment there was no opportunity for making inquiries, though, and Tom had to be content with letting matters take their course. It was obvious that any sort of resistance was out of the question.

"Now then, open up, Sam!" commanded Blakey curtly.

Snide Sam bent down and put his hand to the panelling of the staircase. The juniors heard a slight click, and then Sam grasped the bottom step and lifted it upwards. A section of the stairs comprising the whole of the first four steps swung over on a sort of hinge, revealing an opening from which emanated a faint light.

The juniors stared in astonishment, but Talbot was possibly the less surprised of the two. He had been expecting something of the kind.

The juniors were urged forward. Snide Sam went first, and, following him closely, they stepped over the edge of the trap and found their feet on a flight of narrow, steep stairs that led downwards.

When they reached the bottom they were standing in a short, narrow, bricked passage, from which they emerged into a sort of cellar, fairly large, in extent, and lit by a large lamp of the vapoised paraffin type.

A stove stood in one corner, while there were two camp bedssteads ranged along one wall, with a long wooden bench against another.

A mattress, with some blankets rolled up on it, occupied a far corner, and in the centre of the room was a piece of mechanism that looked like a small printing-press. Talbot's eyes fell upon this as soon as they entered the place, and he nodded to himself in the manner of one who has just had some assumption verified.

"Goin' to tie 'em up?" inquired Snide Sam, turning to Blakey, who had entered last.

Blakey shook his head grimly.

"No need. They won't get out o' here in a hurry—none on 'em," he added, with a malevolent glance towards the third boy, who stood by in an indifferent attitude. "I'm goin' back to meet the boss, an' you'd better come with me."

"All right," agreed Sam readily. "But 'ow about—"

"I'm goin' to shut the safety door," said Blakey, understanding the thought that was in the mind of his companion. "They'll be all right till we get back. Come on!"

And the two men, taking no further notice of the boys, went back along the corridor, from the direction of which a low thudding noise was heard a few moments later, as if a heavy door had been swung into place.

Talbot and Tom Merry glanced inquiringly towards the other boy.

"They've closed and locked the door at the foot of the stairs," he announced in a casual, unconcerned voice. "No use trying to break it down; it's made of steel. We're here all right till they choose to let us out."

Talbot and Tom Merry crossed over to the corridor and found themselves checked at a door which sealed up the passage near to where the foot of the concealed stairs must have been.

They returned to the cellar.

"What the dickens does it all mean?" said Tom Merry in a bewildered voice. "From what those chaps said it's something to do with those dud notes, isn't it?"

Talbot pointed to the printing-press in the middle of the cellar.

"It's everything to do with them," he said. "This is the place where they're being made. That fellow, Snide Sam, as he's called, is a counterfeiter. 'Snide' is the slang term for false coinage, and he generally dealt, in the old days, with the uttering of debased coin of the realm—half-crowns, two-shilling pieces, and even sovereigns and half-sovereigns, when such coins were in general use. But he's a skilful engraver, in addition to his other accomplishments, and it appears that he's turned his attention to the production of forged Treasury notes."

"Great Scott!" gasped Tom Merry. "This is a giddy adventure, no doubt about it. I suppose you guessed all this while we were still upstairs?"

Talbot nodded.

"That's so!—I began to suspect how matters stood as soon as I set eyes on Snide Sam. I hid my face in the blanket in the hope that he wouldn't recognise me. If he

hadn't done, the chances are they'd have let us go. Now, of course—"

He made an expressive gesture.

The other boy broke into the conversation.

"I'm sorry I've let you fellows in for this," he said. "But, of course, I never thought that things would turn out like this. I didn't expect Blakey back for hours. By the way, is it true what Snide Sam said about you? Being a member of the same gang as he was at one time, I mean."

"Not the same gang," corrected Talbot. "It's true I was once—well, it's too long a story to tell now," he broke off.

"We look like having plenty of time to tell long stories," said the other significantly. "You can bet they won't let any of us go in a hurry now. There are your togs over there, against the stove. I expect they're dry by now. You might as well shove them on. I don't suppose the boss will be very long."

"Who is the boss?" inquired Talbot.

"Haven't the faintest idea," was the reply. "Just the boss, that's all I know. A tall, dark, thin fellow, with a small black moustache. Speaks with a slight lisp, and is always very well dressed. I suppose he's what they call a 'gentleman' cracksmen, or something of the kind."

"Hardly that," said Talbot, with a slight smile. "A cracksmen is a burglar, you know, and this fellow appears to be a 'flimsy' worker. Most criminals adopt one type of crime and stick to it."

"Is that so?" said the boy indifferently. "Afraid I don't know much about such things."

Talbot gave him a quick glance, which he observed:

"Wondering what I'm doing here, I suppose?" said the boy. "Well, like you, I've got a story—quite a long one, too. By the way, I suppose I might as well introduce myself. My name's Raymond—Philip Raymond."

He looked from Tom Merry to Talbot in an expectant and almost challenging manner. The junior captain of St. Jim's returned the look with one of polite interest. Talbot was wrinkling his brow as though in an effort to recall something.

"Raymond!" he echoed. "Seems to me I've heard that name before somewhere. Quite lately, too. But I'm hanged if I can think just—"

"Probably in the newspaper," put in Raymond coolly. "There was quite a lot about me three weeks or so ago. That was the time I escaped, you see."

"Escaped?" echoed Tom Merry wonderingly.

"Yes; from Charlesford, you know."

"Charlesford? Why, that's—that's a sort of—of—"

"I suppose you're trying to think of a more pleasant way of saying reformatory, eh?" interrupted Raymond. "Don't bother. I'm not thin-skinned, and it's true, anyway. I've escaped from a reformatory."

CHAPTER 6.

Raymond Tells His Story!

THERE was a short silence in the underground room following upon Philip Raymond's startling announcement.

He shrugged his shoulders slightly, and resumed his story.

"I was sent to Charlesford for theft," he said.

Talbot picked him up quickly.

"But I thought you said you weren't—"

"I said I wasn't a public school chap, didn't I? Strictly speaking, I'm not. I was at a Grammar School. It's one of the best and most famous in the country, though it doesn't happen to rank among the recognised public schools. Cranston, to be exact."

"What?" broke in Tom Merry excitedly. "Cranston Grammar School? Why, we've played footer against them! I'm hanged if I didn't think I'd seen you somewhere before."

"Yes; a year or so ago, wasn't it? I used to play centre-half for the junior team. You licked us two goals to one, I believe."

"You've got a better memory than I have," confessed Tom Merry. "Gad, that explains it. Here's old Talbot been puzzling his brains because you called me by name; it's a very simple explanation after all, isn't it? But you remembered me better than I did you."

Raymond smiled in a curious fashion.

"I've seen you once since then," he said. "However, that doesn't matter. The main thing is, how are we going to get out of this giddy mess?"

"Well, if you don't mind my asking," said Talbot. "Exactly how do you stand in the affair?"

"Yes; I suppose that's puzzling you both," returned Raymond. "You must be wondering which side I'm on, and how far I'm to be trusted."

"Nothing of the sort," said Talbot. "I didn't mean that. Only—"

"Only you wonder how I came to be mixed up with this gang, eh?" said Raymond. "I think the best thing I can do is to spin you chaps the whole yarn, and then you'll have a better idea of how things are. I might as well tell you that I don't expect you to altogether believe me, and I can't say I shall blame you if you don't. Still, that's neither here nor there, and—"

"Why not give us the chance?" suggested Tom Merry quietly.

"All right, then, I will," said Raymond, who appeared to have forsaken his cynical attitude towards everything and everybody, and to be in much better spirits than when the juniors had first entered the mill. "I may as well start at the beginning. I went to Cranston about three years ago—on a scholarship. I haven't any people. My dad was killed in the War, and my mater died soon after—of a broken heart, they say." He was silent for a few moments. "I went to live with some distant relatives. Things weren't over-cheerful. They were always making opportunities for pointing out to me I was practically living on charity, so I bucked up and gained a schol. for Cranston, and got out of it all.

"Things went very well, at first. Of course, there was a bit of unpleasantness from some quarters. I was a schol. fellow, you know, and there were a few snobs in the place. Naturally, I never had much money to play about with—practically none, in fact, till I went in for a Founder's Prize, and came out top of the list. That meant twenty quid, a little fortune for me. I was delighted at the time. Now I wish to heaven I'd never entered the exam-room.

"There was a monitor named Preece who began to take rather an interest in me after I'd won the Founder's Prize. Flattered me no end about my grit and brains, and all that sort of thing, and pretended to sympathise with me for my lack of home and people. I was a trifle bucked, in a silly way, at his taking so much notice of me; and when he promised to give me a few tips about making the most use of the money I listened to him, never realising what he was leading up to."

"We've got one or two fellows of that kind at St. Jim's," put in Talbot understandingly. "Blagging, I suppose?"

"Yes, though I was ass enough not to see it from the start. However, I was fool enough to let him persuade me to put a quid or so on a horse, and it won."

"It would—the first time," murmured Talbot dryly.

"I risked a fiver on the next tip, and it went west. That blunted my keenness for a while, but Preece only laughed, and said it was nothing to worry about—just a little set-back that anybody might get at first. The luck was sure to turn, he said so long as I kept on, and didn't funk it and back out.

"As I say, I'd never had much money, and the sudden wealth had gone to my head a bit. Besides, the suggestion that I was funkng got under my skin, and it wasn't difficult for Preece to persuade me to keep on. But putting money on horses I never saw didn't appeal to me as much fun. I wasn't after money so much as excitement, you understand. I wanted my money's worth, whatever it was.

"Anyway, Preece introduced me to another form of blagging. There's a pub at Cranston known as the Rat-trap, though that isn't its proper name, and a few of our fellows used to go down there at nights to play dingy games at cards in a stuffy little parlour. It's sudden death to be caught near the place, of course, and there was a certain amount of fun in risking it. I went there several times, more for the sake of the excitement of dodging the beaks than for any satisfaction I got out of blagging."

Tom Merry looked up and caught Talbot's eye.

"Cardew!" he murmured with the ghost of a smile.

Talbot nodded.

"I beg your pardon?" said Raymond.

"Nothing!" replied Tom Merry quickly. "I was thinking of one of our fellows at St. Jim's, that's all."

"Oh, I see! Well, I suddenly realised where I was drifting, and cut it out, straight away. Preece was furious. He knew I'd got a fair amount of the twenty quid left, and he did his best to persuade me to carry on, but I refused to have anything more to do with him. Then he became nasty, and threatened to make me sorry for it.

"A few days later there was a burglary at the school. The studies and even the dormitories were rifled. Fellows lost watches and money out of their clothes in the dorms. There was no end of a fuss. The police were called in at the end, though the Head tried his hardest to settle the affair without them. The police said immediately that it wasn't anybody from outside the school who'd been responsible for the robberies. There were no signs of anybody having broken into the place.

"At first suspicion fell on the servants. Then a packet came to the Head by post, and I was sent for. This packet contained a lot of IOU's, with my signature—or what looked like it—on them, together with a note from a man

named Packard, whom I'd met at the Rat-trap, demanding payment. They were all fakes, but I couldn't prove it, and I had to admit that I'd been to the Rat-trap on several occasions.

"The Head was furious, and while the row was on Preece came to the Head's study, and said he hadn't liked to say so before, but he'd seen me out of the dorm on the previous evening, after lights-out. A lie, of course, but it served its turn. My belongings were overhauled, and some of the stolen property was found in my box. Not much, but enough to convict me of having had a hand in the affair. The IOU's suggested the motive, and I began to see exactly what Preece had meant when he said he'd make me sorry for having thrown him over. The Head offered me the chance of giving up the rest of the stolen stuff and being expelled without any further steps being taken, but, naturally, I couldn't restore what I hadn't taken, and I went in front of a magistrate. The result was that a week or two later I found myself in Charlesford Reformatory, a convicted thief."

"Good heavens!"

"After I'd been there about four months," continued Raymond, "I got a chance to escape, and I took it. I managed to get into communication with Gunster, a fellow in the Fourth at Cranston, who'd been my chum since I first went there, and who believed absolutely in my innocence, and from him I learnt that Packard, the rotter who sent in the faked IOU's, had left the district and come down this way. I managed to trace him to Rylcombe, and took up my quarters in this old mill.

"I was convinced that Packard knew more about the affair than anybody, with the exception of Preece, and I wanted to get a chance to show him up in his true colours, and force him to confess what had actually happened. I know he must have been in the scheme up to his eyes, and from what I knew of him I thought if I could get him into a corner, somehow, I could force him to tell the truth about Preece to save his own skin."

"A slim chance, I'm afraid," commented Talbot.

"I know that. But my only chance. And a drowning man will clutch at a straw, they say. Anyway, I was in one of the upstairs rooms of this old mill one night—I have to take care to keep out of the way of the police, of course—when I heard a noise below, and came to the top of the flight of stairs to see what was happening. I saw somebody standing there with that section opened, and almost at the same moment he looked up and saw me. I expect I had made some sort of noise. Anyway, he and another fellow—the chap they call Snide Sam—came after me and soon collared me.

"The first fellow was the chap they call the boss, and it wasn't long before he recognised me. My name and photograph had been in the paper a day or so before, you see. Well, he wasn't going to turn me loose with the knowledge I'd gained, and he guessed, rightly, that I wasn't keen on meeting the police myself, so he suggested that I should stop here and do odd jobs in return for my keep. I know it was a rotten bargain to make, but—well, I hadn't eaten anything for a couple of days, you see, and I daren't come out into the open to try to get work for fear of the police seeing me. Besides, nobody knew I'd been here, and if I had refused to keep their secret, they wouldn't stick at trifles, I imagine. You heard what they said to you about the pool?"

"So I promised to take up my quarters here, and not to attempt to escape. I was left free to move about the neighbourhood, so that I had a chance to keep a watch on Packard at the Blue Pig. And that, above all, was what I wanted."

"Eh?" broke in Tom Merry. "What's he like, this Packard? Stoutish chap, with a check suit, bowler, white spats—"

"That's him!" said Raymond. "Why, do you know him?"

"No; but we saw him this afternoon. He was having a row with one of our fellows about some dud notes."

"Ah, yes!" said Raymond thoughtfully. "I hear there are some of those notes in circulation. There'll be a row about that when the boss comes. He particularly ordered that none were to be taken out of here. There's a mistake in them. But Blakey had a few in his pocket one night, and he got into a poker game at the Blue Pig, and used some of them. That's how Packard would come by them. And he's passed them over to one of your fellows, eh?"

"So Racke—that's the chap's name—says."

"Serve the silly fool right for getting mixed up with a chap like Packard!" said Raymond contemptuously. "Now, look here, you fellows. As I've told you, I have promised not to escape from here. But I haven't promised not to help anybody else to escape, and if I get a chance, I'll—"

"I've no doubt you would. But, you see, you'll not get a chance."

The boys whirled round as that snaky voice cut across Raymond's speech.



"Bring 'im in 'ere, Sam!" grunted the man with the torch. "Twist 'is dratted neck if 'e won't come quiet!" "I've got 'im, Blakey!" replied Sam grimly. "Now then, yer young rip, wot's this 'ere mean, eh?" By the light of the torch the astonished Tom Merry and Tailbot saw the boy struggling in the grasp of the man who had been addressed as Sam! (See page 10.)

In the opening that led into the corridor stood a tall, slim, elegantly-dressed figure smiling mockingly at them.

"The boss!" gasped Raymond in dismayed accents.

"Dandy Jim!" said Talbot at almost the same moment.

The man bowed gracefully towards the St. Jim's junior.

"At your thervith, Toff!" he lisped, and, straightening, stepped forward into the cellar. "Fancy meeting you here, of all platheth. It'th a very thmall world, ithn't it?"

