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SAVED FROM THE FLAMES!

(A sensational incident from this week's
magnificent school story.)

A SPLENDID EXTRA-LONG SCHOOL STORY OF TOM MERRY & Co.—

"Kidnapped"



Every passing hour seems to add to the mystery that surrounds Robert Arthur Digby of the Fourth. Every new turn of events makes it more puzzling and bewildering, until Racke, scheming for revenge, unknowingly brings the mystery of Digby to a happy ending.

CHAPTER 1.

Racke is Wrathful!

"SNEAK!"

Jack Blake halted, and turned round.

It was bed-time at St. Jim's, and Blake was just on the point of entering the Fourth Form dormitory, when the uncomplimentary expression assailed his ears.

"Bai Jove! It is that feabful wottah, Wacke!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, who was just behind Blake. "Pway ignoah the boundah, Blake."

"Punch his head, you mean!" snorted Herries.

Jack Blake hesitated, and then he stepped up to Aubrey Racke, his lips set.

"Say that again, Racke!" he said, his eyes glinting.

Racke glared, his face full of bitter hatred.

"I'll jolly soon say it again," he shouted. "I called you a sneak, Blake, and you are a sneak—a rotten sneak! You sneaked to Railton and to the Head, and you got me a licking, you cad!"

"A lickin' you wichly earned, Wacke!" said Arthur Augustus indignantly. "Let the wottah wip, Blake, deah boy!"

Jack Blake was not feeling in the mood for that, however. It had been a trying day in more ways than one for the leader of that select band known as Blake & Co. He had

quarrelled bitterly with Digby, one of his closest chums; and it had been chiefly owing to Aubrey Racke's caddish behaviour that they had quarrelled, and had arranged to fight that very afternoon. And but for a strange development the fight would undoubtedly have taken place.

Arthur Augustus, however, determined to stop the forthcoming fight, had calmly locked Blake up in the woodshed, and it was while a prisoner there that Blake had overheard Racke bragging and gloating over his success in causing the trouble between Blake and Digby.

Then had come the strange development.

In Rylecombe Lane Digby had been spirited away in a car by unknown kidnapers, and Tom Merry of the Shell had gone in pursuit on St. Leger's motor-bike. And though it was now bed-time nothing whatever had been heard of them since.

Naturally the Head had closely cross-examined all concerned in the trouble, and under his searching questioning Blake and the others had been obliged to tell all they knew—with unfortunate results for Aubrey Racke.

The Head had not spared the rod, and Racke, who felt the effect of his punishment, was seething with rage and malice.

"So that's it!" said Blake. "You think I sneaked to the Head this evening, Racke?"

"Yes, I do!"

"Right!" said Blake, his lips setting. "You've been

— THE CHEERY, ADVENTUROUS CHUMS OF ST. JIM'S !

by
MARTIN CLIFFORD



ducked in a ditch by us, and you've been licked by the Head, Racke. But as you don't seem satisfied and want the matter brought up again, then we'll have it out before the fellows and see what they think about it."

"Hold on!" Racke looked alarmed at that, evidently regretting he had spoken. "Hold on! No need—"

"Plenty of need," said Blake. "A good many of the fellows already know the yarn; but as you call me a sneak it'll be just as well to make it public property. In you go!"

And Blake grasped Racke by the coat collar and sent him sprawling into the Fourth Form dormitory with a single swing of his arm. Then Blake, Herries, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy followed him in. Most of the Fourth were already in the dormitory, and they grinned as the cad of the Shell sprawled on the floor.

"Now, my pippin!" said Blake. "Tell these fellows why I sneaked and got you a licking, Racke."

Racke scrambled up, his face flushed red with rage. He already regretted having given his spiteful tongue too full a rein.

"You—you did sneak, you cad!" he said thickly. "You'd already pitched me in a filthy ditch for what I was supposed to have done. You'd no need to sneak to the beaks as well."

"Supposed to have done, eh?" echoed Blake scornfully. "You say supposed when you've already owned up to us and to the Head."

"It—it was only a lark," said Racke. "No need to make more fuss about it, Blake!"

"I fancy there is," said Blake. "You've called me a sneak, Racke, and we'll see what the fellows think. You were the cause of the trouble between Digby and me, and but for that ass, Gussy—"

"Weally, Blake—"

"But for that born idiot, Gussy," went on Blake, "we should have fought it out. Gussy locked us in the woodshed and while in there we overheard you gloating over it."

"So it was Racke who caused the trouble?" said Levison, eyeing Racke scornfully. "What happened, Blake? I've heard a bit about it, but—"

"Racke doesn't seem to want to tell you, so I will," said Blake grimly. "You fellows have heard that yarn

about Digby—that his pater had gone smash, and that he was to leave St. Jim's?"

"We've heard," said Clive. "All rot, of course!"

"Utter rot," agreed Blake. "Digby has trouble at home, I fancy—goodness knows what!—but it isn't that. Anyway, Digby blamed us for that yarn; said we'd been gassing about his private affairs. But we hadn't! I fancy Racke knows something about that, too—"

"It was Trimble!" snarled Racke. "He set the yarn out!"

"Oh, really, Racke—" began Trimble.

"You dry up, Trimble," interrupted Blake. "I suppose it was you; but that started the trouble. Then this afternoon Dig's pater rang up, and Racke answered the phone. He promised Dig's pater to tell Dig to stay indoors as he was coming over from Wayland to see him. But instead of giving the message to Dig, the cad said nothing, and when the old chap came Digby was out, and he had to go away without seeing him."

"A rotten trick!" grunted Levison. "But—"

"Hold on!" said Blake. "That isn't all, by any means! Racke, when he answered the phone, gave my name. He also gave Dig's pater the impression that Dig had gone out purposely to avoid him, he was also cheeky to the old chap."

"Phew!"

"You fellows can guess what happened," went on Blake. "Dig knew I knew how anxious he was to see his pater. There was trouble between us already. We had a row, and arranged to fight it out behind the boathouse. But luckily Gussy chipped in and stopped it. Then—well, everybody knows the rest; Digby vanished and Tom Merry went after him, and they haven't been heard of since. But—"

"But what the thump does it all mean?" asked Tompkins. "Why should anyone kidnap old Dig?"

"Goodness knows—that's what everybody wants to know," said Blake. "But we do know that Racke played the cad over the business. I told the Head because I couldn't do anything else. The matter's too thundering serious to keep anything back. The beaks had to know the facts, and you fellows know what the Head is for getting things out of a chap. We tried to screen Racke; but it was no good."

"And he calls you a sneak for that?" ejaculated Levison. "Well, it wouldn't have needed a cross-examination to get the facts out of me."

"Nor me," grunted Clive. "You're a howling cad, Racke! It was a rotten trick to cheek another fellow's pater!"

"And a worse one to shove the blame on somebody else," said Herries in disgust, "not to mention getting Dig into hot water with his pater!"

"It was only a lark, I tell you!" muttered Racke. "Anyway, I've been licked for it, and there's no need to bring it up again!"