CHAPTER 7.

Wildrake Makes a Discovery!

"**C**OME along, you fellows! Put a jerk into it! You're three minutes late! Where on earth have you been to?"

"Looking after Gussy," replied Digby wearily. "The ass wanted to mess about getting some grease off his shorts at the last moment, and we had to yank him out by the scruff of his neck!"

"Just about what I expected!" grunted Blake disgustedly. "What on earth does a spot of grease matter just now?"

"Weally, Blake, I considah—"
"I've got no time to listen to piffle, Gussy, so you can give your jaw a rest for once in a way. Digby, you're in charge of the 'Owls' this afternoon. You'd better round up Kerruish and Julian, and then stand by for orders?"

It was directly after dinner on the day following the cross-country run that had ended in so mysterious a fashion, and the St. Jim's troop of Boy Scouts were preparing to set out to conduct a thorough search of the countryside.

The quadrangle was full of Scouts in uniform, and Blake, the leader of the Owl patrol, was acting as troop leader in the absence of Tom Merry.

Search parties of the Sixth and Fifth had been out until late the previous evening, and again during the morning, but they had failed to find any trace of the missing juniors. The police had been communicated with, and Inspector Symes, of Wyland, had been up to the school to consult the Head, who made no secret of the keenness of his anxiety.

Blake had been sent for to recount all the details of the run and the subsequent journey back as far as the mill, and it was obvious that both the Head and Mr. Railton, who had also been present in the room, were considerably startled at hearing of the broken hand-rail.

Among the juniors themselves that aspect of the affair was not discussed, and they did not permit their minds to dwell upon it. Time enough for thoughts of tragedy when it had been proved beyond all possible doubt that a tragedy had actually occurred;

Morning lessons had been a mere travesty in the Fourth and Shell, and Dr. Holmes had decided that a thorough search of the surrounding country should take the place of afternoon school for everybody at St. Jim's, with the exception of the Second and Third Forms, the members of which were far more likely to get themselves into some sort of mischief than to render any useful assistance.

Mr. Railton and Kildare, the scoutmaster and senior assistant scoutmaster respectively of the troop, came down the School House steps together, and Blake hurried to meet them.

After an exchange of salutes and a few words, Blake went to the middle of the quad and blew the Rally on his whistle. There were a few moments of apparent confusion as patrols formed up separately, to double into position in response to crisp orders from the leaders. Staves were

grounded with a rattle, and the troop stood at the "alert," awaiting orders.

Kildare crossed over and nodded to Blake, who blew the four blasts—three short and one long—that summoned the leaders, who came running across to line up before Kildare to receive their instructions.

"You fellows know pretty well what you've got to do," said Kildare quietly. "It's a case of searching over as much ground as you can cover to do the thing properly. Leaders will be held responsible for the safety of their patrols, so don't allow anybody to take risks of any kind. On no account cross to the other side of the river. The Fifth and Sixth are working over the moor. If you have any success, send a messenger at once to Blake, who will be in touch with me. In any case be back here by five o'clock. You understand? Good! Dismiss to your patrols! Carry on, Blake!"

"Troop—alert!" shouted Blake. "Slope—staves! In patrols, Lion patrol leading! By the left, quick—march! Right—wheel!"

The troop swung across the quad and out through the open gates on to the Rylcombe lane.

Blake dropped back to speak to Wildrake, who was marching with his patrol, the Elks.

"Your ankle's all right again, I suppose, Wildrake?" he asked.

"Sure!" replied Wildrake. "Good enough to walk on, anyhow, I guess. I've still got a few yards of mummy-wrapping on. It's an all-fired nuisance it crocked up yesterday."

Blake nodded. But for that sprained ankle Wildrake would have been one of the hares on the run the previous day.

"It was thumping bad luck all round," he said regretfully. "If you'd been able to walk last night I should have sent to see if you'd come back with us when we went as far as the mill. You might have been able to have found some tracks or something that would have given us an idea of what had happened."

Like the rest of the St. Jim's fellows, Blake had tremendous faith in Wildrake's abilities as a tracker.

"Thasso," agreed the Canadian junior. "But I might tell you it wouldn't have been a lead pipe cinch at the best. Tom Merry and Talbot were wearing running-shoes, and with half a hundred galoots in the same kind of moccasins leaving a trail like a herd of steers gone loco. I guess the chances of picking out two sets of tracks would have been less than thirty below."

Blake's face fell.

"I'd been hoping that even now you might have found some tracks," he confessed. "In fact, I was pinning my faith on you. Still, we shall have to do our best, that's all. Look here, this is my idea. I shall drop patrols at intervals between here and the mill, and reserve the Owls and the Elks for the work round by the mill. I suppose Monty Lowther and Manners had better come on, too."

"Pretty slick notion!" approved the Canadian.

"I'll go and turn Noble loose with the Kangaroos now," said Blake.

By the time the troop arrived at the footpath leading from the lane to the mill only three patrols were left. These Blake proposed to use in the search around the mill. His main hope was Wildrake.

Twenty yards from the bridge Blake halted the Scouts while Wildrake, accompanied by Levison, went on to make an examination of the ground.

In a few minutes he returned to the rest of the juniors.

"Nothin' doin'," he announced. "It's a sure tracker's nightmare. But that broken handrail does look plumb suggestive."

The listening juniors felt a chill at their hearts.

"You—you think—" began Monty Lowther.

"Cut it out!" said Wildrake quickly. "What I think doesn't amount to a row of beans, I guess. I've got nothing to go on. Nary a footprint. But supposin' those chaps did go into the pool, and—well, and came out again; I guess they had to come out somewhere along the banks of the pool or the river. That doesn't need a Ferrers Locke to work out. And wherever they came out, they left soon, and I guess I'm goin' to look for that same sign right now."

"And the rest of us?" asked Blake dubiously. "We can't help—"

"You can spend a few minutes giving this place the once-over, though, I reckon," said Wildrake.

"But if you can't find anything," said the puzzled Blake.

"How can—"

"I guess I'm not talking about tracks," said Wildrake. "You might find other things, though—a pair of shoes, for instance."

"Shoes?"

"Sure. I figger it out that if those chaps went through the gap in the rail they didn't go together. One fell through, and the other went after him. He found time to get rid of

his scent bags, so it's more'n likely he kicked off his shoes as well."

"But we only found one scent bag," objected Digby. "They were wearing two each."

"Thasso! But you can bet your eyelet holes to a boot store those bags were slung off mighty pronto. They went just anywhere. One landed on the bridge. The other went into the river, at a guess. I wouldn't say the shoes didn't follow it, but there's a chance they didn't. If we find them we shall have a line on what happened, I reckon."

"Well, I'll leave it to you, Wildrake," said Blake. "I'm supposed to be in charge, but it seems to me you're the real leader. You know better what to do than I, anyway. Which bank are you going to start with?"

"This one," replied the Canadian. "Kildare said keep to this side, and one side looks as good as another to me, for a start. I'll take Levison and Cardew with me, if you don't mind."

"Take whom you like," said Blake. "You're doing the real work."

When Wildrake had gone, Blake and the rest of the juniors set to work searching the ground in the vicinity of the bridge, without much hope of any result. But less than five minutes afterwards, Manners discovered a running shoe in a bush on the slope of ground immediately below the mill-dam.

It was quickly identified as Talbot's. That settled the question of which junior had gone to the rescue of the other, besides proving a confirmation of the correctness of Wildrake's reasoning.

"Then it—it was Tom who went over into the pool," said Monty Lowther, in a strained voice. "And Talbot jumped in after him."

"Just like Talbot," said Blake softly.

"And just like Tom, if it had been Talbot who went first," put in Manners, with ready and eager loyalty.

"That's so," agreed Blake. "One of you chaps had better cut down and tell Wildrake. Not that it makes any difference really, but he might as well know."

But there was no need to send a messenger to Wildrake. At that very moment Blake was interrupted by a shout from the direction in which the leader of the Elks and his two companions had gone.

It was clearly a summons, and the juniors went racing off without more ado.

They found Wildrake examining the ground at the brink of the river some two hundred yards or so below the mill.

He looked up as they came running towards him, and his expression was a queer mixture of satisfaction and bewilderment.

"What is it?" called out Blake breathlessly, while he was yet some distance away. "Have you—"

"I guess they have got out of that ditch all right," said Wildrake. "But I—"

"Both of 'em?" interrupted Manners eagerly.

"Yep," replied Wildrake slowly.

"Hurrah!"

The juniors cheered wildly. All they realised at that moment was that whatever had befallen Tom Merry and Talbot, they had not perished in that dark pool. In their relief at being assured of this they disregarded the fact that the whereabouts of the juniors was as much of a mystery as ever.

"Yep," repeated Wildrake slowly. "They got out all right—all three of 'em."

"What?"

The juniors stared blankly at Wildrake.

"Three of 'em?" echoed Blake. "What the thump are you talking about, Wildrake?"

"Guess I'm not too darned sure," confessed Wildrake ruefully. "This is a new one on me. Three chaps came out of the river just here. Two of 'em were Tom Merry and Talbot, I reckon. The third was—well, I just dunno, and that's about all there is to it. Except—"

He paused for a moment.

"Yes?" prompted Blake curiously. "Except what?"

"Except that he was the galoot who rescued Lord Eastwood from the hobo with the cudgel in Wayland Woods last Tuesday," said Wildrake.

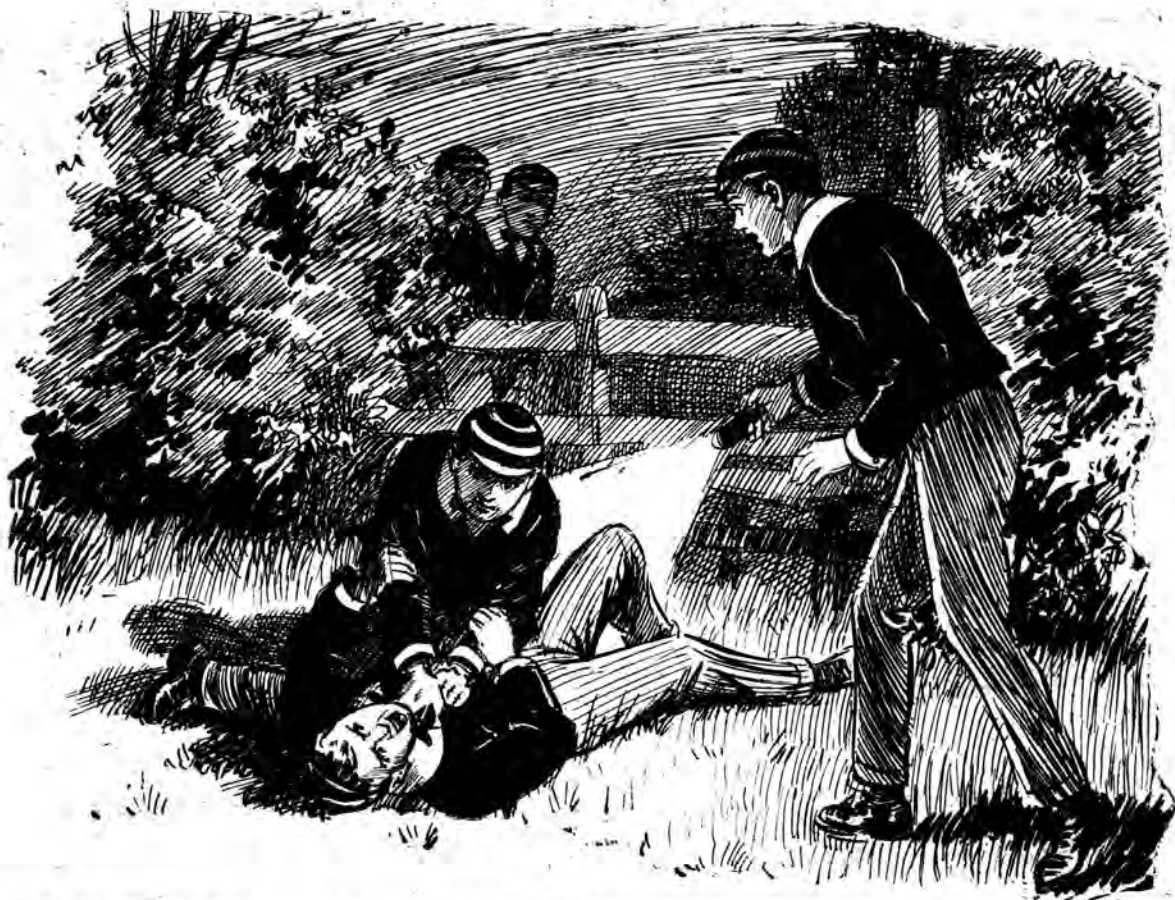
CHAPTER 8.

The Lost Trail!

THE juniors stared at Wildrake in something more than mere amazement.

They knew quite well that the Canadian junior would not have made such a statement unless he was certain of his facts.

It was several days since Lord Eastwood had been attacked by a footpad in Wayland Woods while walking to St. Jim's to pay a visit to the Hon. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, and had



The suddenness of the attack took Levison completely off his guard. Within a minute he was on the ground, with his unknown assailant pinning him down. "Got him!" panted a voice in a tone of satisfaction. "Here, Wilkins, let's have a light and see what kind of ruffian he is!" A beam of light from the torch shone in the "ruffian's" eyes. "My—my hat!" exclaimed Grundy, in utter amazement. "It—it's Levison!" (See page 18.)

been saved from almost certain serious injury at the hands of the ruffian by the intervention of a boy who had suddenly appeared on the scene and tackled the ruffian.

At first the credit for the plucky deed had been claimed by Trimble, who had happened to be near the spot at the time; but subsequent investigation by Wildrake and Cardew had revealed the fact—by means of the tracks that had been left on the ground—that another fellow had really been the hero of the occasion.

The identity of the rescuer had never been established, and now Wildrake was announcing that his footprints were here, in company with those of the missing juniors, Tom Merry and Talbot.

It seemed altogether incredible.

But the juniors knew perfectly well that if Wildrake said it was so, then it must be true. He was not the sort of fellow to make a mistake in such matters, nor was he given to making statements on mere suspicion.

It was a well-recognized fact at St. Jim's that the Canadian junior never forgot the characteristics of a footprint once he had seen it, and it was but a few days since he had studied these particular tracks in Wayland Woods.

But to come across them again in such a place, and in such circumstances—it was bewildering.

That there should have been a third party present was a factor that added to the mystery surrounding the disappearance of Tom Merry and Talbot; but that this third person should also be the unknown rescuer of Lord Eastwood, concerning whose identity there had already been much speculation at St. Jim's—well, it was no matter for wonder that the juniors stared at Wildrake, and that Wildrake shrugged his shoulders in token of his own bewilderment.

"Well, this beats the giddy band," said Blake at length. "You said a few minutes ago that the case didn't need a Ferrers Locke, Wildrake; but I reckon you were wrong, for once. The more we discover the deeper the mystery becomes. What's the next move? Report to Kildare?"

Wildrake shook his head.

"Not for a bit, I guess. I'm aimin' to have a right down dandy try at locating Merry and Talbot—and the other

galoot, goes without saying. Let's figger it out. They got outter the river here. They'd be likely to be pretty damp, more or less, and in ordinary cires I reckon the thing they'd be most apt to do would be to make tracks for St. Jim's, pronto. We know they didn't get there, so it's odds these weren't ordinary cires. So where did they go?"

"Yaas, wathah, wheah—"

"If you'll shift those natty corn-cases of yours, Gussy, I dessay I'll stand some chance of answerin' that query. I oughter followed up this trail some time ago, soon's as I clapped eyes on it; but findin' that galoot's trade-mark kinder knocked me sideways. Yes, here we are. One chap was in his socks."

"Talbot," put in Blake. "We found his shoe in a bush."

"Just as you say. Keep behind, please, and don't tread out the trail. It's been walked over a few times already. They seem to have made for the footpath according to the look of things."

"But, hang it all," said Blake, "we must have passed by here a few minutes afterwards at the most. How could we have missed seeing them if they came this way?"

"That's just what we've got to find out, I guess," said Wildrake. "But they sure made for the footpath, right enough."

The juniors followed on behind Wildrake with growing mystification. It was true, as Blake had said, that they must have passed along the footpath very shortly after the two juniors had climbed out of the mill-pool, and it seemed impossible that they could have vanished, or that any harm could have befallen them in that short space of time.

Wildrake experienced very little difficulty in following up the trail for the first hundred and fifty yards, but when he got closer to the mill he began to find himself at fault. Quite a number of the juniors had been walking about in that part of the field, and they had left a maze of tracks through which Wildrake was constrained to work slowly.

But he stuck to his task with painstaking carefulness, until he was finally checked about five yards or so from the door of the mill.

"Guess I'm licked to a frazzle!" he confessed ruefully at length. "This part of the reservation looks as if a herd of steers had been stampeded across it. But, from the direction of the tracks, it sure looks as if they were makin' for the mill."

"But why should they go to the mill?" queried Manners incredulously. "There was no earthly reason for their going in there, surely!"

Wildrake shrugged his shoulders.

"Guess I'm trackin', not fortune-tellin'," he said dryly. "I claim to be able to tell where a hombre went by followin' up his footprints, but they sure don't tell me just why he went there. I'm not a 'tee in a dime' novel!"

"But we searched the mill last night," pointed out Blake. "And they weren't there. If they went in there at all, how do you account for the fact?"

"Ain't fingerin' on 'accountin' for it at all!" responded Wildrake, still conducting an examination of the ground near to the huge stone which formed the doorstep of the mill. "Perhaps they came out again soon after, though I can't find any sign to say they did. But that may be because you galoots left a set of tracks like a Lord Mayor's procession and—say, I thought somebody said this shack was sorter off the map for everybody!"

"So it is as far as I know," replied Blake wonderingly. "You can see for yourself it's practically a ruin."

"Yep, and I can see for myself that a few galoots in man's size boots go in and out mighty frequent."

"Some of the villagers wandering round out of curiosity, I suppose," said Monty Lowther rather impatiently. "But I don't see what that's got to do with—"

"They aren't villagers," declared Wildrake, with conviction. "One wears heavy, town-made boots. And they sure are almighty inquisitive if they come here as often as they do out of curiosity. They were here last night, for instance, after you chaps had gone, and they've been in and out once, at least, since then, if I ain't seen 'em double. The way their tracks cross yours—"

He looked up from the ground and surveyed the mill towering above him in a thoughtful manner.

"I've got a hunch there's something darned queer about this business," he said slowly. "First the tracks of that galoot who hazed the hobo in the woods, and was so darned shy he didn't wait to be thanked. Then Tom Merry and Talbot vanish into thin air in a matter of minutes. And now we find this played-out old shanty is being used as a rendezvous. It all fits together somehow, I guess, but I'm dog-goned if I know how."

"Why not search the mill again?" suggested Manners. "Hang it, if Wildrake's so certain they went in and didn't come out again, they must be there now."

"That's sure logic if it ain't a fact," agreed Wildrake. "But considerin' you searched the mill last night—"

"That's no reason why we shouldn't search it again now," said Manners doggedly. "It was almost dark in there last night, and we may have missed something—a door leading to a room we didn't look in, for instance."

"That's a notion, sure!" admitted Wildrake. "I'll have another look round while you're inside."

"Would it be of any use looking for tracks inside the place?" asked Blake.

"Nary a bit," replied Wildrake positively. "Stone floors and wooden ones tell no tales in this game."

"Well, we'll have another look, anyway," said Blake. "Come on, you fellows!"

And the juniors, with the exception of Wildrake, followed the leader of Study No. 6 into the mill, where they conducted a thorough search.

In the meantime Wildrake continued his survey of the ground outside the mill, but found nothing to cause him to revise his opinion that the two missing juniors had gone into the mill and not come out again.

It was not long before the rest of the juniors emerged from the building, as disappointed as they were bewildered. The result of their search could be seen from their downcast expressions.

Wildrake came to meet them, his careful examination of the ground having proved equally unprofitable.

"No luck?" he said quietly.

"None!" replied Blake disgustedly. "This beats the giddy band. The only thing we can do is to keep on searching around, I suppose. Dig, you'd better cut back to St. Jim's and let Kildare know we've discovered they fell into the pool and got out again, and that we can't find any trace of them afterwards. The rest of you had better work along in a sort of screen, about a couple of hundred yards apart, in that direction."

He waved his hand towards the country on the immediate right. Digby sped away to carry Blake's message to the St. Jim's skipper.

The rest of the juniors spread out as Blake had directed, and inspected every bit of cover in their respective districts.

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When Blake's whistle called them together at the end of an hour, they had discovered exactly nothing.

"Come on, time to be getting back," said Blake wearily. "Nobody had any luck, I suppose!"

The juniors shook their heads glumly. Everybody was looking, and feeling, absolutely dispirited.

When they got back to St. Jim's they found Kildare standing talking to Darrell, who had just returned with a search-party of the Sixth.

The captain of St. Jim's was plainly disappointed to hear the Scouts had met with no further success beyond that which Digby had already reported to him, but he said that both Dr. Holmes and Mr. Railton had been tremendously relieved by learning of the discovery of the footprints which had revealed the fact that, though the missing juniors had actually fallen into the pool, as had been feared, they had, nevertheless, succeeded in getting out again.

"I'd been more than half expecting you'd found them," confessed Kildare. "I should have thought you'd have been able to follow them up once you got on the track of them, Wildrake," he added, glancing curiously at the Canadian junior.

Wildrake shrugged slightly.

"Guess I'm sorry," he said quietly. "But I lost the trail in the first couple of hundred yards, and couldn't pick it up again. They sorter vanished into nothing somewhere near that old mill."

"Well, it's a dashed queer thing where they've got to," said Kildare, with a puzzled expression. "Still, you chaps have done your best. Better cut in now, and I'll report to Mr. Railton. The rest of the Troop are already back."

"No news from any of them, I suppose, Kildare?" asked Manners.

"Nothing!" responded Kildare briefly.

Blake saluted Kildare, and then turned on his heel and led the way towards the School House.

But, unlike the rest, Cardew's expression suggested that he was far from being disappointed with the result of the afternoon's work.

CHAPTER 3.

Cardew Makes a Suggestion!

"YOU'RE by way of bein' rather a whale on local history, aren't you, Ernest, old bean? Happen to know anythin' about that old ruin of a mill?"

Levison and Clive looked up as Cardew's drawing-words fell on their ears.

The three Fourth Form juniors had finished tea a few minutes ago, and were spending a comfortable half-hour or so before the fire in the cosy little study prior to commencing prep.

"The old mill?" echoed Levison slowly. "I can't say I know much about it, except that the last man who lived there was a queer sort of johnny, if there's any truth in the account I've heard of his behaviour."

Levison's mind, as Cardew well knew, was a veritable storehouse of information regarding the history of St. Jim's, the Priory, Wayland Castle, and the district in general.

Not only had he delved, by means of books and old documents, into the more remote past, but he had also spent much time talking to old people who had lived in the neighbourhood all their lives. And he had thereby acquired a great deal of knowledge concerning local history during the past fifty or sixty years.

"H'm!" said Cardew. "It's supposed to be haunted, of course?"

"Yes," replied Levison in a surprised voice. "How did you know?"

"I didn't till you said so. I made a guess, that's all. Fairly safe bet, of course, with an old, deserted, out-of-the-way place like that. Owls nest in the roof—or wherever it is that owls do build their nests—and make noises at night, an' all that sort of thing. And if the last tenant happened to commit suicide—"

"He didn't! But he died there, certainly."

"Most people do die somewhere, sooner or later, I've heard. And if every chap is goin' to come back and haunt the scene of his demise and make himself unpleasant to the next tenant—well, it's a cheerful look-out for landlords and house-agents. What?"

"But this chap died in rather peculiar circumstances," explained Levison.

"Which means there's a yarn, as I hoped there might be," said Cardew in a satisfied tone, leaning back and making himself comfortable in the armchair. "Let's hear it."

"Oh, it's nothing much, really," said Levison. "It just happens that the last miller who lived there—about twenty years ago—was a weird sort of old fellow who lived absolutely alone in the place, and used to treat everybody in the most surly fashion. In fact, he was so dashed grumpy to his customers that they began to give up dealing with him, and took their trade to the windmill on the heath, until he had no business worth speaking of. That didn't seem

to worry him, though, and the villagers came to the conclusion he wasn't dependent on the mill for a living."

"Pretty obvious, I should imagine," murmured Cardew. "I should say so myself. Anyway, they began to credit him with being an old miser, who was only living at the place because it was out-of-the-way. He allowed the mill to go to rack and ruin. One day, however, a lot of workmen turned up and set to work at the place. Nobody ever learned what they did, because they came from another part of the country, and lived up at the mill while they were here. When they went into the village, which wasn't often, they wouldn't talk, I'm told. But the queer thing about it is that after they'd gone the place looked as ramshackle as ever. Then the old chap took to disappearing for days together. Nobody ever saw him go away, or come back again, but there didn't seem any doubt about the fact that he wasn't in the mill."

"Go on, old bean," said Cardew, his eyes gleaming. "This is becomin' interestin'."

"Well, I think it's a lot of silly piffle," said Clive candidly. "Ten to one it's nothing but a lot of silly gossip the villagers have made up among themselves. Do you really believe any man would act in such a fashion?"

"I'm ready to believe anythin' about anybody, so long as it's bad enough or mad enough," drawled Cardew. "Didn't Diogenes of Sinope live in a tub and make himself generally unpleasant to everybody? And I dare say there's some truth in the story, in spite of its bein' an historical fact. Then why shouldn't a modern Diogenes live in a mill? By the way, you said the old chap died there, didn't you, Levison?"

"That's so. It was days before his body was found," replied Levison with a slight shudder. "That's how the place has got such a sinister reputation. You see, he lived all alone, and—"

"All right, old bean. Don't pursue the topic. It isn't exactly cheerful. He must have been a queer old stick. I should like to have known him, but I dare say he'd have bored me stiff. Still, I might have persuaded him to tell me just what those workmen did while they were there. With my great charm of manner—"

"What on earth does it matter what the workmen did?" asked Clive, staring at Cardew.

"That's just what I'm wonderin'," murmured the dandy of the Fourth. "You see, Tom Merry and Talbot are missin', as you may possibly have heard, and—"

"Exactly what are you blathering about?" inquired Clive in concentrated tones. "Perhaps you wouldn't mind telling us what connection there is between the old mad miller and Tom Merry and Talbot?"

"I wouldn't mind in the least, if I knew," replied Cardew coolly. "You seem to have a flair for unanswerable questions, Clive. That's the second you've asked within a minute."

Cardew got on his feet slowly and yawned.

"I'm goin' to have a little jaw with Wildrake," he announced. "I think he's teagin' in Study No. 6, so I'll drift along in that direction. Comin', Levison?"

"I shouldn't advise you to go with him," said Clive. "If Cardew's going to talk the same kind of rot he's been talking in here you'll both be slung out on your necks."

Levison laughed. "I suppose Cardew has worked out some kind of theory?" he said, "and, in his usual fashion, he's pulling our legs a trifle before he condescends to tell us what's in his mind."

Clive sniffed, and turned his attention to his book. When Cardew and Levison reached Study No. 6 they found that Manners and Lowther were there, as well as Wildrake.

"Ah, quite a gatherin' of the clans," drawled Cardew pleasantly. "Are we intruders, or welcome little strangers?"

"Levison's welcome, anyhow, and so are you, so long as you haven't come to talk any of your usual rot," said Blake bluntly.

"Blake also is among the prophets, and Clive is justified of his warning," said Cardew blandly. "As a matter of fact, it is expressly for the purpose of talkin' rot that I have honoured you with my presence this evenin'. Leastways, Clive says it's rot, an' who am I to dispute so eminent an authority?"

"Oh, for goodness' sake, shut up!" growled Blake disgustedly. "Take him away and lose him, Levison, and then come back."

"I think Cardew's really got something to say to you," replied Levison quietly. "If you just give him a chance—"

"We'll give him all the chances he wants, if he'll only talk sense, and not blither like a half-witted idiot."

"Sorry, old bean. Force of habit, you know," apologised Cardew imperturbably. "What I'm tryin' to get off my chest is this: I've been thinkin' about the problem we hit up against this afternoon, and I've just been hearin' somethin' of the history of the old mill from Levison. One or two things he said were a trifle suggestive."

"Eh?" put in Levison blankly. "I can't remember telling you—"

"That's a mystery in itself," said Cardew. "You're usually so keen that I can't understand your missin' clues like that. However, I'm absolutely convinced that the old mill holds the key to the mystery of the disappearance of Tom Merry and Talbot. There's something queer about the place. Tom Merry and Talbot seem to have gone in there and not come out again—according to Wildrake, at least, and he doesn't usually make mistakes, you'll admit. Then there are those footprints of the men who, on the same authority, go out and in pretty frequently—for what purpose?"

"What do you suggest is their purpose?" inquired Manners keenly.

"I haven't the faintest idea," confessed Cardew. "It's beyond my powers of conjecture. But, at the same time, I'm absolutely convinced that, when you've answered that question, you've solved the riddle of the disappearance of Tom Merry and Talbot."

"Yep," agreed Wildrake quietly. "There's something in that. As I said before, I guess it all fits together like a jig-saw puzzle, only some of the pieces are missing, and—well, I take off my hat to any hobo who can make the picture out of what we've got!"

"You're not likely to get a cold in the head on my account," Cardew assured him. "But my guess—and I'm willin' to admit quite frankly it's a mere guess, and a pretty wild one at that—is that the mill is being used by some men for a purpose which they aren't likely to take the front page of a newspaper to advertise. People don't usually make a rendezvous of a place like that for the fun of the thing. Now, just suppose Tom Merry and Talbot had happened to stumble across them by accident, and discovered what they were up to. What more likely than their takin' measures to prevent Merry and Talbot gettin' away with the information?"

The juniors drew in their breaths sharply as the significance of Cardew's quietly spoken words came to them.

"Gad!" said Levison. "I never thought of anything like that. And yet it's possible—quite."

"Sounds very melodramatic an' all that, I know," admitted Cardew, in an apologetic tone. "Still—"

"What did you mean when you said that Levison had been telling you the history of the mill?" inquired Monty Lowther suddenly.

"Oh, that?" said Cardew. "Well, accordin' to local gossip, the last tenant of the mill was an eccentric old fellow who was in the habit of disappearin' for days every now and then. You see, there's something dashed queer about the place altogether."

"But when you said that about—about these men taking measures to prevent Tom and Talbot getting away," put in Manners, in a troubled voice. "You surely don't suggest they might have—"

"I simply suggest they're being kept prisoners," said Cardew quickly, understanding the dreadful thought that Manners could not voice. "Even criminals, granting that's what they are, don't go to extremes without grave necessity, I should imagine. The worst of it is, we've got practically nothin' in the way of real evidence, and if we went to the police with our suspicions we should simply invite sneers. So why shouldn't we take matters into our own hands?"

"How?" chorused half a dozen voices promptly.