"You brought it up yourself by calling me sneak!" said Blake. "These fellows know the facts now, and they can judge for themselves whether I sneaked or not. Now get out before I boot you out!"

"Hold on!" said Lumley-Lumley. "The Head may have licked Racke, and the fellows concerned may have pitched him in a ditch; but that doesn't satisfy the Fourth. We can't allow Shell cads to make mischief between Fourth chaps!"

"I guess not!" agreed Wildrake emphatically. "And we aren't allowing Shellfish to insult the paters of fellows in the Fourth! This is a Form matter!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Look here—" Racke started back in alarm, and made a sudden leap for the door. But he was collared on all sides and held. More than ever did Racke regret his rash words. But regrets were too late now.

"The Form knows the facts now," said Lumley-Lumley, "and the verdict is that Blake didn't sneak, and that if he had done he would have been excused under the circumstances. But Racke's acted like a howling cad, and there's no excuse for him. A ducking will teach him to keep his ugly nose out of the affairs of fellows in the Fourth."

"Hear, hear!"

"I guess a ducking will settle the insult to the Form," said Wildrake, pouring cold water into a basin from a jug. "Yank the galoot here before Kildare looks in."

"Look here!" gasped Racke. "Look here, I'll yell if you— Oh, you rotters! Leggo! I tell you— Yaroooooh! Mum-mum! Grooogh!"

Splash!

Struggling frantically in the grasp of several Fourth-Formers, the cad of the Shell was dragged to the wash.

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stand, and his head was ducked again and again in the basin of cold water. He choked and gasped and gurgled, and water swamped over his clothes and his boots. But the juniors had no mercy—they knew Racke only too well, and they knew the malice that had prompted his "lark."

But they desisted at length—when the basin was empty—and then Racke jumped for the door, streaming with water, and with a dozen boots clumping behind him. In the doorway he met Kildare of the Sixth, and the captain of St. Jim's sprang back just in time.

"What the thunder—" Kildare gazed at Racke, and then he looked into the dormitory wrathfully. "What's this game? Why aren't you kids undressed, and why aren't you in your dorm, Racke? You've no right in here."

"Groooogh!" gasped Racke, glowering at the Fourth-Formers. "Blake dragged me in—I couldn't help myself!" "Why? He must have had a reason!" snapped Kildare. "I suppose it's something to do with this afternoon's affair. If it was you've only yourself to blame, Racke."

"I—I called Blake a sneak, and he was a sneak to tell the Head!" panted Racke.

"Rot!" said Kildare. "He was obliged to tell, and it would have come out if he hadn't. You deserve what you got, and more, you little sweep! Get off to your dorm. You Fourth kids can do fifty lines each for acting the goat. I'll double it to the chap not in bed under five minutes."

"Oh crumbs!"

There was a hurried scramble in the dormitory. Nobody wanted his fifty doubled. Racke tramped away, his face black with rage, and he left a trail of water behind him. Once again the cad of the Shell regretted having interfered in the affairs of Robert Digby of the Fourth. Racke usually did regret his rascally tricks—afterwards. But, unfortunately, he was a fellow who never learned from experience.

It was a long time before Racke got to sleep that night—his aches and pains were numerous and lingering.

But he was not alone. Lowther and Manners, in the Shell, and Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy, in the Fourth, lay awake for hours after lights out. They were thinking of the missing Fourth-Former and the junior who had pluckily gone to the rescue, hoping against hope for their return.

CHAPTER 2.

On the Trail!

"HALLO! Stopping, by Jingo!"

As Tom Merry breathed the words he quickly slowed down until the motor-bike was moving at almost a crawl.

The fact that the car he was pursuing had suddenly checked its speed brought an awkward situation to the plucky junior.

Since he had mounted St. Leger's machine and gone roaring in pursuit of the big car Tom Merry had stuck to the trail like grim death, determined not to allow it out of his sight. What the whole astonishing affair meant was a complete mystery to the captain of the Shell as it was to everybody else.

Actually Tom had not seen Digby captured. But there was plenty of evidence that he had been kidnapped and taken away in the car he was pursuing.

From a distance Tom Merry had heard Digby's cry for help, and he had rushed out into Rylcombe Lane just as the big car was speeding away. And he had found Digby's cap lying in the dust of the roadway, with clear traces of a struggle.

Moreover, it was not the first attempt on Digby's liberty.

That afternoon Baggy Trimble of the Fourth had been spirited away in the same car by unknown men, who had obviously mistaken him for Digby. But after a stern chase on bicycles, Tom Merry & Co. had succeeded in rescuing him.

So now that yell for help from Digby, his cap lying so significantly in the roadway, and the swiftly vanishing car which Tom recognised at once, was quite enough to tell Tom Merry what had happened.

He had snatched St. Leger's motor-bike from that startled Fifth-Former, and he had gone tearing in pursuit, his one idea being not to lose sight of the car in front.

Nor had he done so. Past Rylcombe and Wayland and on to the Abbotsford road the chase had led him, and from the increased speed of the car Tom knew the men ahead realised he was in pursuit. And now it looked as if they had realised the futility of attempting to shake him off and were stopping.

As he slowed down himself, Tom's brain worked swiftly.

Against the two men in the car, Tom knew he would stand no chance whatever. To attack them would be asking for trouble, and possibly losing all chance of aiding Digby, who was most likely trussed up and helpless. Yet he either had to go on or turn back, for the car was now backing slowly along the narrow road towards him.

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In a moment Tom's mind was made up, and he stopped his machine and dismounted, ready to leap into the saddle again in a flash if necessary. Somehow he felt no fear of the men whatever. From his experience of them in the afternoon they were not desperate men, kidnappers or not. In their previous encounter, indeed, they had seemed far more afraid of hurting the juniors than the juniors were of hurting them. It was all most mysterious.

But though unafraid, Tom was determined to take no risks. Not a soul was in sight along the long road, and the junior put his leg over the saddle in readiness.

Yet, despite his alertness, Tom was taken unawares.

The car hummed backwards, and it was still moving slowly when, on coming opposite to Tom Merry, the door nearest him swung open, and a man leaped out into the road.

He was upon Tom in a flash, and his arms swept round the junior before he could move to escape, pinning his arms to his sides.

Tom struggled furiously, regretting his careless bravado too late.

"Let me go!" he panted, "You—you scoundrels!"

"You've no need to be afraid, my boy," said the tall man, whom Tom had recognised again at once. "You shall not be harmed; but you were following us, and we are obliged to stop you! Now, Johnson!"

He called to the driver, and the man instantly left the wheel. He was in smart livery, and appeared to be just a chauffeur in good service. But, for all that, he gave a scared and uneasy look up and down the road for a moment. Then he took the motor-bike as the tall man lifted the struggling junior from the saddle.

Running it on to the grass on the roadside, he swiftly emptied the petrol-tank. Then, leaving the machine lying on the grass, he boarded the car again and took the wheel.

As he did so, the man holding Tom suddenly released him and jumped into the car. Next instant the door had slammed, and the car was gliding away.

It had all taken place in a few swift seconds, and before Tom Merry had regained his scattered senses the gleaming car was speeding away along the white ribbon of road.