"Well, what's the general opinion about our spendin' a few hours watchin' the mill to-night? You can bet that if anythin' questionable is happenin' there, the night's the best time to find them up and about. Besides, we shall stand a better chance of gettin' near to the place unobserved. What's the verdict?"

Cardew spoke in his usual flippancy, but his earnestness was unmistakable.

There was a few moments' silence, and then Blake spoke.

"We'll do it," he said. "Somehow, I'm beginning to think there's a lot in what you say, Cardew. Anyhow, if nothing comes of it, we're no worse off."

And the juniors immediately went into committee to discuss the details of the proposed excursion.

But they were certainly not aware that a fat ear was adjacent to the keyhole for a considerable part of the time they spent in discussing the matter.

CHAPTER 10.

The Night Excursion!

"QUIET, you ass!" It was more of a sibilant hiss than a spoken injunction. Indeed, the sound might almost have been that of the sighing wind in the elms.

The shadows lay heavily across the place from which the sound came. It was an angle of the high wall surrounding St. Jim's, near to the spot where grew a tree, the trunk of which leaned slightly towards the wall, so that one or two of its stout branches almost scraped the coping stones.

"Bai Jove, Blake, I uttably wufuse to be addressed—" This time it was unmistakably a voice. It was also an unmistakable voice—that of the Hon. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth.

There were certain juniors at St. Jim's who averred that Arthur Augustus never stopped talking, but that contention was not strictly accurate. On this occasion, for instance, he had hardly started before he stopped—most abruptly.

A hand had come from out of the darkness at his side and closed over his mouth. At the same time other hands grasped him firmly. The first hand was a large one, and it covered Gussy's mouth most effectively.

"Keep quiet, you frabjous burler!" hissed a voice in his ear. "Mum—m—mmm!" gurgled Arthur Augustus, struggling vainly to release himself.

A number of shadowy figures were grouped in the shelter afforded by the angle of the walls.

Eleven o'clock had just boomed out in as many solemn strokes from the big clock in the School House, and St. Jim's was a dark pile of buildings dimly seen in the faint light of the stars.

"If that ass Gussy's going to start jabbering," growled Blake, "we might as well—"

"It's all right," Monty Lowther assured him. "Manners and I are looking after Gussy. You go first, and we'll follow."

There came the sound of boots scraping the bark of the old tree, and a dimly seen form appeared on the top of the wall a few seconds afterwards.

There was a slight thud in the lane outside, followed by a faint whistle that announced a clear coast.

"You next, Diggy!" breathed Lowther. "We'll come last, after we've tamed Gussy!"

"Mum—m—m!"

Arthur Augustus had often been accused of speaking through the back of his neck, but if he really possessed an ability to do anything so remarkable he did not choose to exercise it just then. He simply struggled to express himself in a more conventional manner, but unsuccessfully.

"It's no 'good, Gussy," whispered Monty Lowther cheerfully. "Let you go when you've promised to keep your silly mouth shut for the next five minutes! Shake your head for 'Yes,' and don't take long to make up your mind, because if you don't decide quickly we shall tie you to the tree with your braces and leave you behind!"

Arthur Augustus considered the matter for a few moments, and then gave the required promise.

"Good egg!" said Manners, in a satisfied voice. "That's settled our biggest problem—keeping Gussy quiet!"

One by one the juniors scaled the wall, and dropped over into the lane outside.

Monty Lowther came last, and then the little party moved silently off in the direction of the mill.

"Ugh!" shivered Manners. "It'll be cold hanging about! Hope we don't have long to wait before something happens!"

"We're going to stick it, anyhow, till something does!" said Blake grimly. "We've come out on business to-night!"

"Hope you fellows won't scalp me if it turns out that I was simply talkin' rot, and nothin' happens," came Cardew's voice. "I mean to say, don't forget it's only a guess. We're not bettin' on a certainty."

"You don't seem to have a lot of trust in the stunt," said Digby. "After all, it's your own idea, you know."

"That's exactly why I haven't got much faith in it," replied Cardew frankly. "I never do trust myself very far."

"You're not the only one!" Blake informed him bluntly. Cardew chuckled as cheerfully as though Blake had paid him a compliment.

"Well, I'm inclined to think we're on the right track," said Levison. "It's the most feasible supposition—fits in with all the facts as we know them."

"I guess that's so," agreed Wildrake quietly.

"Hallo! What's that?" said Manners suddenly. The juniors halted.

"I thought I heard somebody behind us," explained Manners. "It was a sound like somebody kicking against a stone."

The little party stood still, listening, for a minute or so. Then Manners and Blake went back a hundred yards or so, to return with the announcement that they had seen nobody else on the road.

"I must have been mistaken," said Manners, "but I'd have sworn I heard a slight noise."

"Well, if we're going to start hearing noises that aren't there, so to speak," said Monty Lowther, "I shall begin to think there's something in the yarn about the ghosts in the mill! Perhaps they've come to meet us."

"Rats!" said Blake. "Let's be getting along!"

The juniors resumed their journey, and in a few minutes came to the gate which led on to the footpath on which the mill was situated.

"Quiet, now!" warned Blake. "Walk carefully, and don't talk."

"Yaas, wathah, deah boys! We must be twigtfully caahful, y'know."

"Hallo, Gussy! Is the five minutes up?" grinned Monty Lowther. "I wish we'd made it ten, now."

"So do I—for both of you," growled Blake. "For goodness' sake, keep your comic cross-talk for the next junior school concert."

The juniors approached the mill cautiously. The gaunt old building showed up dimly in the glimmer of the starlight.

From top to bottom of the place no light was to be seen.

"Looks as though there's nobody there, after all," whispered Blake in a disappointed tone to Wildrake.

"I guess it's early days to be deciding one way or the other," returned the Canadian junior. "Better not get too close, I reckon. We can see the front of the place from here, an' those bushes make right dandy cover. The— Gee, what's that?"

This time every junior in the party heard the noise that had caused Wildrake to break off suddenly and turn his head sharply to peer through the darkness.

It did not come from the direction of the mill, but from somewhere near to the stile, and it sounded like a twig breaking under the pressure of a foot.

"Somebody's coming this way," whispered Levison in a voice vibrant with suppressed excitement. "Were we being followed along the lane, do you think?"

"Maybe, and maybe not," said Wildrake non-committally. "In any case, our play is to lie doggo and see what happens. Only be ready to move mighty quick if we need to."

The juniors scarcely breathed as they crouched there in the cover of the bushes. For five minutes, at least, they were tense, staring in the direction from which that startling sound had emanated.

But when the first move in the game was really made, it came from the mill itself.

Everybody's attention was concentrated upon listening for a repetition of the noise that had so unexpectedly broken the silence, so that none of the juniors heard or saw anything of the

two men who came through the door of the mill and along the footpath until they had almost reached the bushes.

Then Wildrake's quick ears detected their approach just in time to permit of his issuing a sharp warning to the rest of the juniors, who might otherwise have been startled into making some movement that would have revealed their presence.

The two men went silently past, and as soon as they had passed out of earshot, Wildrake was whispering rapidly to Blake.

"I guess they're our birds, those two galoots. I'm going to hang on to their trail, and I guess I'll take Levison with me. You stay here and watch points. I'll stick to them closer'n a postage-stamp, and if they lead me to anything worth while—the place where Merry and Talbot are, for instance—I'll get Levison to cut back and fetch you. That good enough for you?"

"Absolutely! I leave it to you," whispered Blake. "You know best."

"Right you are! Come along, Levison, and tread as though you were walking on eggs."

The two juniors slipped away into the darkness, as silently as shadows. Wildrake, remembering the noise as of a breaking twig, kept a sharp look-out for the cause of it. He suspected that somebody had been waiting for the two men, and had trodden on a piece of dead wood while strolling about awaiting them; but, to his surprise, the men climbed the stile and went on along the lane in the direction of Rylcombe without being joined by anybody else.

Wildrake was more than a little puzzled, and a trifle uneasy, but he had plenty to occupy him in the task of keeping the men in sight without devoting any of his thoughts to matters which were possibly nothing whatever to do with the affair in hand.

The men walked on briskly, and were soon entering the silent, deserted main street of Rylcombe.

They turned down the narrow side street that led to the brickfields, and just as Wildrake was beginning to suspect that this must be their objective, they stopped against the dingy little ale-house known as the Blue Pig.

Wildrake and Levison heard a series of short knocks on the door, which was opened almost immediately, as if at a pre-arranged signal, and the men went inside.

"This is a trifle unexpected, I guess," said Wildrake dubiously. "It doesn't seem anyways likely that Tom Merry and Talbot are being hidden away there. Seems mighty like we've followed up a blind trail."

"Well, I suppose we'd better find out all we can now we're here," suggested Levison. "If we went down that alley we could climb over a fence and get into the garden of the place. Those men may have gone through to the back, and in that case we might perhaps get a look at them in the light."

"Strikes me," responded Wildrake laconically, "you'd better lead the way, knowin' a heap more about this ranch than I do."

As Levison had said, it was a simple matter to get into the garden which lay behind the public-house, and when they had attained that vantage ground, the juniors saw that luck was indeed favouring them.

One of the rooms at the back was lighted up, and the slatternly Venetian blind that lurched ineffectively across the window was no barrier to their vision.

They stole forward and peered between the slats. Inside the room, which was hazy with smoke from cheap cigars, were about a dozen men, most of them sitting round a table, a little pile of money before each.

One of them was dealing out a greasy pack of cards.

The two new arrivals were easily to be distinguished, as they were just removing their coats.

"There they are," whispered Wildrake. "That bottle-nosed hombre with the crooked eyebrow, and the little rat-faced coyote over yonder. Seems like they're aimin' to join in that poker game—which means they're likely to be fixed for a bit. So they were only comin' down here for an honest-to-gosh jubilation. Guess we've been wastin' our time, pardner."

The Canadian junior spoke in tones of the bitterest disappointment.

"See here," he resumed, with sudden determination. "I'm hangin' on to those roughnecks like a mustard plaster. Sooner or later they'll lead the way to the cache. But Blake's sure to be gettin' anxious if he's kept waitin' too long without knowing which way the cat's jumping. You cut back an' tell him where we've located them, and then come back and help me keep tabs on them."

"Right you are," said Levison softly. "I sha'n't be long."

He scaled the fence and sped off silently in his rubber-soled gym shoes, and it was only a matter of minutes before he was back at the stile.

He moved with the utmost caution, not knowing what had happened in the vicinity of the mill while he had been away.

He climbed the stile, and had just dropped on to the footpath on the other side, when somebody sprang out of the shelter of the hedge, and a pair of arms wrapped themselves round him.

He uttered a startled exclamation and struck out. He heard an exclamation of pain, and then his assailant gave vent to a roar of fury, and the next moment Levison went spinning back before a rapid succession of hefty punches.

CHAPTER 11.

The Mystery Solved!

THE suddenness and unexpectedness of the attack took Levison completely off his guard.

Within a minute he was on the ground, with his unknown assailant pinning him down.

Two more shadowy figures loomed up behind.

"Got him!" panted a voice in a tone of satisfaction. "Here, Wilkins, let's have a light, and see what kind of a ruffian he is."

Something clicked, and in the same instant a beam of light from a powerful electric torch shone in Levison's eyes.

"M-m-my hat! Levison!"

It was an exclamation of utter amazement. At that moment Levison recovered some of his breath, and with it his voice.

"Grundy!" he gasped. "What in the name of grief do you think you're playing at? Let me get up, you unutterable idiot!" Grundy vacated his seat on Levison's chest and snorted disgustedly.

"Of all the fatheaded chumps," he said witheringly, "you take the cake, Levison! It's just what I might have expected you to do—but in like this and spoil everything!"

"Spoil everything?" echoed Levison, rising to his feet. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"Never mind what I'm talking about! What do you mean by creeping about and climbing stiles in the middle of the night like a blessed cat-burglar?" demanded Grundy indignantly. "Is that any way for a chap to behave? How did I know who you were? I thought you were one of those men."

"What men?"

"How do I know what men they are?" was Grundy's astonishing reply. "They're rotters and ruffians, and probably footpads and burglars, for all I know."

"Look out!" came an alarmed exclamation in the voice of Wilkins. "Here they come!"

"Where?" shouted Grundy, springing round. "Let me get at them! Shine that light, Wilkins!"

Wilkins' share in this extraordinary expedition of Grundy's appeared to be that of providing the lighting effects. He swung the beam of the torch round in obedience to his leader's behest, and a half-dozen or so juniors stood blinking in the radiance which revealed them.

The first of them to recover himself was Blake.

"Turn that blinking light out!" he hissed. "Is that frabjous footler Grundy there?"

"Look here, Blake, who do you think you're—"

"I thought it was you! I heard your foghorn half a mile away! What are you doing here?"

"The same as you," retorted Grundy. "Looking for Tom Merry and Talbot!"

"Wh-a-a-at?"

"Don't shout like that!" snapped Grundy. "I should have thought even you fags would have had sense enough to keep quiet on a job like this."

"Keep quiet!" hissed Blake. "Why, you—you dunderheaded mugwump, you've been shouting loud enough to wake half Wayland up!"

"Half a minute, Blake," put in Levison. "Look here, Grundy, this requires a bit of explaining. You say you're looking for Tom Merry and Talbot. Perhaps you don't mind telling us just what's put it into your head to turn up at this place in the middle of the night."

"Well, I suppose you'll find out sooner or later," replied Grundy grudgingly. "It was Trimble."

"Trimble?"

"Yes. He heard you fellows talking it over this evening, and for some reason or other he came to me with the yarn. I didn't believe him at first, and I gave him a lamming for telling crams; but I was awake when Manners and Lowther left the dorm, so I knew at once there must be something in it. So I brought Wilkins and Gunn along, and came after you."

"Then I suppose it was you we've been hearing about—making noises?" put in Monty Lowther.

"That's so," grinned Gunn. "Grundy fell over a brick in the Rylcombe lane, and we had to hide in a ditch while two of you came back. And then he trod on the bough of a tree, and we had to run behind the hedge—"

"You fellows seem to be losing sight of the fact that this is a serious business, and not a sort of picnic," interrupted Levison. "I've come back to tell you fellows that Wildrake and I tracked those two men—"

"What two men?" interrupted Grundy. "I've seen no men."

"Shut up!" snapped Levison. "You've made nuisance enough of yourself already. They're playing cards in the Blue Pig, and Wildrake's watching for them to come out."

"Well, we're no wiser now than we were at first," said Blake disgustedly.

"I'm inclined to doubt that," drawled Cardew quietly. "In the first place, we know that Wildrake was right about the men who make use of the mill for some purpose or other. And, secondly, we know that there's more about this old mill than meets the eye."

"What do you mean by that exactly?" said Levison keenly.

"Dear man, do I ever mean anything?" said Cardew, and though they could not see his face, they knew that he was smiling his usual exasperating smile. "But supposin' I did, for once, it would be just this. When we first came here, about half an hour ago, there were no lights in the place. Yet those two men came out shortly afterwards. Is it feasible to suppose they'd been sittin' in the dark, playin' cards by the feel of the pips?"

"Well?" said Blake impatiently, as Cardew paused. "I don't see the point."

"No? Well, let me put it this way. Accordin' to local gossip, the old miller had a habit of disappearin' for days at a time. Now, in order to be able to do a thing like that, you need to have more than a habit—you need the means for indulgin' the habit. If the old miller hasn't come out of the mill, and yet he wasn't in the mill—where was the old miller? Tom Merry and Talbot go into the mill, and don't come out again—yet when we search the mill they're not there. Where are Tom Merry and Talbot? We arrive to find the place obviously deserted, yet soon after two men come out of the door. Where have they come from?"

"Is this a time to talk footling rot?" asked Manners angrily. "If you can't—"

"Gad!" came Levison's voice suddenly, in the tones of one to whom enlightenment has just been vouchsafed. "A secret room!"