"Well, my hat!" panted the junior. "Done in the eye, after all. What—what an ass I was!"

The junior could have kicked himself, realising as he did now that he had been just a bit too cocksure of looking after himself.

But it was too late for vain regrets. The car had vanished now, and Tom hurried to the machine on the grass—useless for the time being.

He looked down at it, his face showing how this last development mystified him still more. He had been handled with ease, but he had been handled gently enough. Their evident uneasiness, and the fact that they had merely emptied the petrol-tank in order to prevent him following them, made it clear that the kidnappers were far from being hardened desperadoes.

Professional "crooks" would scarcely have done that—scarcely have left him free to acquaint the police with what had happened. They would probably also have vented their anger and made pursuit doubly hopeless by smashing up the motor-bike altogether.

Yet they had undoubtedly kidnapped Digby for some mysterious and inconceivable reason, and Tom set his lips hard and hauled up the useless machine. The next moment he was pushing it along the dusty road.

Though the position now seemed hopeless, he had no intention of giving up the chase yet. He knew he was only a couple of miles from Abbotsford, and less than that from the nearest garage where he could obtain a fresh supply of petrol.

He tramped on, angry with himself for having been "done" so easily, and wondering what to do next. His first thought had been to find the nearest constable and get the police on the track of the kidnappers without delay. Yet somehow he hesitated at the thought of doing that—why, he could scarcely have told himself. To feel that he was "chipping in" on Digby's private affairs seemed an utterly absurd way of looking at the matter, and yet—

"It beats me altogether!" muttered the perplexed and worried junior. "I suppose I ought to have let 'em rip and put the bobbies on them in the first place. But I wish I could feel that it's what Dig would want me to do!"

For some minutes Tom Merry trudged on, and then he saw a solitary cyclist riding leisurely towards him. He came nearer, and proved to be a butcher's boy on a tradesman's bicycle. He slowed down, and jumped off as Tom called to him.

"Seen a large car going that way," asked Tom eagerly—"big blue closed car, with a chap in livery driving?"

"Eh?"

Tom repeated the question, and the butcher youth nodded.

"I seed it," he admitted. "Dang near ran me down it did! 'Bout a mile outer Abbotsford!"

"Was it going fast?"

"Yes—least it was until it turned in at that 'ouse! Dang near ran me down as it was turnin' in at the drive, though!"

"Oh!" Tom almost panted. "You say it turned in at the drive of a house? What house?"

"'Ouse called Green Shutters it was!" said the butcher youth, staring at Tom curiously. "Bin there with stuff many a time when the old people 'ad it. But—"

"Who lives there now?" demanded Tom eagerly. "Do you happen to know their name?"

The youth shook his head.

"Only bin there a day or two, I believe," he said. "Taken the 'ouse furnished, I reckon. Nice 'ouse, though it ain't big. Stands just off the road, and you can't miss it, 'cause of the green shutters. I suppose that's why they called—"

"A mile, you say?"

"Yes, on the right. Stands by itself, wi' trees in front."

"Thanks very much!"

The butcher boy mounted his bike and pedalled away. Tom pushed on, his face determined, but brighter now. The road was an unfrequented one, and it was extremely unlikely that the butcher boy could have made a mistake.

Nor had he. Tom reached the house at last. It was a smallish house, white, with green-painted shutters, and surrounded by trees. But through the bushes and trees Tom Merry glimpsed a big, luxurious blue car standing before the entrance doors of the house.

It was the same car, without a doubt. Tom understood now why the men had been determined to get rid of him before they came in sight of the house.

Yet what did the whole amazing affair mean? The house was just an ordinary house, well kept and peaceful to look at. A gardener was at work on the front lawn, and at a window Tom glimpsed a trim maidservant in cap and apron. That such a house could be occupied by kidnappers—lawbreakers—seemed absurd and fantastic.

Tom passed the house for a hundred yards or so, and then he opened the gate of a field, and, taking the motor-bike inside, he hid it in the ditch beyond, hiding it as best he could with grass and brambles.

This done, he returned and approached the house cautiously again. The car had disappeared. Tom Merry hesitated, his brain working swiftly. Then, his mind made up, he set his teeth and walked boldly along the short drive to the house. It seemed impossible to think of danger in that pleasant, sunny house, though Tom scarcely gave danger a thought. He was only resolved to learn what had happened to his chum.

He went boldly up the steps and rang the bell.

Almost at once the door opened, and a man appeared. It was the tall man who had held him, and, though he was dressed as before, save that he was hatless now, Tom knew instinctively from the way he answered the door that he was a trained manservant, either a footman or butler. The junior wondered why he had failed to guess as much before.

The man started back at sight of him.

"You—you again?" he exclaimed.

"Yes," said Tom curtly. "I want to know what has happened to my chum, Robert Digby! I know you brought him here!"

The man hesitated, obviously at a loss what to say or do. Then he opened the door wider.

"Will you come inside, please?" he said.

His voice was polite—that of a well-trained servant. Tom stepped inside at once, watchful and alert. The man closed the door, and stood with his back towards it.

"I suppose it is useless to deny what you state," he said, his voice low. "But Master Digby is in good hands and will come to no harm. There is no need for you to interfere in the matter at all. Indeed, I can assure you, sir, that Master Digby, when he understands the situation, will be very anxious indeed that nobody should interfere."

"I demand to know what has happened to him!" snapped Tom. "If you refuse to explain I shall go to the police."

The man started, obviously alarmed.

"I assure you that this is far from being a matter for the police," he said uneasily. "I—I—"

"Let me see Digby," said Tom. "I demand to see him. If you refuse—"

"Kindly be quiet," said the man, looking behind him. "The maidservants here are quite unaware of anything amiss, and—"

He paused, and then he nodded.

"Very well," he said, "perhaps it will be as well if you do speak to Master Digby. Kindly come this way, sir."

He led Tom across the hall and up the stairs to the next floor, stopping at a bed-room door. He knocked, and then,

after a slight wait, unlocked the door and pushed it open, waiting for Tom to enter.

Tom hesitated warily, and then, sighting a figure in the room by the window, he boldly entered. As he did so the man closed and locked the door, leaving them alone.

It was Digby right enough, and as he sighted the captain of the Shell he fairly jumped.

"Tom Merry, you here!" he panted.

CHAPTER 3.

More Mystery!

ROBERT DIGBY'S face was white and strained, and he eyed Tom Merry as though thunderstruck.

"You here!" he repeated. "How on earth—"

"I followed on a motor-bike," said Tom Merry breathlessly. "I heard you yell for help, and rushed up just as the car drove away."

"I thought someone must be following," muttered Digby. "Carter tied me up and threw a rug over me when the car stopped. I didn't dream it was you, though."

"What's it all mean, Dig?" said Tom. "This house—"

"I—I don't know," said Digby, after a pause. "It's the queerest thing out, and—and I don't like it at all. Carter—the chap who just let you in—says I've nothing to fear; and they're treating me well enough, I suppose. But he refuses to tell me anything. Says I shall know all in the morning when the person responsible for this business arrives."