"A secret room?" echoed Blake incredulously. "Impossible!"

"The whole affair is impossible," pointed out Cardew. "This

is the one impossibility that might be possible. Hallo, what's that?" The hoot of an owl came eerily through the night.

"Somebody using my patrol call," whispered Blake. "Wildrake, for sure."

He replied in a similar fashion.

Thus, reassured, Wildrake suddenly appeared in their midst. He was panting as though he had been running hard.

"They're coming!" he announced. "There's been a shemuzzle at the Blue Pig. One of the men was accused of passing dud notes, and there was a shindy."

"Now's the time to act, then," said Blake. "Get right up against the door, and keep out of sight. As soon as they've gone in, Wildrake and I will creep in after them. The rest of you be ready to make a rush."

The juniors lost no time in getting across to the mill and taking up their positions. Even Grundy came into line and obeyed orders for once.

The sound of voices came from the direction of the lane. It was evident that the men had been drinking, and they were apparently quarrelling. They came straight across the field and into the door of the mill.

Blake and Wildrake were at the door a second afterwards. The two juniors heard a peculiar thudding sound, and the next instant the two men could be seen dimly lit up by a faint glow that seemed to come out of the floor at their feet.

Blake realised that it must be a sort of trapdoor, although he could not recollect having seen anything of the kind during his search of the mill. But he wasted no time in wonderment. He gave a loud shout and sprang forward.

The two men turned with startled exclamations, and one of them reached for his coat-pocket.

There was a crash, and the faint light disappeared as though a door had been suddenly closed.

The rest of the juniors were pouring into the mill. Blake and Wildrake, in the pitch darkness, were trying to locate the men.

Wilkins switched on his electric torch, and the powerful beam shone into the room like a searchlight's ray.

Had Wilkins known more of the character of the men with whom they were dealing he might have been less eager to use his torch.

There came a spurt of flame from a corner of the room, and a bullet whined past Wilkins and passed out of the door. It had obviously been aimed at the torch. Light at that moment was just what the two ruffians desired least of all things—except a clear path to the door.

Another bullet thudded into the woodwork a scant inch away from the hand that held the torch.

And then Grundy most unexpectedly justified his presence.

He snatched the torch from Wilkins and flung it in the direction of those two flashes.

There came the sound of a dull thud, followed by a howl of anguish, and something clattered on the ground. Grundy had knocked the automatic from the man's hand.

It may have been more luck than judgment, but the juniors were not worrying about that at the moment. They were too busy following up their advantage.

Somebody produced another electric lamp, not so powerful as Wilkins had been possessed of, but efficient enough to enable the juniors to locate the ruffians, and make captives of them.

It was left to Levison to solve the secret of the entrance to the secret cellar, for Blake recognised that the position occupied by the stairs was the spot from which he had seen the light coming through the floor.

Levison was an old hand at the task of locating secret springs, and he soon had the moving portion of the stairs swung back.

The door at the bottom presented no difficulties to the juniors. As a matter of fact, it was not locked, but bolted. The rogues realised that a mere lock was not likely to withstand Talbot's skill.

The two imprisoned St. Jim's juniors had heard the revolver shots, so that they were in no wise surprised when the bolts were drawn and the door was flung open by rescuers; but they were certainly amazed by discovering that the rescuers were their own chums—almost as amazed, in fact, as the rescuers themselves were when they learned for what purpose the cellar was being used.

The juniors stared rather curiously at Raymond, but a brief account of his gallant rescue of Tom Merry from the pool set them to wringing his hand and slapping him on the back in as cordial a manner as they had similarly greeted Tom Merry and Talbot.

Wildrake's identification of Raymond—whose footprints he had found on the river bank—as the hitherto unknown rescuer of Lord Eastwood when the peer had been attacked by the footpad, had not been at fault.

It was indeed Raymond who had behaved with such conspicuous gallantry on that occasion, and he had hidden himself upon the appearance of the St. Jim's juniors, fearful of being recognised as the escaped Reformatory boy if by any chance his action should have resulted in any sort of publicity. From the shelter of the undergrowth some distance away he had been a witness of Baggy Trimble's claim to the credit for his bravery—which, of course, explained his enigmatical remark to Talbot that all St. Jim's fellows were not over-scrupulous in such matters.

What happened afterwards hardly needs explaining. Lord Eastwood inquired into the whole business, and young Raymond's character was cleared and a job was found for him. Lord Eastwood did not forget to amply recompense the boy for his conspicuous gallantry, either.

The three ruffians of the mill were duly captured, and they got their fair share of the reward—ten years' hard!

Whatever other adventures befall the chums of St. Jim's they will for ever remember the Mystery of the Mill!

THE END.

(There will be another splendid double-length yarn of St. Jim's next week, chums: "THE BOY FROM BROADWAY!" by Martin Clifford. Don't miss it.)

The Two Aero Chums Again!

Ultima Cornered At Last!

The BULLET FROM NOWHERE!



Another Thrilling Adventure of the Two Young Sleuths, "Live-Wire" Lindsay and his staunch chum Jerry O'Gorman.

By **LESTER BIDSTON.**

CHAPTER 1.

The Experiment!

TWO smiling youths, goggled and helmeted, lounged beside a strangely constructed machine in the Adda Company's drome. The entire staff of the place rioted the "bus" in a grinning circle, and the only serious person in all the crowd was the works manager.

"Gentlemen," the latter said, "for the first time in Adda history, we're handling over a machine without trial tests. We've built according to your orders. You've signed a chit freeing us from all responsibility, but I again beg of you not to attempt to fly this—er—iron foundry!"

Mr. Manager Haslett was almost in tears. He looked upon these customers of his as moneyed cranks, intent upon playing a game the danger of which was beyond their limited understanding. Besides—he was really a kind-hearted chap—it seemed such a pity that people should commit "hari-kari" on a sunny afternoon; and, anyway, it meant a blot on the company's reputation.

The cause of all his fears looked dainty enough to be put in a museum—in fact, Manager Haslett had emphatically stated that was where it ought to be, though he had not intended a compliment when he said it. Actually, it was a dual-control, all-metal machine that glistened silver bright in the sunlight—a bus assembled on Jerry O'Gorman's own ideas, and an extravagance made possible through the generosity of the Maharajah of Rajputana in return for the saving of his valuable jewels.

"Is it hearin' him ye are Lylesey?" Jerry gasped, in reply to Haslett's appeal. "Ochone! An iron foundry! The child av me dhrame's an ir-ron foundry!"

Lyle Lindsay chuckled. "Evidently regards your child as potty!" he murmured; then turned to the manager. "Thanks, dear sir! But we'd better let Jerry keep his dream, even if it turns to a nightmare!"

Haslett gasped. "You'd risk your neck to test your friend's theories?" he demanded.

"Oh, he'd do the same for me!" Lyle smiled. "In fact, if he doesn't break mine to-day, I'll probably break his some other day!"

"Faith, but I bags first turn!" Jerry yelled, climbing quickly into the "pit."

Manager Haslett stared. He had no idea that these two strange fellows had already shared many a hair-raising risk, and never realised that Jerry was one of the cleverest pilots who ever handled a joy-stick. As it was, he resigned himself to the inevitable, and stepped back amongst the crowd now making a lane to give the Lindman Linnet room for a run-off.

"Switch off!" a mechanic called loudly, jumping to the propeller.

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"Switch off!" Jerry yelled.

"Contact!"

The challenge came sharply from the fellow's lips, and, on Jerry's agreement, over bumped the propeller on compression.

The roar of racing engine racketed through the air, and the mechanic sprang clear. Jerry adjusted a switch—a silencer he was experimenting with—moved the stick a trifle forward, drove the bus over twenty yards of smooth turf, then felt her lift as lightly as a swallow.

"An ir-ron foundry, bedad!"

That was all the comment he made on this proof that the machine was, at any rate, not the hopeless failure that Haslett had feared.

And in the seconds that followed Manager Haslett nearly cricked his neck in an attempt to follow the Linnet's flight. Built entirely for speed, mounting an inverted eighty-horsepower engine with down-pointing cylinders, quite thirty per cent. of the drag caused by wind resistance was overcome, and the Linnet lifted into the blue at a truly amazing speed.

"An iron foundry, bedad!" Jerry repeated viciously, easing his feeling by tilting the machine to an almost vertical climb, and reaching a height of five thousand in exactly two minutes and a half.

Even then his outraged feelings forced him to indulge in a "swank" show that normally would have left him cold. He zoomed, hoicked, rolled, and spiralled over Birmingham until its wondering inhabitants marvelled that the flashing streak held together. He was busily engaged in imitating a falling leaf when Lyle called him to account.

"Sorry to spoil sport, old owl," Lyle murmured into the tube, "but you're forgetting that we've a radio test to make as well as a flyin' one!"

"Shure, I did an' all!" Jerry answered, flattening the machine and turning her nose sou'-east. "Faith, I've been so busy hustlin' those Adda slackers that I haven't paid much attention to the radio 'rangements! Phwat is it ye're afther tryin' Lylesey?"

"Well, since Inspector Dixon's been forced to admit the wonders of wireless—thanks to Ultima's little games—I've persuaded him to install a Lindman beam," Lyle answered. "He realises at last that wireless, crooks, and police are life's latest jig-saw puzzle, and, as a practice in beam manipulation, he's going to try to pick us up."

"Some hopes he's got," Jerry grinned—"us playin' skylarkin' up here an' him lost in London!"

"It's a stiff test, but not impos," Lyle replied. "I told him we'll lift from Brummagem at five pip emma, fly on four thousand at eighty per, make straight for St. Paul's, and back to the Adda drome." He turned his attention to a low table that was sunk between them. "Now, Jay, you carry on as I've said, and I'll try the earwiggles ou."

The apparatus on which Lyle now concentrated was no less remarkable than the Linnet in which they sat; for, if Jerry was an expert on matters aeronautic, his chum was a veritable wizard of wireless.

Over their heads, securely clamped by insulators to the plane's stays, a spherical cage of golden wires hung like a skeleton balloon. On the tiny table a second arrangement of wires ran in lessening circles that flared to an inverted snout of close-knit mesh. A third wired mystery—shaped as a miniature clothes-horse—formed a screen behind their chairs, and all three connected by leads to the boxed-in set that fronted Lyle.

Releasing the weighted aerial with a touch of his boot, Lyle switched the set to the plane's engine, donned phones, and tuned in to ninety—the low wave-length previously arranged with Dixon.

The same thought was in each mind—that Dixon's attempt to focus his beam on the Linnet was rather like shooting an arrow at a lightning-flash. Still, it was an interesting experiment, and one that absorbed Lyle to the extent that he hardly realised how swiftly they were devouring distance.

Until they were over the outer suburbs of northern London it was entirely barren of result; then, about seventy minutes after leaving the Adda drome, the Lindman alarm tinkled in Lyle's ears, and he quickly fitted spare phones over Jerry's head.

"That you, Dixon?" he called, bending close to the microphone.

"Dixon it is, with little time to waste on this wonderful toy!" came the inspector's snappy answer. "I'm surprised I've picked you up—I wouldn't have tried for long, my lad—and now I'm—er—ringing off right away!"

"Inspector, your mind sounds as aero-ated as we are!" Lyle chuckled. "Somebody been stinging you with the three-card trick? Or p'raps the missus has been telling you off for stopping out late—eh?"

But Dixon was apparently in no mood for pleasantries.

"Lindsay, you'll be interested to hear that the reward we offered for news of Ultima has at last borne fruit!" he said quickly. "Now, good-bye, for I must hurry back to the Yard!"

"You've got him?" Lyle yelled. "You've really got him?"

"No such luck!" Dixon grunted. "No; but the trail's growing red hot. When I hurried home to keep my promise to you I found a fellow waiting for me—a tough too frightened to come openly to the Yard. He thinks he's spotted Ultima. He tells me that the black ray—"

A shattering explosion smothered the detective's words. It roared and reverberated in the listeners' phones like a clap of overhead thunder. The radio flyers stared aghast into each other's eyes. They shuddered as a shrill scream suddenly broke into a deep, sobbing groan.

"Dixon!" Lyle yelled. "Dixon, are you there, man?"

But an ominous and complete silence was his only answer.

"Dixon!" he again called, then impatiently tore the phones from his head and turned to the speaking-tube.

"It's no good, Jay!" he cried. "I doubt we'll ever hear Dixon's voice again!"

"Great snakes!" Jerry yelled. "The poor beggar's been shot whilst actually speaking to us!"

Lyle nodded grimly.

"Another score to Ultima's account, undoubtedly!" he said bitterly. "The brute must have been in Dixon's house—must have heard Dixon beginning to tell us his whereabouts!"

"And shot him down mercilessly!" Jerry agreed sadly. "But what was he trying to say? Something about a black ray, wasn't it?"

"Oh, that'll keep!" Lyle snapped impatiently. "Dixon lives at Putney—08, Kenyon Road. How soon can you get us there?"

"Land you at Croydon in five minutes—that's the nearest 'drome," Jerry answered.

"Good! I'll arrange a berth," Lyle replied.

Snatching up the earphones, he quickly tuned in to nine hundred.

"Hallo, Croydon!" he called. "Private bus, Lindman Linnet, calling G.E.D., Croydon!"

True to its boast that G.E.D. never sleeps, that it listens for radio calls every minute of the day and night, Croydon instantly answered.

"Hallo, Lindman Linnet!" came the reply. "Croydon Aerodrome speaking! Don't know you, but at your service, Linnet!"

"Arrange landing berth! We touch down in five minutes!" Lyle called. "And whilst you're arranging it, please put me through to Scotland Yard!"

"Th—what d'you say?" Croydon yelled, obviously startled.

"Scotland Yard! And get a move on, old dear!" Lyle snapped. "If you don't know how to switch your receiver on to the land line, I'll instruct!"

"Oh, don't get fresh, Linnet!" Croydon answered. Then, after half a minute's silence: "Speak up, Linnet! The Yard's on!"

"Hallo, Yard!" Lyle called. "Assistant-Commissioner Mann wanted! Urgent call from Inspector Dixon!"

A moment later the now-familiar voice sounded in Lyle's ears.

"Hallo, Dixon, you want me?" Mann demanded.

"This isn't Dixon speaking, Sir William," Lyle explained. "I used his name to get through quickly. You'll remember me, Lyle Lindsay—Ultima affair?"

"I remember you, Lindsay," Mann answered. "What do you want of me?"

"We're flying over London, sir," Lyle said quickly. "A minute ago we were speaking to Dixon. He was telling us that he'd just received news of our famous wireless crook, and that he was about to hurry back to you, when there came the sound of a shot. I'm afraid, sir, that the inspector has fallen to Ultima's vicious spite!"

It takes a lot to startle an assistant-commissioner. If you reported that Mr. George Robey had been seen stealing milk from a baby's bottle, he'd simply order that the bottle be examined for finger-prints.

But for once the C.I.D. expert was jolted out of his accustomed calm.

"What! Dixon shot?" he cried. "You heard it—flying over London? You're sure of what you say, Lindsay?"

"Regret to say I'm only too sure, sir," Lyle answered. "We're near Croydon 'drome now. We'll hurry on to Kenyon Road, all speed!"

Without waiting Mann's answer, Lyle abruptly demanded landing orders from G.E.D.'s operator, and passed them on to Jerry just as the green space came into view.

Dropping in two hair-raising circles, Jerry flattened out against the wind, and touched down within twenty yards of the signal-flag. Jumping out before the propeller stopped its last lazy whirl, the chums found

themselves surrounded by a crowd of wondering officials.