"But dash it all—"

"It's something serious—something to do with my pater, I'm certain," said Digby thickly. "I only wish I did know what it means. If—if anything's happened to him—"

"No reason to suppose that," said Tom Merry, frowning in his perplexity. "But it's no end queer, and the sooner we get clear of this the better, Dig."

"Why did you chip in, Tom Merry?" said Digby, his face suddenly changing. "You—you've interfered again in—"

"But why not?" ejaculated Tom Merry, in astonishment. "Wouldn't you have done so in my place, Dig? What on earth is the matter with you, Dig? I came to rescue you if I could. We'll beat these rascals yet, whatever their game is, and—"

"I wish you'd kept out of it, Tom Merry," said Digby savagely.

"Why?"

"I don't know, I tell you!" snapped Digby. "But I'm hanged if I care whether I go back to St. Jim's or not!" he added bitterly. "I've lost my pals, or the fellows I supposed were my pals. The only thing I'd care to go back for is to give that cad Blake the hiding he deserves."

"What rot!" said Tom, though he spoke gently. "Look here, Dig, old chap, you're not yourself! And as for Blake—well, I'm absolutely certain he wasn't the fellow who answered the phone. He's the last fellow at St. Jim's to cheek a fellow's pater, much less play a dirty trick on a chum. There's a big mistake somewhere. Whoever did answer the phone gave Blake's name solely to cause trouble between you."

"And you believe that?" said Digby derisively.

"I do," said Tom quietly. "And you would, too, at any other time, Dig. But you've not been yourself lately. You know as well as I do that Blake's one of the best, and absolutely incapable of being disloyal to a pal, much less doing what you've charged him with."

"He's a rotter!" said Digby doggedly. "And he's proved himself a funk, too! I challenged him to a fight, and he failed to turn up, as you know."

Tom Merry frowned again. Being absolutely ignorant of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's little dodge to keep Blake away from the fight, he could not deny that, and knowing Blake as he did he simply could not understand it, either. He was also, of course, quite ignorant of the fact that Racke had been found out, and Blake cleared of the charge.

"I can't understand Blake not turning up for the scrap," he said at last. "I fancy, though, it must be solely because he hates the thought of fighting with you, Dig."

"Bunkum!" said Digby.

"I believe so, anyway," said Tom patiently. "But never mind all that now, Dig; we've got to get out of this. Though the people here seem harmless enough, we're prisoners. No getting away from that. The dashed door's locked; but what about the window?"

"I've tried that," said Digby, without enthusiasm. "There's a twenty-foot drop. I'm not so keen to get away that I'm risking a broken leg."

Tom Merry set his lips and crossed to the window. As Dig said, there was fully a twenty-foot drop to the ground below. This fact, however, worried Tom less than Digby's

obvious lack of interest. He did not seem to care whether he escaped or not.

Still, the chance did seem hopeless at the moment. But it would soon be dark, and Tom Merry was resolved to try despite Digby's attitude towards the whole thing. It was borne in on Tom's mind as he looked at Digby's haggard face that the kidnapped junior knew—or, more likely, suspected—something that he had not, or would not mention to him. It was clear that Digby did not fear his captors, that he knew no harm would come to him. Yet from his face it was clear the suspicion—if suspicion it was—was not a light one.

"Dig," said Tom at last, "I don't know—I can't even give the remotest sort of guess as to what this queer affair means. But I can see that you suspect something."

"I suspect nothing," said Digby, in a low voice.

"But you fear something?"

"I'm afraid it's something to do with the pater, that's all," said Digby. "If it means harm to me, it means that something serious is wrong. A fellow would be blind not to see that."

"You don't seem to care whether you get away from here or not. Why?"

"I tell you I don't know, excepting that Carter warned me I should afterwards be sorry if I made a fuss—a fuss that might bring the police into the matter."

"He may be lying—throwing dust in your eyes, Dig."

"I believe him, anyway," said Digby. "I was mad at first. I thought him a scoundrel. But I can't help seeing that the chap is more scared than I am; that he seems to be doing this against his will."

"But—but hang it all, Dig, the fellow's kidnapped you!" said Tom impatiently. "It's serious. You must think of the Head and your people as well as yourself."

"I'm thinking of my people!"

"But—but the Head and everybody at St. Jim's," said Tom, staring at his chum—"they'll be alarmed; they'll have the police on the job, and if we don't turn up to-night—"

He was interrupted by a knock at the door, and the next moment it opened wide.

Tom Merry started. Had he been alone in the matter he would there and then have made a bold bid for liberty. But Digby did not move, and there was no time for talk.

Indeed, a second glance showed Tom that to try to escape that way would have been a forlorn hope. In the doorway, bearing a big tray piled high with food and drink, was Carter. And behind him was the big chauffeur, watchful and alert.

Carter laid the tray on a side table and then he nodded to the driver, who departed, while Carter closed the door.

"Here is some food, young gentlemen," he said. "If you require anything else, please ring. Master Digby, I trust you will try to persuade your friend to leave this house. It has made matters very awkward."

"I'm not leaving this house without my chum," said Tom Merry, eyeing the man steadily. "What does this mean, you rotter? Let us go at once! Otherwise—"

"This matter concerns only Master Digby," said Carter politely but firmly. "You yourself may go at any time you wish—providing you give your word not to mention this house, or what has taken place to a soul."

"I won't!" snapped Tom. "When I go, Digby goes!"

"Then I am afraid you must remain here until morning," said Carter. "You will be given a bed-room, and will be made comfortable here. But you will not be allowed to go until the person responsible for this matter has decided what is to be done with you. You are quite certain you will not go on my condition?"

"I am! You'll regret this business, my man! We shall be missed, and the police will be informed. They will very easily track you down."

The man made no reply to that, though his eyes showed his uneasiness. He withdrew, closing the door and locking it after him.

"Well, I'm blowed!" said Tom Merry, looking very curiously at the white-faced Digby. "This takes the biscuit, Dig! Haven't you the ghost of an idea what it means?"

"I'm as puzzled as you are," said Digby. "But why don't you clear out and do what he wants, Tom Merry? Go while you've got the chance; better for one to be missing than two. I can look after myself without your help."

Tom shook his head. In his mind there was no doubt that something was wrong—that the matter concerned Sir Robert Digby, Digby's father. He remembered that Digby had received a letter from his father—a letter that had upset him strangely, and the contents of which he had refused to confide with his own chums. But he had told his chums that something was wrong at home, and it was this that had caused the trouble in the first place. Somehow—Tom himself suspected that Trimble was responsible—the news had spread in the Lower School that Digby's pater had gone

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smash, and that Digby was leaving St. Jim's to go into an office.

Naturally, Digby was furious at this, believing his chums—Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy—had been tittle-tattling about his private affairs in the school, and it was this that had started the quarrel in the first place.

Certainly, the story was utterly untrue. Sir Robert had certainly not gone smash, nor was Digby leaving. It sounded suspiciously like one of Trimble's wonderful yarns to Tom Merry. Yet something was obviously wrong at home, and the fact that Digby himself did not know what it was made the matter more mysterious. Digby's manner was far from being pleasant; but the captain of the Shell knew the other was labouring under acute anxiety.

"I'm not going without you, Dig," said Tom quietly. "I think you know me better than that, old chap! When I go, you go! I don't pretend to be able to make a guess as to what's wrong; I'm not going to ask you again—"

"I tell you I don't know myself, Tom," said Digby, his tone becoming more genial. "In the letter my pater sent he only hinted at things being wrong. But it's the uncertainty of it all that makes it so rotten. I'm sorry I'm such a bear about it; but I can't help it. Anyway, let's get some grub."

Tom was ready enough, and the food on the big tray was certainly tempting. There was tea and buttered toast and eggs and cakes in abundance. Evidently their captors did not intend them to starve. Indeed, it looked as if Digby and Tom Merry were going to be made as comfortable as possible in the circumstances.

But all Tom's thoughts were of escape, nevertheless. And over tea he talked earnestly to Digby, pointing out the alarm and anxiety their absence would cause at St. Jim's, and that it would be madness to make no effort to escape from their peculiar predicament. And presently the Fourth-Former's despair left him as his spirits revived, and he agreed to make the attempt to escape.

CHAPTER 4.

Digby Turns Back!

"YOU ready, Dig? I think we'll try it now!"

As he spoke Tom Merry looked out of the window into the velvety darkness of the garden at Green Shutters.

The juniors had disposed of the evening meal, and the tray had been removed by Carter, and papers and magazines brought for the juniors to read if they felt disposed to read. But they did not, and the time hung heavily as they waited for darkness.

But it was dark enough now, and Tom felt it safe enough to make the attempt. He had already made his plans, and he repeated them to Digby now.

"Those sheets will do the trick," he said grimly. "They look strong enough, and we'll soon have a rope made. Get busy, anyway."

And they got busy. The sheets were taken from the bed and swiftly twisted into a rope and knotted securely together. To make sure the rope would be long enough a blanket from the bed was added; and after testing the rope Tom cautiously opened the window and looked out.

Not a soul seemed to be stirring, and the night was quiet and still. The rope was tied securely in its turn to a bed-post, and then Tom dropped the end through the window. It touched the bushes below easily.

"Good!" breathed Tom. "Now, you know what to do, Dig. If anybody turns up, just make a bolt along the road until you come to a bunch of trees on the right. The bike's hidden in the ditch behind the hedge opposite. If we get separated I'll join you there."

"Right!"

"Go on, then—carefully, mind!"

Digby took a firm hold on a twisted sheet, and after a moment's hesitation he slipped over the sill and began to lower himself down the rope.

He reached the bottom, his feet rustling among the bushes as he stepped away to make room for his chum.

"All serene!"

"Coming!" breathed Tom Merry.

He was just slipping over the sill when the look of the door in the room clicked sharply, and next second the door flew open. Over his shoulder Tom saw Carter standing in the doorway, his face startled.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Tom.

"Stop!"

Tom Merry ignored the shout and swung himself over the sill.

"Run for it, Dig!" he called, throwing caution to the winds now. "Quick! Run for it!"

Tom Merry came swarming down the rope of the sheets, and as he reached the ground safely Digby darted away

through the laurels, making for the gates. He heard the captain of the Shell thudding behind him, and presently he struck the drive, and sped along it.

It was pitch dark here, the drive being overhung with tall trees. But he reached the gateway safely and was just about to dart out when he pulled up short.

Outside the gate a car was drawn up, showing no lights. Digby just glimpsed it in time, also the dim forms of three men standing by it.

Instead of rushing through the gateway, Digby promptly slipped along the yew hedge and moved on, seeking a gap.

He stumbled and tripped over roots and earth in the



"Ow! Grooogh!" Raccoe jumped for the door of the Fourth Form dormitory, streaming with water. In the doorway he met Kildare of the Sixth, and the captain of St. Jim's sprang back just in time. "What the thunder—" (See Chapter 1.)

dark. But presently he found a gap and squeezed himself out into the road.

There he hesitated a moment. He heard no sound of his chum following. But he knew Tom Merry wasn't the fellow to get caught easily, and he supposed his chum had spotted the men by the car and was hiding in the shrubbery, waiting a chance to slip through the gates unseen.

"Blow it!" muttered the junior, frowning in the darkness. "I'd better go on, anyway."

And remembering Tom's injunction to make for the motor-bike, Digby started off at a trot, feeling confident that his chum would join him presently.

But Digby was wrong. Tom Merry had not been so lucky.

Scarcely had he started after Digby when he tripped over a trailing creeper and went down headlong across a flower-bed. When he jumped up again, breathless and half-winded, Digby had vanished.

Tom soon struck the drive, however, and he scudded down it, heedless of the darkness. He came out through the gateway with a rush—crashing full into three men, who had just started through it.

"Oh, my hat!"

Tom staggered back from the impact, gasping and almost dazed. He had neither glimpsed the car outside nor the men under the dark trees.

He turned to bolt—too late. There was a sudden ex-

clamation in the darkness, and as Tom turned, a hand grasped him, holding him fast.

"Let go!" panted the junior, struggling furiously.

His natural thought was that the men belonged to the house, and that he was in the hands of the enemy, and he started to struggle desperately.

"Hold on!" said the man who held him. "Why, it's a boy! By James! I wonder—that light, one of you!"

A light flashed out, showing up Tom's Etons and his face. A simultaneous exclamation of satisfaction followed from the three.

"The boy, right enough," said one, switching the light off instantly. "Good!"

"Save us a nasty job, anyway," said another. "The car—look lively!"

Tom Merry was lifted instantly, despite his resistance. But he suddenly ceased struggling. He realised that the men took him for Digby, and the longer they took to discover their mistake the greater would be Digby's chance of escape. Of himself Tom gave no thought at the moment. He expected to be taken back to the house, and, despite what had happened, he did not fear that.

The next moment he got a surprise.

Instead of turning again at the gateway the men stepped to the car. He was lifted inside, and a heavy rug flung over him, two of the men following him in.

The startled junior was so amazed that he did not move for some seconds, and the next moment it was too late.

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The car's lights flashed on, the engine started, and the car glided swiftly away in the direction of Abbotsford, vanishing into the darkness.

It passed Robert Digby as he stood by the side of the roadway, waiting for his chum, and he little dreamed who was inside it, though he gazed after it curiously, knowing it was the car he had avoided.

"Queer!" he muttered.

He felt more than uneasy at Tom's absence. But he felt certain that now the car had gone Tom would speedily make his appearance. He waited another five minutes, and then he gave it up and started resolutely back for Green Shutters.

Digby could quite easily have got clear himself now. The motor-bike was there waiting, and all he had to do was to tramp on to the garage, a few hundred yards higher up towards Abbotsford. He only need fill the tank, and then he could speed back in the darkness to St. Jim's.