"A strange machine! We expected a crash, the speed you dropped at!" one fellow said. "H'm! An all-metal! Who put it together, sir?"

"Tell you our life-story later! We're in a hurry!" Lyle answered. "Taxi handy, old bean?"

"We've heard your news. The gov'nor's own car's waiting you at the clubhouse!" came the welcome answer.

So were two cups of hot coffee, that were doubly welcome by the two chums after their swift rush through the blue. They nearly scalded their "absorbers"; but time was valuable, and the gov'nor's car was soon bumping over the rutted stretch that lies between clubhouse and road.

Ten minutes later they raced up Kenyon Road immediately in the wake of a big Daimler, and exactly fourteen minutes after speaking to the unlucky inspector.

"Quick work!" Lyle whispered. "What about police traps, Jay? There's Mann himself jumping from the car ahead!" Springing from their own car the instant it slowed, Lyle raced up to the Commissioner and touched him on the arm. "We can come in with you, Sir William?" he asked.

Mann frowned on the crowd who had morbidly gathered near the house, but nodded pleasantly to the speed merchants.

"Come in, of course!" he agreed. "Your news was quickly confirmed by our own men, and I'm glad to say it's better than you feared. Dixon has been badly wounded, but not fatally, we hope."

CHAPTER 2. The Black Ray!

THE house was quite a modest affair, and a young constable immediately led the way to what he named the "back parlour." Here the newcomers found two divisional inspectors standing by the window, obviously dissatisfied with the results of their first quick examination.

"Ah, Raine—Holt!" Mann nodded. "How is Dixon? You've had him moved, I see."

"Dr. Denby has this minute rushed him to hospital, sir," Raine replied. "Left word

for you, Sir William, that he has every hope of Dixon's recovery, but doesn't think there'll be a chance of questioning him for several days."

"And his injury?" Mann demanded.

"A very strange one," Raine answered. "A bullet along the right side of his head had gouged the bone without actually splintering it. A miraculous escape, though Denby makes light of it."

"H'm! Any trace of the gunman?" Mann asked.

Raine hesitated, and Holt stepped forward.

"There's neither trace of gunman nor gun," he sighed. "In fact— But we'd better put the affair in proper order, Sir William. We've questioned Mrs. Dixon, and she tells us that Dixon had a long interview with a disreputable caller, who came muffled to the eyes. They talked in this room—she has no idea on what subject—but she eventually heard Dixon saying "Afternoon!" to the fellow at the front door. Without coming into the kitchen where she sat, the inspector immediately returned here, and again closed and locked the door. For a minute she heard no sound; then came Dixon's voice, a shot, a broken scream. Unable to get in, she immediately telephoned the station, and was preparing to break the yard window when we arrived."

The Commissioner frowned.

"But if the door was locked, his assailant must have left by the window!" he snapped.

"That's the trouble, sir—the window was bolted as securely as the door was locked," Raine answered, in frowning perplexity.

"A bullet hole—" Mann began irritably.

"Not through the window—every pane is unbroken," Raine sighed.

"But, confound it, you're suggesting the impossible!" Mann snapped, staring about the place.

Raine put his finger immediately below a tiny break in the wall that divided room from hall—a mark eight feet from the ground, and one that Raine could just reach at arm's limit.

"Here's the bullet, sir," he said, "though how it could damage Dixon and yet lodge at this height beats me."

Sir William jumped on a chair, examined the sinister hole at close quarters, and stepped down. Then, slowly, he toured the room, and finally returned to the group with an expression of bewilderment on his shrewd face.

"Let us have the thing clear," he said very quietly. "Dixon saw his visitor



"You've never had the pleasure of meeting Ultima—allow me!" With a lightning sweep of his arm, Lyle knocked the carstaker's hat from his head and, with it, the ruddy wig that had altered Ultima's whole appearance.

out, returned here, locked the door, and was shot a minute later. You had to break the door down, you find Dixon wounded and alone, yet there's no trace of a bullet being fired through the door, wall, or window."

"That's correct," Raine admitted. "In every detail," Holt agreed. "It's an uncanny business, but there must be an explanation somewhere."

The Commissioner's reply to this obvious truth remained unuttered, for at that moment Lyle stepped forward.

"Possibly we can put the explanation into English for you," he suggested quietly.

The divisional man stared. It was no uncommon thing for strangers to be with the Chief—strangers who usually regarded their deductions on matters criminal with suitable awe. But for one to coolly and calmly suggest—as Lyle was doing—that he saw a way through the queerest maze they'd ever been lost in was beyond the limit, and only the Chief's presence saved Lyle from a wordy onslaught.

But their discomfort was so plain, they made so little attempt to hide their sarcastic smiles, that the Commissioner felt forced to utter a word of explanation.

"They're usually worth listening to," he assured his men. "You've heard of Lindsay and O'Gorman, the fellows who, I'm bound to admit, have done more to spoil Ultima's coups than all the police of England." Abruptly, he turned piercing eyes on Lyle. "Now, sir, we're waiting."

"You'll remember, sir, that Dixon was wireless to us, and that we heard the report of the gun from our plane?" Lyle began.

"You spoke of Ultima," Mann replied; adding ruefully: "I'm afraid he's getting farther away every moment."

"I'm confident he was miles away when the gun was fired," Lyle answered. "I'll repeat his actual words. After telling us that his visitor was claiming the reward, and that he must hurry back to the Yard, he went on: 'He thinks he has spotted Ultima. He tells me that the black ray—'"

"The black ray?" Mann interrupted sharply. "What on earth is the black ray?"

"We haven't the least idea," Lyle admitted. "Anyway, he was speaking of this black ray when we heard the shattering explosion of the gun mingling with the scream his wife mentioned."

The Commissioner frowned, and glanced askance at the four-valve set that rested in disorderly array on a small table.

"It tells us so much—and so little," he sighed. "But go on, sir."

"Well, Dixon must have been sitting here, his mouth close to the microphone," Lyle answered, dropping into a chair facing the set. "He'd be just about in the position I now occupy."

A sharp gasp came from Jerry. He saw the drift of Lyle's demonstration even before the C.I.D. men. But the three experts clustered round Lyle, following his words and actions with keen interest.

"H'm—reconstructing the crime," Sir William muttered. "Well, Lindsay?"

Lyle's gaze fixed on the plugged wall fronting him.

"That's about all, sir," he said quietly. "Bullets fly straight, I believe."

Now that they had a thread to grasp, Mann and his assistants were quick to take Lyle's hint.

"By George!" Mann cried. "A line from the bullet to your head! Continue it, it leads to the—firegrate!"

"To beneath the grate, I'm atter thinkin'," Jerry suggested.

"Which means—the house next door!" Raine cried, dropping to hands and knees and peering under the firebars. "H'm, a ventilator plate—holed in twenty places. No clue this side, Sir William."

"We'll try the house next door," Mann answered quickly. "Holt, over the wall and guard the rear—we'll try the front."

Rather to his surprise, the door opened to Mann's first peremptory knock. A little wisp of a woman, grey-haired and obviously alarmed, stood framed in the opening, having far more the appearance of a terrified rabbit than the master-criminal the hunters wanted.

"Your pardon, ma'am—there's trouble next door," Mann began politely.

"I know, sir—it's dreadful," the woman

sniffed. "Poor Mr. Dixon—such a nice man he was."

"And still is," Mann smiled. "But come, ma'am, we must look through your house." He stepped into the passage as the woman jumped back in alarm. "By the way, who lives here beside you?" he asked sharply.

"N-no one, sir," the woman stammered. "I have lodgers sometimes, sir—if you hear of any, you'll recommend Mrs. Watson as a respectable widder woman?"

"We'll inspect your back room first," Mann answered pointedly. "You've a man outside, Raine? Get him to run through the house to confirm that Mrs. Watson is alone."

Mrs. Watson led the way, doubtful as to whether they were accusing her of murder or thinking of renting her spare room.

Entering a room of exactly similar build to the one they'd left, four pairs of eyes focused on the fireplace—and, behind Lyle's back, Raine smiled at the absence of gun or trace of wireless.

"What becomes of your theory now, Lindsay?" the Commissioner asked.

"It's still there," Lyle answered, stepping to the grate and lighting the dark recess with a flaring match.

But not the slightest sign of anything beyond the usual tiles and metal-work rewarded the closest inspection.

Ruefully enough, Lyle dropped the burnt match on the hearth and stared down in frowning perplexity. But Mann, after satisfying himself that the grate was entirely commonplace, quickly voiced his irritation.

"You persist in your fantastic idea?" he demanded.

"I must do," Lyle answered obstinately. "I'm confident the shot was fired by wireless, and I'm confident we traced its line accurately."

He mused in silence for a moment, then turned sharply to the amazed landlady.

"Mrs. Watson, your last lodger, now?" he asked. "Quiet studios sort of fellow; kept to his room—didn't give you overmuch bother, did he?"

"Why, sir, you must ha' known him," Mrs. Watson replied. "Such a nice man—wouldn't have the best room when I offered it, said 'e'd be cosier in this 'un. Used to shut himself up all day, an' sit up here half the night. Paid me extra, he did, for using the light so late, without me even asking of him."

"Ah! And how did he pass the time away?" Lyle inquired. "Did a lot of reading, I suppose?"

Mrs. Watson shook her faded locks vigorously.

"Oh, no, sir; you're wrong this time," she beamed. "'E was a sculptured artist."

"A sculptor?" Lyle murmured, flashing a glance at the Commissioner.

"That's it—a sculptor," the landlady agreed eagerly. "Used to cut things out o' stone and marble—many the night his little tapping hammer has soothed me to sleep."

"When did he leave you, lady?" Lyle asked quietly.

"Only two mornings since," Mrs. Watson sighed. "He was up all that night—I 'appened to wake early an' heard the tap, tap, tap—an' at breakfast he said he was called away, suddin-like. He gave me money, said he'd come back, and—"

"We'll hope he will," Lyle grinned, ruthlessly breaking the lady's chatter. "Meanwhile, if you own a chisel, I'd be glad to borrow it."

"There's one under your nose," Mrs. Watson giggled. "Dear Mr. Smith left some of his tools in this cabinet."

The little woman openly regarded Lyle as a humorist; but the smirking smile soon left her face when he began tearing her china tiles from the hearth.

And suddenly Jerry guessed the game.

"Shure, missus," he yelled, "if it's a pickaxe handy ye have, it's a hand I'll be lendin' him!"

A pickaxe was not forthcoming, but Jerry's hands proved almost as useful once a hole was made, and within two minutes Lyle was justifying his obstinacy.

"Here you are, sir!" he suddenly yelled. "Here's the giddy little sculpturing that kept Smith up o' nights!"

Mann and Raine were already on their knees, keenly following the chums' activities. Now, to their amazement, they saw a compact six-valve set resting on the rough concrete foundation, two feet below the boarded floor.

"Clever chap—Ultima!" Lyle chuckled before the others could voice their surprise. "Must have spotted Dixon installing a wireless, argued danger to himself, took rooms here, and, under the guise of sculptor, had liberty to do all the jolly old hammering he wanted." His hand groped beneath the firewell.

"You see, there's a Lindman alarm apparatus attached to the set, but there's a wire instead of bell running from it. Feel along here, Sir William. You'll touch the gun that still points directly on anyone sitting at Dixon's microphone."

"A most infernal trap!" the Commissioner muttered bitterly. "I'd never have thought it possible, Lindsay!"

"The secret of the stolen beam has made it only too possible," Lyle answered.

"Ultima simply directed the beam on Dixon's set; he'd easily find the wave we used. Then, listening in, he's heard Dixon's words, tuned his loaded wave on to this thing, and fired the gun!"

The Commissioner's lips closed in a thin, straight line.

"You've been keen, Lindsay—amazingly keen!" he said. "Your wireless knowledge is wonderful; but is it wonderful enough to find the source of the beam that fired this hidden gun?"

Lyle shook his head.

"No, sir," he answered. "The wave could easily carry an operating load four or five miles, and I'm afraid it isn't in human skill to trace a beam that's once gone dead."

"Then, in spite of your discoveries, we're no nearer Ultima than we were before!" Mann sighed.

"When Dixon recovers—" Raine began.

"Ultima will be far away!" Mann interrupted testily. He turned inquiring eyes on the radio chums. "Dixon gave a hint when he spoke of the black ray. Have you any ideas? I know you're particularly well primed on beams and rays."

"But not on any black ray," Lyle answered. "I've read of green rays and death rays in sensational fiction, but the black ray's a new one to me."

"Then, as you suggest, Raine, we can only wait Dixon's recovery!" Mann sighed.

It looked an impasse. They certainly appeared to have come up against a dead end—when Jerry sent them questing along a new road. Since first entering Dixon's house he had been remarkably quiet. Only when the Commissioner appeared ready to abandon the strange affair as hopeless did he venture to air the half-formed idea that troubled him.

"Shure, now, I'm wontherin' if Misther Dixon really meant a ray—black, grane, pink, or any other sort?" he began doubtfully.

"You tell me he distinctly said 'the black ray'!" Mann snapped. "Are you beginning to doubt your own ears, Mr. O'Gorman?"

"Bedad, me ears are sound, but ye must remember th' inspector's voice snapped off as suddinly as this owld gun exploded."

Jerry answered. "Faith, we've taken it for granted he was speaking as an actual ray—a wireless beam or a searchlight ray—haven't we?"

"Of course we have," Mann admitted.

"I fail to see how we can place other meaning on his words."

"But I do, sir!" Lyle broke in quickly. "I see what Jerry's driving at. Dixon's voice 'cut' like a lightning-flash. Jay means that perhaps the word 'ray' was only the part of another word with an entirely different meaning." His forehead ridged with an effort of thought. "Let's see, now! Ray, rain, radiator—"

"Rats?" Jerry suggested hopefully.

"Rats to you!" Lyle snapped. Then:

"Raid, range, Raymond—"

Not to be outdone, Jerry broke in:

"Raise, rave, raven—"

Lyle's head shot up as though someone had landed him a generous chin "clip."

"Raven!" he yelled. "That sounds sense, anyway! I wonder—I wonder if poor Dixon was trying to tell us that Ultima was hiding in some place named the Black Raven?"

Then Raine chipped in.

"By George!" he cried. "I believe you've hit it! There is a Black Raven—a questionable lodging-house 'ours' have raided above once!"

"Where is it, Raine?" Mann demanded.

"Close to the Bush, sir," the inspector answered quickly.

"Then come! There's a chance in a million we're not too late!" Sir William cried, striding for the street.

CHAPTER 3.

"I'm Cornered—Beaten!"

AT such bewildering speed did this radio drama unfold that barely ninety minutes elapsed between the beginning of the Linnet's momentous trial flight from Birmingham and the stopping of the Commissioner's car in front of the notorious Black Raven.

Telephoning ahead, Sir William had ordered a score of men to surround the place. In the gathering dusk the chums glimpsed shadowy forms that proved how quickly he had been obeyed.

"Look's like Ulty's last chapter if he's really in this frowsty show!" Lyle whispered, following the Commissioner into the gloomy hall.

Perhaps later, when night was fully established, the place would be illuminated. At present the intruders were hardly able to make out the general details, except that the bare hall had a small glass office near the doorway, and that an attendant, or janitor, lounged sleepily over a paper-strewn table.

Apparently, the surprise descent of officers had passed unnoticed. Only when the Commissioner tapped on the glass wall did the fellow lift his head and stare surlily at them.

"A word with you, my lad," Sir William said, beckoning the man out.

Slowly, reluctantly, the fellow left his seat and slouched from office to hall.

"Watcher want?" he growled. "Bif it's rooms, the book's not open 'f another hour!"

"It's one of your lodgers we want!" Mann snapped. "I may as well tell you the house is surrounded, a warrant was signed five minutes ago, and that we intend to search every hole and corner and to question every living being in the place!"

"Bah! Blinkin' bullyin' bulldozers!" the fellow mumbled under his breath, yet loud enough for Lyle's super-sensitive ear to catch the words. Then, louder: "Well, we ain't responsible f' the blokes what stop here! Y' can poke about anyhow yer like!"

"We'll begin by having the lights on!" Mann invited.

"Ho! Will yer?" the attendant growled hoarsely. "I got orders not to waste juice 'fore dark, an' I ain't going to!"

But Jerry's keen eyes had located the switchboard. Almost before the fellow had finished speaking he flooded the hall with light.

"A-look yere—" the creature began explosively.

"That'll do!" Mann snapped. "No good talking to this fool, Raine! Call the men in, and begin!"

"One moment, Raine," said Lyle quietly. "You've heard a lot about Ultima. You've never had the pleasure of meeting him. Allow me!"

With a lightning sweep of his arm, Lyle knocked the caretaker's hat from his head, and with it the ruddy wig that had altered Ultima's whole appearance.

"Weepin' William—it is!" Jerry whispered.

For several seconds the staggering surprise held the C.I.D. men speechless. Then Ultima laughed.

"So you've brought the impossible to pass—and I lose," he said affably. "Had no idea you were visitin'—merely had time to jump into the office and find a job when I sighted you enterin'." He drew himself up, and bowed sardonically to Mann. "Sir William, the last time I had the pleasure we were imbibin' tea and tasty tit-bits at Lady Daventry's. You remember?"

"You scoundrel!" Mann answered seathingly. "Raine, the bracelets—get it over quickly!"

Ultima held out his hands invitingly, those brilliant eyes of his holding mocking mystery as he smiled at the youths who had again outwitted him.

And, somehow, in that moment the chums almost pitied him. His coups—and not all of them had gone astray—had been so magnificent, so brilliantly planned, that this tame arrest seemed a sordid anti-climax. The thought of a golden eagle destined for a cage crossed Lyle's mind.

"Now, my lad, no nonsense!" Raine ordered.

"No nonsense," Ultima agreed. "I'm cornered—and beaten."

Then, of a sudden, the crook's outstretched hands gripped the lapels of Raine's coat. The bewildered detective was pulled forward, and, having lost his balance, came hurtling back into the chums like a blundering elephant!

They crashed to the floor in a jumbled



In the gloom, the startled pursuers had a vision of the great machine nose-diving to the sea. Then a mighty splash and—nothing. "Phew—Ultima's gone!" Lyle gasped. "How absolutely awful!"

heap, conscious of the Commissioner's hoarse yell and the thud, thud of racing feet. Sorting out with all speed, they saw Mann nursing a bruised jaw and staggering towards the street door.

A moment later they were on his heels—in time to see Mann's chauffeur sprawling on the pavement, the car gathering speed and Ultima crouching over the wheel!

"Out of the way, men!" the Commissioner yelled to the officers who closed in, a fraction too late. "The ruffian—he's wriggled from beneath our very finger-tips!"

Angered almost to madness, Mann streaked for the nearest police van that had brought half his now useless helpers. Realising that if Ultima was lost sight of for a single second in that crowded district he was probably lost for ever, the Commissioner did a most unprofessional thing—he let the car all out, left his men standing open-mouthed on the pavement, and took up a lone-hand pursuit.

"Pile in, Jay!" Lyle yelled, springing into the second van and dashing away whilst Jerry was still negotiating the splashboard.

They heard a confused howl from the uniformed army, but blithely ignored it—Lyle alert to avoid unwary pedestrians, and Jerry, focusing his keen sight on the van ahead.

Luck was with Ultima in the fact that an antumn mist made the twilight shadowy and unreal. Of the roads he took and risks he accepted the chums were entirely ignorant, for they knew little of outer London and nothing at all of the side streets that the wily crook so persistently hugged.

Unable to see his car, barely able to maintain their place about fifty yards behind Mann, they glimpsed the faces of a shocked public, and heard scores of cries that were quite unintelligible to them.

"Wideawake Ulty," Jerry chuckled. "He knows police vans weren't made for jazzing, and he's dodging round corners like a fly in a jigsaw puzzle."

"He's either a genius or a madman," Lyle growled. "It's only a question of minutes before half the police of London close in on him."

Ultima was anything but mad, as Lyle, in reality, knew. Desperate, yes—and grimly determined not to be taken. Yet, from the very first second of that hurtling onrush, he must have had a definite object, and, with sublime skill, played "the limit" on freedom or oblivion.

The first hint of his monumental audacity came when Jerry recognised their locality.

"Queer chance, Lyle!" he yelled. "D'ye notice that we've circled back to the Croydon road?"

Lyle's answer was a non-committal grunt. The lumbering car, rocking and swaying, pulled like an obstinate mule, and demanded his closest attention.

Commissioner Mann could have told that the big Daimler—now free of London's traffic—was rapidly dropping them behind, that Ultima stood every chance of getting clean away. But, because Mann's huge vehicle masked the view throughout the chase, this disappointing knowledge was withheld. What they did see was the leading van suddenly slowing, clumsily swerving, and finally crashing into the wide gateway of the Croydon aviation station.

Lyle ground his car to a tyre-ripped standstill scarce three yards behind the wreckage, to find a highly irritated police chief ruefully regarding the mess he had made, and to see a squad of newly-uniformed motor scouts jumping from their bikes.

Mann accepted the chums' appearance without comment—he had other and more annoying things to think of.

"Confound it all!" he yelled. "The ruffian saw he was trapped between us, and cleverly dodged in here. But he's jumped into a blind alley. Keep together; we'll pin him down this time!"

Entering the grounds by climbing the bonnet of the crumpled van, they were confronted by a startled crowd from the clubhouse—off-duty pilots and attendants brought hither by the tearing crash of Mann's arrival.

The Commissioner cut short the confused questions that greeted his appearance.

"Any of you sight a Daimler rushing past a minute since?" he demanded loudly.

"Its old petrol-tank nearly scuppered me," one pilot answered crossly. "Beastly road-hog—I'd like to meet him again!" He caught sight of the uniformed men, now grouping behind their chief. "Hallo—police? Anything wrong, sir?"

As if in answer, the snap of a fired gun from the gloom ahead mingled with an ominous confusion of angry yells. That was enough. The whole crowd raced forward, a struggling line led by the radio chums and an alert pilot.

Abruptly, they emerged from a darkening avenue to a brilliantly lighted landing-ground—and dramatic confusion.

Ultima was there, seated in the pit of a lately arrived Continental plane—a sinister figure holding one palsied mechanic motionless with a pointed automatic that glinted blue-grey in the electric glare. A helmeted pilot writhed in agony on the green, wheel-rutted turf, a dozen frightened figures streaked for safety in all directions! Even as the chums dashed forward, the thunderous roar of racing engine broke out, and the heavy bus began to trundle along the ground.

With a tremendous spurt, Jerry touched and clutched the bottom main plane as the machine began its lift. His feet were torn

from the ground—then a dead weight fastened on his legs, and he fell and rolled a dozen yards on the spongy turf.

"You blinkin' ass!" Lyle roared. "You'd never have got near Ulty—the wind would have whipped you away and crashed you with broken neck the moment he got up speed. Look at him now, you zany—roaring away like a tornado up there!"

Jerry rubbed a bruised elbow tenderly.

"Shure, I know—but I never thowt av it at th' toime," he muttered contritely.

But Lyle had whipped round on the mechanic who had been forced to do Ultima's service.

"The Lindman Linnet—we own it," he said quickly. "D'you know if she's been housed yet?"

"No; you left no orders," the fellow answered; adding eagerly: "You're going up, sir?"

Lyle nodded.

"Know where she is?" he demanded.

"Sure," the mechanic grinned. "She's an original we've all been inspecting. Come along."

On the run, he dashed through a rail-off enclosure, skirted a wooden booking-office, and crossed a second open field.

"Here we are!" he cried. "Dead level run-off; you'll need no lights."

"You'll start her up, bhoys?" Jerry yelled, as they tumbled in.

"On your word!" the mechanic shouted. The customary ritual of "switch" and "contact" were omitted.

"Lerrer rip!" Jay mouthed, and the propeller bumped over on the instant.

The Linnet swirled aloft like a startled plover. If other machines took the air in pursuit of the stolen bus, the chums never sighted them. They were up and away whilst Croydon still gasped astonishment—and astonishment doubled when the second machine so swiftly whined up into the darkling blue.

"Ulty's risking no lights!" Jerry yelled into the tube. "We've only the rattle av his engines to go by."

Lyle nodded.

"Throw her up, Jay," he answered. "There's still light enough, if only we can get clear of this beastly mist."

And throw her up Jay did—at an angle that would have amazed our pilots of the old War days. (They, poor chaps, had to circle laboriously upwards in huge spirals, but this amazing Linnet simply sat on her tail and whizzed aloft like a rocket.)

At four thousand Jerry gradually eased her to the level, applied the silencer that made her engine less noisy than that of a train, and streaked away for the Channel at a speed that soon touched ninety.

"Petrol-gauge isn't too healthy," Lyle advised.

"She's a dainty feeder!" Jerry reassured him.

After that there was silence for several minutes. Then suddenly Lyle cocked an ear, stretched round the edge of the screen, and nearly had his head torn from his shoulders by the rushing wind.

"Ouch!" he yelled. "Talk about the slog of a bruiser's fist! But listen! We're picking him up, or I'm hearing ghosts!"

For a brief second Jerry completely smothered his engine, and, faintly but distinctly, the throb of driven machinery floated back to them.

"Makin' over Channel," he hazarded, "hopin', maybe, to touch down on lonely Dutch sands."

"Whip her up, then, Jay!" Lyle answered tersely.

For a while the subdued purr of the stolen bus seemed to diminish, as though Ultima was edging away. Then the crook's luck broke. They rushed beyond the coast, out over the water, and shot from mist to clear twilight.

"There she goes!" Jerry cried, sighting the big plane a second before Lyle. "Seven miles to span! We'll do it, begor!"

Nursing the Linnet with delicate touch, he gradually speeded up. Ninety-five, hundred—five—ten, and there, apparently, she touched maximum.

"Not so bad for a private runabout!" Lyle thought, and watched the Croydon plane change from midge to dragon-fly, to fleeing eagle, and, finally, to the great air-monster she really was.

"Now, Lylesey, I'll be on his tail in two-tyos!" Jerry yelled. "Got a programme?"

Lyle nodded.

"Let him see us!" he ordered. "I want to get him talking!"

But when Jerry audaciously loomed up beside Ultima's wing the crook did not talk—he fired, and the twang of a snapped stay within six inches of Lyle's head showed how viciously accurate his aim had been.

Discreetly Jerry dropped behind, avoiding the big plane's "backwash," but keeping within fifty yards of the other.

Lyle was perfectly content. He calmly fitted phones on his own and Jerry's head, and started the set going. A little preliminary tuning, then a responsive howl, and he knew the rogue was listening.

"Ultima, I warn you that I've a Lindman beam aboard!" he mouthed into the microphone. "You know its power! You know I can shatter your magneto the moment I want to! The choice is yours! Turn again to Croydon, or crash!"

Ultima never took the trouble to answer. Instead, he swerved, dropped a hundred feet, and sent a stream of bullets pinging viciously upwards.

But Jerry was awake—very wide awake. Even as the big bus began to drop, he pushed the stick forward, kicked the Linnet's tail into the air, and dived like a plumbings-tone!

The Linnet's whirling propeller passed within three yards of Ultima's wing. In the instant of passing Jerry began to ease the stick back to his chest, turning his dive into a graceful loop, and completely ringing the heavy passenger machine.

It was a daring manoeuvre, but it meant that Ultima wasted his bullets on empty air—that the little Linnet was once again hidden behind his tail and beyond the reach of his murderous gun.

It meant more, for Ultima, reckoning that what Jerry could perform he could follow, started a reckless swirling and turning in a demented attempt to get broadside on with his pursuers.

But Jerry just grinned, turned as Ultima turned, dropped as he dropped, and played "follow my leader" with uncanny skill. Wilder and wilder grew the crook's gyrations, and suddenly the deadly folly of torturing a heavy plane whilst racing its engine

was brought home to Ultima in grim fashion.

A tearing zipp—a wing hung limply by its wires! In the gloom the startled pursuers had a vision of the great machine nose-diving to the sea. They saw the broken wing tear upwards and away; they watched it float down as if in sympathy. Then a mighty splash—and nothing!

"Phew! He's gone!" Lyle gasped. "How absolutely awful!"

"It is; but it's exactly the end he meant for us!" Jerry growled.

Yet that truth did not prevent Jerry from planing perilously close to the waters and cruising about for long minutes in the hope that Ultima had escaped plunging with the machine to the ocean's bed.

At best it was but a flimsy chance. They sighted the broken wing, but never a sign or sound of the daring crook gladdened their eyes. Rebel against order and honesty though he was, the radio partners had a moment of sorrow that the brilliant, plucky aristocrat's day had so suddenly ended.

Eventually, when night had made the ocean a waste of brooding mystery, they abandoned the search and turned the Linnet's nose to England.

In mist-gripped London Commissioner Mann sat disconsolate in his office. Even the news that Dixon was conscious and out of danger did little to dispel the black gloom that gripped him.

"It's too bad! Those poor fellows!" he mused, and sighed. "Unarmed, unprepared, tilting a toy plane against an aerial dreadnought driven by a desperate madman!"

Then his telephone shrilled raucously.

"Hallo!" he called languidly, and in a moment sat bolt upright in his chair.

"What! You, Lindsay!" he yelled.

"Over the Channel, speaking via Croydon wireless! You're safe? Ultima crashed, you say?"

He listened, amazed, to Lyle's modest story.

"Boys, you've done splendidly!" he broke in later. "You've earned the rewards ten times over, and you've earned England's gratitude!"

Again he listened, and slowly his stern face softened to a boyish grin.

"Oh, you'll have no mouldy old reward? You'll have a hot feed and plenty of it twice over—eh? So you will! I'll be at Croydon to see you get it! And, by the way, the Yard needs fellows like you! There's two vacant lines on the pay-roll that'll look quite nice with the names of Lindsay and O'Gorman on them! Think it over, lads! We'll welcome you!"

THE END.

(Look out for another thrilling adventure yarn, dealing with Lyle Lindsay and Jerry O'Gorman, the two Aero Adventurers.)

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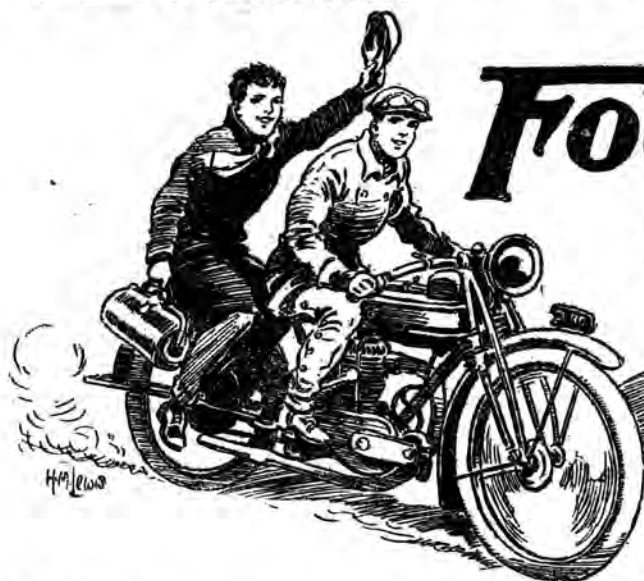
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A thrilling yarn, telling of the trials and tribulations of young Hal Chester, in his bid for fame on the footer field.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED.