But such a thought never entered his mind. Tom Merry had risked a lot in coming to his rescue, and he had no intention of deserting him now. He would search, and if he did not find Tom he would go boldly to the house again. After all, in his own mind Digby scarcely knew which he wanted most—his liberty, or to remain there a prisoner until morning, when he would, he hoped, discover the meaning of it all.

And Digby wanted to do that badly. In the morning the person who had caused him to be kidnapped would be at Green Shutters, according to Carter, and he would know then why he had been kidnapped.

The junior felt almost relieved that all had not gone according to Tom Merry's programme, excepting for the uncertainty as to what had happened to Tom. He hurried back to the house, and, entering the gates, hurried on along the drive towards the house, stopping when in sight of the entrance doors.

They were open, and a light streamed out into the darkness. To Digby it seemed to prove that Tom had been caught, but he stopped, anxious to make sure first. A sudden rustle in the bushes close by startled him.

"That you, Tom?" he whispered.

The answer came swiftly, as a figure darted at him and a hand closed on his arm. It proved to be Carter, and he gave an exclamation of deep satisfaction as he recognised the junior.

"It is you, then, Master Digby!" he exclaimed. "I was just searching the grounds, hoping you could not have got far. Where is your friend?"

"Haven't you got him?" gasped Digby.

"No; I saw him disappearing through the window. But when I rushed downstairs he had vanished, and you also. You should not have tried to escape, Master Digby. It was foolish, in the circumstances."

"I would have got clear," snapped Digby. "But I came back to see what had happened to my chum. He was behind me; but he did not follow far. Something happened to him. You're sure—"

"I heard a car outside," said Carter, in rather shaky tones. "Did you see it?"

"Yes; it was waiting outside the gates, and three men were standing there. I dodged them and got clear. I afterwards saw the car going towards Abbotsford at a good speed. I—I hope—"

Digby paused. It was obvious now that the men with the car did not belong to Green Shutters—had no connection with Carter. Then who were they, and what were they after there at that hour? It seemed to be adding to the strange mystery. The fact that the lights on the car had not been switched on until the last moment showed that their errand was not a law-abiding one.

What did it mean? And had they anything to do with Tom Merry's disappearance?

Carter also seemed to be strangely troubled about the car.

"You heard nothing, Master Digby?" he said, anxiety in his voice. "I mean, you did not hear them speak?"

"No."

"It is very strange. I hope nothing has happened to your foolish friend," said Carter. "I will ask the chauffeur to search the grounds for him. Meanwhile, you must come with me, Master Digby. I am afraid I shall be obliged to keep you under closer observation after this."

"You needn't worry," said Digby roughly. "I'll come quickly enough. I only want to learn what this rotten business means."

And Digby accompanied the manservant into the house and the hall door closed on them. But Digby's thoughts were not of himself now, but of Tom Merry. What had happened to him? Had he got clear he would certainly have made at once for the motor-bike. Had he stumbled

into the three men under the trees and been taken away—a prisoner?

CHAPTER 5.

Trimble is Not Wanted!

"NO news?"

"None!"

Kildare of the Sixth answered briefly and walked on. Blake exchanged gloomy glances with Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, Herries, Lowther, and Manners.

"No news!" repeated Lowther. "Rotten!"

"Rotten!" agreed Manners, his brow clouded. "Where can they be? I thought we should hear something this morning."

"I expected to find Dig in his bed when I got up," grunted Blake. "No such luck!"

"Looks to me—" Herries paused.

"Well?"

"It looks to me as if Tommy overtook the kidnappers," went on Herries slowly. "And—well, they've collared him, too!"

"Just what I was thinking," said Blake. "Tommy wouldn't be likely to let them get away. We should have heard something from him otherwise. It's too rotten for words!"

"And jolly rummy!" said Manners. "It's all very well for Dig's pater to say there's no need for alarm, and refusing to have the police brought into the matter! But what about poor old Tommy?"

"That's another queer thing about it all," said Blake. "The old chap didn't seem concerned about Dig, though goodness knows he was ratty enough when he heard Dig had vanished."

"Fairly raving!" agreed Manners. "He told the Head to leave the matter to him, I believe. But it doesn't look as if he's done much, anyway."

"Looked to me as if he knew where Dig would be, and that he was rushing off to fetch him back," said Blake. "But we should have heard before this if he'd found him."

The chums of the two missing juniors went in to breakfast with troubled looks. That no news had come through yet seemed to indicate certainly that something had happened to Tom Merry. Had he lost touch with the car he would have returned before this, or would undoubtedly have let the Head know by some means or other.

There were serious faces at breakfast that morning. The chief topic of conversation was the missing juniors. After they had left Hall, Blake & Co. made inquiries again, with no better result. There was still no news.

"It's frightfully rotten, dear boys," said Arthur Augustus dismally, as the chums returned to Study No. 6 to get their books for morning lessons. "I have been thinkin', y' know."

"That's some help, anyway," said Blake, with heavy sarcasm. "When Gussy starts thinking something's bound to happen."

"Weally, Blake—"

"I noticed he was looking thoughtful," said Herries.

"What's the idea, Gussy?"

"About Digby, of course," said Arthur Augustus. "As his chums, I feel we ought to do somethin' more than gas about it, dear boys. I have a great regard for Sir Wobert Digby. But, weally, I do not see why we should leave the mattah to him."

"What on earth are you getting at, ass?"

"I wufese to be called an ass, Blake," said Arthur Augustus frigidly. "If Sir Wobert has failed to twaco Dig, then it is no weason why we should fail. And if the Head is content to leave the mattah in his hands, I see no weason why we should. I have given it a great deal of anxious thought, and I have come to the conclusion that it is up to us."

"What's up to us, fathead?" said Blake.

"To twack down Dig's kidnappahs, and to wescue him and Tom Mewwy," said Arthur Augustus.

"You—you idiot!" gasped Blake. "How the thump are we to do it?"

"I think I have alweady explained that, Blake," said Arthur Augustus, raising his eyebrows. "We are Scouts, and are twained in twackin'. I suggest that we get on the twail and follow the tyre-marks of the cah."

"Fathead! What about classes?"

"We shall get leave ffrom classes, of course," said Arthur Augustus innocently. "I think I'll go and see the Head now about it."

"Yes, do!" said Blake. "And see what you'll get!"

"Wight-ho, I will go at once," said Arthur Augustus. "I am glad you fellows agree that it is up to us to wescue old Dig."

"Here, come back, you ass!" roared Blake.

But Arthur Augustus was gone.
 "The—the burbling dummy!" snorted Blake. "He'll get scalped! Of all the born idiots! Well, if he wants a licking, let him rip!"

It was too late to call the swell of St. Jim's back, and his chums waited for him as he vanished into the Head's study. They had not to wait long. Presently Arthur Augustus came out and he was tucking his palms under his armpits.

"Licked?" said Blake. "Serves you right!"

"Bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "Yaas, the Head seemed watty. I suppose he is upset about this affair. He wefuses to give his permission, and because I insisted upon explainin' my weasons for wantin' to go, he caned me. Bai Jove! Powevah, it scarcely mattahs."

"Oh, doesn't it! Go and try it on again, and get another licking then, if it doesn't matter."