HAROLD CHESTER, a well-knit youngster in his teens, and a member of the Kingsdown Football Club. His love for football earns for him the disapproval of

JAMES HENSON, his stepfather, a Nettingham grocer, in whose employ Hal Chester is. Like the rest of the employees at Henson's, Harold finds his stepfather a very hard taskmaster. First of all, his stepfather dislikes him; secondly, James Henson hates football; and, thirdly, he believes that he—Harold—is an idler.

An important match was down for decision on Saturday for which Hal had already been granted permission to assist his team. But when the great day comes Mr. Henson cancels his promise. Hal has pledged himself to play for his team. He was considered one of the best players in the club, and could not very well let his side down.

Suffering from a sense of injustice, Hal is determined to turn out for his team, come what may.

But luck is against the lad, for in the match he is badly hurt

by one of the opposing backs. It is late when he returns home, weary and in great pain, and he finds the door locked against him.

He meets an old friend, however, in Tommy Bell, who is well in with the management of the Nettingham Town Football Club. Hal is given a trial with the professionals, but the older players, envious of his play, starve the lad, and he is turned down.

Still convinced of his chum's prowess, Tommy Bell interviews the manager of Nettingham United, and Hal is given a chance with them.

It was an "on" day for Hal, for his side proves victorious by three clear goals, all of which are scored by Hal himself. And, to crown it all, the United's opponents had been Nettingham Town, the team that had turned Hal down as being no good.

George Bliss, the Town's manager, who had witnessed Hal's great display, waited on the young player, and ventured a question.

"I'm sorry," answered Hal, "but I'm going to sign on for the United, the team that's given me my chance!"

(Now read on.)

Disappointed Hope!

MANAGER GEORGE BLISS stared at Hal in dismayed surprise. He scarcely knew what to reply. In his heart he knew that he deserved the rebuff.

For once in a way he had allowed the football instinct that had served him so well to lie dormant when a great chance had come to him, for there had been sufficient evidence during the progress of the game that afternoon to show that Hal Chester was a forward of far from ordinary class, young in years though he might be.

At last he spoke.

"But I gave you your first chance, boy!" he said.

Hal's face broadened merrily at that. It was an odd thing, but Hal found all the old buoyancy of spirit that had been a part of him when he had played for Kingsdown Athletic come back to him. During those early days, after his stepfather had turned him away from home, the boy had been weighed down by a deep depression, hardly knowing what to do for the best, and nervous as to the future.

His failure in that trial for the Town's Reserves had deepened his dejection. Even the raillery of Tommy Bell, who had for ever encouraged him, saying that he would be bound to make his mark in the future, had failed to rouse him.

Perhaps the after effects of his injury and a latent chill had helped to lower his spirits. But to-day he had played with all the ease, dash, and cunning of old. He had discovered that even a League defence was not unbeatable. He had left the field to a ringing chorus of praise.

He knew now that he was good for big football.

And he was sufficiently human to rejoice in having Manager George Bliss of Nettingham Town as a suppliant.

Now, trainer Ben Robinson, who had listened to what they were saying, and who also had been greatly impressed by Hal's form that day, put in a word.

"Quite right, Hal boy!" he said, with a geniality in strange contrast to the frozen attitude he had adopted when first informed that this boy was to be given a chance of playing for the Town. "Mr. Bliss was the first to give you a chance!"

"And he turned me down!" returned Hal sharply. "And do you remember what you said, Ben—that the Town didn't want any kids in the team!"

The trainer flushed guiltily.

"It was only my little joke," he said. "I can 'ave a little joke, can't I?"

"Joke or no joke," answered Hal, "I was informed last Monday that I wasn't wanted at the City Ground. But they didn't mind giving me a show at Riverside. I think I made good."

"You played well, boy," the manager admitted. "But you'd be better supported if you came to us. We're a happy family at the City Ground. You're a pal of Tommy Bell's. Look here, if you sign on for us, I'll make it well worth your while—just name the wages you want. I don't suppose we shall quarrel over terms. We couldn't give a youngster like you the maximum, of course, but we'll pay you whatever you and Tommy Bell think fair. How about making Tommy arbiter?"

Hal shook his head. Never had he seen football officials so eager to get a player. He loved having George Bliss on the rack. Why not make him realise that he, Hal, was really worth while troubling about?

"Nothing doing!" he said, as he turned away. "They want me here. I shall sign on for the United if they ask me."

"Wait a moment, then," said the manager of Nettingham Town, placing a hand upon Hal's shoulder. "Let's talk it over. Wait till Tommy Bell comes out of the dressing-room. Come and talk to some of our directors. We're not going to let you go like this."

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Inwardly Hal was laughing. Outwardly he was as grave as the Sphinx.

"No," he said. "I can't have my hand forced like that, sir—thank you!"

"Ben," groaned George Bliss, as he watched Hal's retreating figure, "I haven't made many mistakes as a football manager, but I've struck a bloomer this time! That boy has the makings of a great player, and yet we couldn't see it when he played for us against Northampton Reserves, and you are also partly to blame that we turned him down—"

"And we weren't the only ones, either!" returned the trainer. "There were some directors who watched him play and who couldn't see any good in him, either, you know."

The manager sighed.

"Well, there it is," he said. "United get him. 'Pon my soul, they seem to have all the luck!"

Glancing down the hall, he saw Hal stopped by Billy Chatsworth and two smiling directors of the rival club.

George Bliss wouldn't have allowed curiosity to carry him so far as a rule, but this afternoon he could not help it. He hastened after them, saw them vanish behind a door marked "Private," and with a muttered growl came back to meet Tommy Bell at the door of the visitors' dressing-room.

Tommy Bell, being one of the best and brightest of boys, was on the best of terms with Bliss.

His mouth stretched in a grin as he studied the glum face of the manager now.

"Hallo, George!" he remarked. "What sort of snag have you struck?"

"The rock of disappointed hope," grumbled George Bliss dejectedly. "Tommy, why didn't I take your word on the question of Hal Chester's ability? That kid was wonderful this afternoon. Look what he did against our best. I cornered him just now, of course, and begged him to sign for us—but he won't do it!"

Tommy frowned, thinking the while. His smile had gone.

Of course, if Hal had signed for the United it served Bliss right. It would be only fair to the United, too, seeing that they had presented Hal with the golden opportunity of revealing his real form.

Tommy had not tried to persuade Hal in any way, but he

had believed that when it came to the pinch Hal would join the Town in order to be with him and Dicky Double.

"Where is he now?" asked Tommy Bell sharply.

George Bliss explained.

"Gone in to the manager's office, eh?" exclaimed Tommy. "And the United's directors are with him? George, it looks bad! You're going to lose him. I reckon you're a mug! Didn't I tell you that he was a far better player than ever I or Dicky Double was when we were at school?"

"Yes; but school is school and League football is League football," returned Bliss.

"It's not so long since we were at school, anyway," shot back Tommy. "And didn't I tell you how well he played for Kingsdown Athletic? Couldn't you have found out by appealing to their secretary just how good Hal was? Weren't you experienced enough to make the necessary allowance when you knew that he was not well and was crooked into the bargain when he played for our Reserves, and didn't you see how the boys starved him? I didn't watch the play, but that's what they say at the City Ground."

"All right—rub it in—make me feel cheap! It doesn't alter the fact that the United have got him. What I want to know is—who's the chap who put them wise to the kid's ability?"

"I am!" answered Tommy Bell.

The bombshell almost made the manager reel.

"You—you—you!" he jerked.

"Yes. Don't shout at me, George. Here was Hal turned out of home just because he loves football, and in urgent need of earning his own living. You refused him the chance he sought. So I got Billy Chatsworth to put him in his team—and Billy was wise enough to go to Kingsdown Athletic for Hal's record. They'll pay him good wages."

Tommy paused and frowned.

"All the same, though," he continued, "I didn't think Hal would sign on for the United until after he'd had a word or two with me."

A thick voice butted in just at that moment.

"Well, if he signs for the United instead of for the Town, Tommy, he will at least remain in Nettingham. And that's where we want him. We shall see a lot of each other."

It was Dicky Double who spoke. The Town's fat boy and great goalkeeper was fresh from a rousing hot bath. His cheeks were aflame, and he looked like a gigantic dressed-up goldfish. His great round face was wreathed in a smile.

"Dicky," asked the manager, "you had to stand up against that boy's shooting. What was it like?"

"Like? Why, just like it always was, sir!" gurgled Dicky. "Right bang on the target, with enough powder behind the ball to drive you to the back of the net almost! That was always Hal's way. I wish to goodness I'd been round and about the City Ground at the time when you decided to give Hal a chance in the Reserves."

"Tommy told me you were going to do it, and it never occurred to me that you were likely to turn him down. Hal always did get more force behind his drives at goal than any other chap I ever played against. It's just knack, the way he takes the ball, the speed of the foot swing as he sends his boot at the leather."

"And you think that he will make a mark in League football, Dicky?"

The fat boy goalkeeper set a hand on Tommy's shoulder. His full moon face beamed intelligence.

"The Nettingham nursery," he pronounced, "has now got three young players, everyone of whom is going to make his mark. We are all in our teens, George. But if there's a better centre-half than Tommy playing for any League side, or a finer goalkeeper than me keeping goal for a League team, or a young, smart, and enterprising forward who has got anything at all on Hal Chester, than all I can say is—find 'em!"

"Gad, I think you're right, Dicky!" said George. "I know this—that our play has been fifty per cent improved since you and Tommy joined the City team. We haven't



"It's not so much a question of wages, Mr. Chatsworth," said Hal, "but, you see, I was set on joining Nettingham Town." "What—set on joining the Town?" turned the United's manager. "And they turned you down, whilst we gave you a real chance!"

lost many games. Some of the Association's councillors came to watch you two play last week, and they said a lot of nice things about you."

"They'll be saying more about young Hal soon," said Dicky Double, with a nod.

"And the United have got him. It's your fault, Tommy," groaned the manager. "I think you might have told me that you were getting him a chance with the United."

"And supposing I had? You would still not have believed in Hal. You still wouldn't have signed him on. It took what he did here to-day to make you open your eyes to his worth."

"Ay," the manager agreed, with a nod. "And now he's signing on for the United."

"And without saying one word to me," said Tommy, turning to Dicky Double.

Hal Chooses His Club!

MEANWHILE, the interview in the private room at the Riverside Ground had not quite taken the turn expected by the Town's pessimistic manager.

Hal was drawn into the room and favoured with beaming smiles.

The United's manager, setting form on table and dipping pen in ink, talked eulogistically about Hal's great display.

"We are all delighted with you, my lad," he said, "and we want you to sign on for us. I can't promise you a place in the first team right away, perhaps, but it won't be long before you find a place there. And we'll pay you three pounds ten shillings a week, and give you a nice little present for signing on into the bargain."

Hal hesitated. He looked troubled.

"What's the matter, boy?" inquired the manager. "You are only a slip of a lad, you know, and it's not bad wages for a start. You'll get the same amount during the close season also, and if you render us good service you can reckon on a rise next year."

"It's not so much a question of wages, Mr. Chatsworth," answered Hal. "Though, perhaps, I might get a bit more elsewhere. But, you see, I was set on joining Nettingham Town."

"What! Set on joining the Town? And they turned you down, whilst we gave you a real chance! That's hardly playing the game, my boy!"

"You see, my chums, Dicky Double and Tommy Bell, belong to the Town."

"Was it in Bell's mind when he forced my hand and got me to play you to-day that you would double cross us, eh?"

Billy Chatsworth's face was set now. He looked at Hal suspiciously.

"I can't have you think of Tommy Bell like that," returned Hal. "What he wanted was to get me a chance. I dare say he would prefer that I should join the Town even now rather than the United, but he'd tell you so frankly and openly."

"That's all very well," grumbled one of the directors; "but it does seem as if you were making a convenience of us, Chester."

"Even if I don't sign for you, sir, you won't lose much by it. Your club did well in the match to-day, and you won't be losing a player."

"We sha'n't be gaining a good one, either, if you go to the Town!" growled the director. "We'd have found them a good one instead, boy. Here, sign that form now and we'll pay you five pounds a week."

Hal shook his head.

"It's not a question of money, sir," he declared. "I would sign on for three pounds ten shillings if I did sign. I'm not trying to force you up. But Dick and Tommy and I were at school together and—"

"You can see them every day. You'll be living in Nettingham. Come, come! Look at this thing in the right light, my lad, and sign."

Hal shook his head again.

"I won't sign now," he said. "I must have time to think it out. I should hate to do a rash thing and regret it afterwards."

In vain, manager and directors argued and persuaded. Hal's determination not to sign the form then was only strengthened, and at last they gave it up in disgust.

"Very well," said the manager, with a grim and savage smile; "think it over, and let us know, Chester. If you sign for us we shall be glad, because we know you're a clever player. But if you don't, it's the last time I'll allow myself

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(Continued from previous page.)

to be jostled into making a fool of myself by a player of the Town! I ought to have guessed when Bell brought you to me that there'd be a catch in it somewhere. You're going to make me the laughing-stock of Nettingham!

"What a fool they'll reckon Billy Chatsworth is to try out a player, for the benefit of Nettingham Town, who hadn't got the sense to see how good you were when you played for them! You've given me a bad pain in the back of the neck, my boy. But—well, one lives and learns!"

As Hal begged to be excused and made for the door, one of the directors barred the way.

"May I ask," he said, forcing a wry smile, "when you will let us know which of the Nettingham teams you're signing for, Chester?"

"I'll let you know by Monday morning, sir."

"Very well!"

"There's one thing I can promise you, at all events," said Hal, with a boyish, frank, and gracious smile—"that I am grateful to you all for giving me a chance of showing what I could do, and I'm not likely to forget it, either."

"Words are cheap!" sneered the director.

Hal reddened, turned, and left the private room.

Waiting for him in the hall under the stand were Dicky Double and Tommy Bell, who advanced eagerly towards him as he appeared.

Dicky caught him by one arm and Tommy by the other. "I say!" cried Tommy breathlessly, "have you signed on for the United, Hal?"

"No."

"Hurrah!"

"Are you going to sign on for the Town, then?" chirped Dicky Double.

"I—er—don't know."

"Let's go and have a talk to George Bliss now, then."

"No, Dick. If you don't mind, I'd rather think things

out on the quiet, and have a talk to Tommy over dinner before I take any further step?"

"All right," said the fat boy.

Hal smiled as he walked across the playing pitch with his two chums.

Out into the wide open space beyond the stand they went, and were hurrying towards the gates when a voice hailed them and a man came running up.

"Just one minute, Chester!" sang out Manager Bliss.

"Can't you save me, Tommy?" asked Hal. "I don't want to talk to him again yet."

"I'll choke him off, Hal!" laughed Tommy Bell.

The young half-back barred the manager's progress and caught him by the arm. He was amazed at George Bliss' anxious look.

"Well, is the deal completed? Has Chester signed on for the United?" asked the Town's manager breathlessly.

"No, George, not yet. He stood out against them. He's going to think things over."

"Good biz!" exclaimed Bliss. "I'll talk to him now. I'll—"

"Leave him to me. I know Hal. Don't worry the lad, George."

"Yes, but we want him. Do you think there's any hope?"

"Yes."

"United wanted him, of course?"

"Ay!"

"Is he to let them know about signing on?"

"Yes, on Monday morning. And by Monday morning either you or Billy Chatsworth will get him, George. But you had better not worry him any more now, for it won't do any good."

George Bliss was a masterful man. He did not like anybody else to conduct his business for him. Yet he had the sense to realise that precipitation might spoil everything.

"All right! Only get him to sign for us if you can," he said, and turned away.

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