"Wats! I wepeat that it scarcely mattahs, as we shall go just the same without permission," said Arthur Augustus firmly. "Dig is our chum, and it is up to us to rescue him!"

"We?" ejaculated Blake.

"Yaas, I twust," said Arthur Augustus, eyeing his chums steadily, "that you are weady to wisk a tickin' for the sake of a pal. If not, I shall go alone."

"You—you born idiot!" said Blake. "What good could we do if we did? We don't know where the dashed car went, and if we did we'd never be able to find the tyre-tracks and follow them. They'll have been wiped out long ago, and it would be like looking for a needle in a haystack."

"Wubbish!"

"Look here—"

"Wats!" said Arthur Augustus, his noble eyes gleaming with determination. "We should be vewy poor Scouts if we could not find the twail and follow it up. And, in any case, we could make inquiries. Somebody is bound to have seen a cah answah-in' to the description of the cah Dig was taken away in."

"But it was last night!" shrieked Blake. "Since last night scores of cars will have covered up all traces. It's hopeless to think of following, you dummy! There might have been last night, if we'd thought about it."

"It is not hopeless," said Arthur Augustus calmly. "I have quite made up my mind, and if you fellows are so diswegardful of poor old Dig's safety as to wefuse to come, then I shall have no othah wesource but to go myself."

Blake breathed hard.

"You—you fathead!" he said, in concentrated tones. "If I felt there was a ghost of a chance of success you wouldn't find me holding back, permission or not. But there isn't! You won't jolly well get me to come, and you won't go yourself, either, Gussy!"

"Then I take it you fellows wefuse?"

"Of course, you chump!"

"Then I shall go myself," said Arthur Augustus calmly. "Will you kindly inform Mr. Lathom that I shall be unable to attend classes this mornin' as I have gone to wescue Digby, Blake? I have no doubt both he and the Head will be watty; but that cannot be helped. I shall start at once on my bike."

"Will you?" said Blake. "We'll jolly well see about that. Collar the ass, Herries!"

"What-ho!"

"Heah! Welease me, you wottahs!" gasped Arthur Augustus, as his dutiful chums laid hands on him just as he was about to walk away. "Bai Jove! Oh, gweat Scott!"

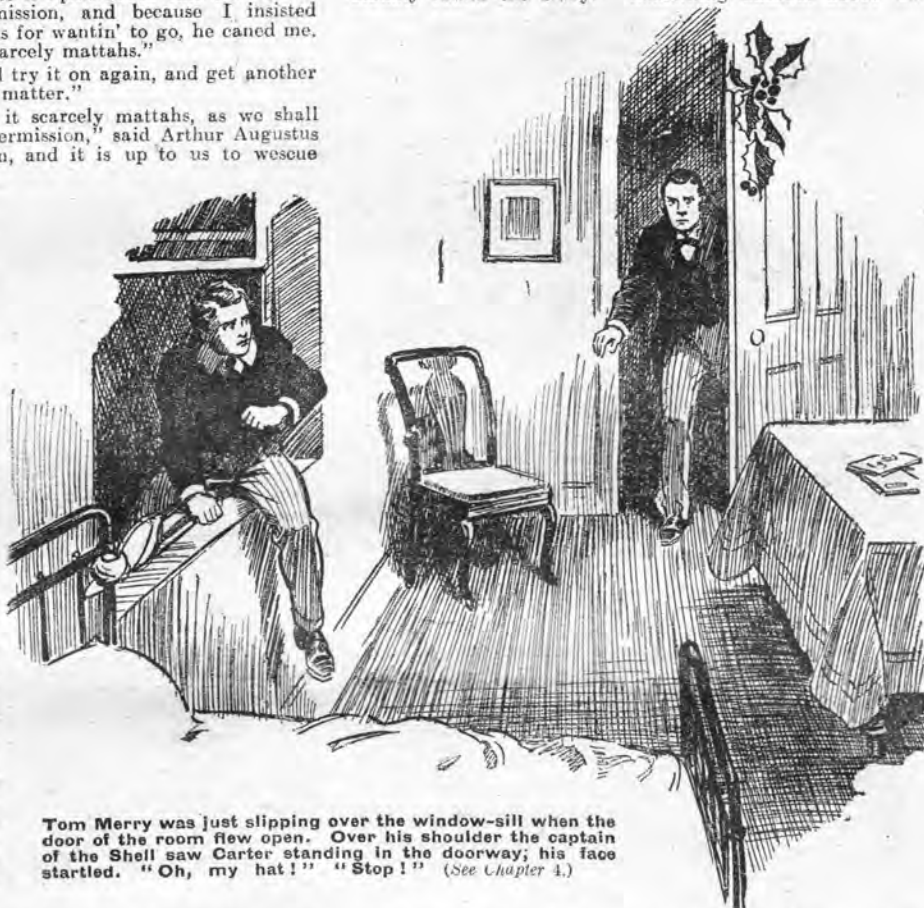
Arthur Augustus fairly gasped as his chums rushed him along the passage towards Study No. 6.

"In with him, and grab his books!" snapped Blake. "We'll stick to the fathead until he's safely in the Form-room, anyway. In you go, Gussy!"

"Welease me, you wottahs!" shouted Arthur Augustus angrily.

He struggled furiously, but his chums rushed him into the study. They did not mind Arthur Augustus getting a caning, but they knew that the consequences would be far more serious if he dared to disobey the Head, and cut classes to go on a hopeless hunt for the missing juniors. And his chums felt that it was up to them to stop him at all costs.

As they reached the study, however, they halted, releasing Arthur Augustus in their surprise. They stared blankly round the study. Something unusual about the



Tom Merry was just slipping over the window-sill when the door of the room flew open. Over his shoulder the captain of the Shell saw Carter standing in the doorway; his face startled. "Oh, my hat!" "Stop!" (See Chapter 4.)

room struck them at once. Digby's desk, for one thing, had been dragged from its place, and was open, with a piled heap of its contents scattered on the floor.

On the table was a collection of books and various other articles, all of them dilapidated.

"What on earth!" gasped Herries. "Who's been nosing among old Dig's things? Dig cleared out of this study yesterday, but he left his things just as they were."

"And what's this doing here?" snorted Blake, glaring at the heap on the table. "Great pip! This looks like Trimble's rubbish! Well, I'm blown!"

Blake and Herries glowered at the miscellaneous collection. What Trimble's belongings were doing in Study No. 6 was quite beyond them. They soon knew, however. There was a sound of footsteps outside, and the next moment Baggy Trimble rolled in, staggering under a pile of books and things.

"Here," yelled Blake, "what's this game, you fat clam?"

"It's all right, you fellows," said Trimble cheerfully. "I'm just moving in."

"You're whatter?" yelled Blake.

"Don't shout!" urged Trimble. "It's all right. You'll be glad to hear I've got old Lathom's permission all serene. I say, that armchair belongs to old Dig, doesn't it?"

"You—you fat ass!"

"If it does," said Trimble calmly, "I bag it, remember! I think we shall get along well together in this study. After all, Dig wasn't really much catch, though his pater was a mouldy old baronet! I shall give tone to this study, I hope. I bet you fellows are glad to get rid of Dig. Sulky brute, you know! You'll find me different."

"Well, my hat!"

Blake and Herries had forgotten all about Arthur Augustus. They just stood and blinked dazedly at the cheery, chatty Trimble as he proceeded to store some of his things in Digby's desk. The sheer cheek of his proceedings fairly took their breath away.

"There's a heap of rubbish in this study that ought to be pitched out, you fellows," went on the fat youth cheerfully. "Old stuff belonging to Dig, I suppose. You fellows pitch it out, will you, when we get the new furniture along from Trimble Hall?"

"Tut-tut-Trimble Hall?"

"Yes, I've already written to the pater about it. It's as good as fixed up. I'm going to make it jolly comfy in here," said Trimble, looking about the room disparagingly.

"It's more like a garret than a study now; but I'll soon alter—I say, Blake, what—what are you going to do with that poker? I—Here, leggo! Yarrooogh!"

Trimble roared apprehensively as Blake made a leap and grabbed him.

"You cheeky owl!" roared Blake. "What's this dashed game?"

"I say, leggo!" gasped Trimble. "Haven't I told you it's all right? I've fixed it up with Lathom, and he's agreeable to me joining you in here now Digby's gone."

"You cheeky fat rotter!" snorted Herries. "Well, of all the nerve!"

The meaning of it seemed clear now. Baggy Trimble evidently believed in taking time by the forelock, and, now that Digby had gone, he evidently felt he would be welcome in Study No. 6 in his place. At all events, he seemed to have taken it for granted that he would be welcome. As a matter of fact, Trimble's reason was only too clear to Blake and Herries now. Study No. 6, with fellows well supplied with cash, like Arthur Augustus and Digby, in it, had always been more or less a land flowing with milk and honey, and a source of great attraction to the impecunious Baggy Trimble. And even without Digby, it evidently still had great attractions to the greedy Baggy. In Study No. 2, with Wildrake and Mellish, Baggy got far more kicks than anything else, and it was clear that, with Digby gone, he had seen a chance to make a satisfactory change.

But from the looks on the faces of Blake and Herries it wasn't going to be so satisfactory to them.

"You—you fat poacher!" gasped Blake. "You—you cheeky fat rascal! You've been to Lathom and got him to shove you in here?"

"It's a yarn!" said Herries wrathfully. "Lathom wouldn't, when he knows Dig must come back."

"Oh, really, Herries!" said Trimble, blinking apprehensively at the two. "Not at all. Dig isn't coming back! His pater's gone smash, and he's left. This kidnapping tosh has all been arranged to hide the real reason why he's leaving, of course!"

"You fat fibber!" roared Blake, shaking the fat junior angrily. "If you've had the nerve to get changed in here—"

"Oh, I say, Blake, it's all right, I tell you!" gasped Trimble. "I didn't really ask, you know; Lathom made me k-i-c-o-m-e. Stop shaking me! Ow! It's all right. Wildrake and Mellish don't mind. I'm fed up with them—mean beasts, you know, and not my class! I felt I had to come and join my old pal Gussy! I'm going to stand some stunning spreads right through the term, and I'm going to refurbish this study. You'll like the new stuff I'm having sent from Trimble Towers—I mean, Trimble Hall. It's all inlaid oak and—Yarrooogh!"

Trimble roared as his head tapped the study table—hard.

"Out with the fat rotter!" gasped Blake. "Whether he's got Lathom's permission or not, he's going out, and his rubbish after him. Now then, out—"

"Hold on!" said Herries. "Why, the fat toad's wearing some of Dig's things! That's Dig's tie, and I'm jolly sure that's not Trimble's jacket and waistcoat! And the blessed shoes he's wearing are Dig's, or I'm a Dutchman!"

"Well, I'm blowed!"

"I—I say, you fellows, it's all serene about that!" gasped Trimble in alarm. "They're all my togs, of course—not Dig's at all. Besides, Dig gave them to me before he went."

"What?"

"That's it," said Trimble, blinking up at Blake. "Digby left them to me as—as a parting gift, you know. He said—Yooop! Oh crikey!"

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Trimble was fairly strewn on the carpet. Blake and Herries grabbed him and tore off his jacket, his waistcoat, his tie, and his shoes—or, rather, Digby's jacket and waistcoat and tie and shoes. Evidently Trimble had been making hay while the sun shone, as well as taking time by the forelock.

"Want any help?" grinned Levison, looking in at the door.

"Join in!" gasped Blake. "This fat burglar's been helping himself to old Dig's things, the cheeky worm! I bet he's got some more in his pockets. Up-end him and shake the dashed things out! Hallo! There's Dig's fountain-pen already!"

"Phew!"

"The fat rotter!" ejaculated Levison in disgust.

Digby's fountain-pen—the junior's knew it at a glance—dropped on the carpet. It was followed by Digby's pocket-knife, his silver pencil-case, and several other small items they knew belonged to their absent chum.

That was apparently all, but more than enough, though Trimble had evidently also taken to himself all Digby's books and things—or intended to.

"You—you fat burglar!"

"Yarrooogh! I tell you Dig gave them to me!" howled Trimble as Blake rolled him over with a bump. "I bagged them! I got in first, and you—yow!—only want to bag 'em yourselves, you selfish beasts! Yarrooogh! Oh crikey!"

Bump, bump, bump, bump!

Trimble was propelled towards the door in a succession of bumps, and rolled out into the passage. A shower of articles followed him and rained down upon him—all sorts of things that were obviously the fat youth's property.

"Yarrooogh! Stoppit! Yow!"

Trimble sat up dazedly, but a hefty Latin dictionary flew from Blake's hand and bowled him over again. And at that moment Mr. Lathom, the little, good-natured master of the Fourth, came along the passage, evidently making for the Form-room.

He did not look good-natured as he glowered through his spectacles at the grovelling Baggy and his belongings.

"Trimble," he thundered, "how dare you appear in public without shoes, waistcoat, and jacket. And—Ah, were you boys responsible for Trimble's disgraceful state?" he added sternly, his eyes falling on Blake, Herries, and Levison.

"Ahem! Y-e-es, sir."

"Then explain your extraordinary action, Blake!" snapped the master.

"Levison isn't to blame, sir," answered Blake. "Herries and I don't want Trimble in here, so we—we've kicked him out, sir. Whether Digby returns or not we—we don't want Trimble. We—we shan't get on well with him at all, sir."

"Bless my soul!" said Mr. Lathom, gazing severely at Trimble, who was staggering to his feet. "Do I understand that Trimble has taken it upon himself to move with his belongings into your study, Blake?"

"Yes, sir," said Blake, staring. "We—we're sorry if you gave him permission, sir, but—"

"I certainly did not give Trimble permission to change studies!" snapped Mr. Lathom. "Did Trimble say I had, Blake?"

"Ahem!"

"Trimble, did you give Blake to understand that I gave you permission to change into this study?" said Mr. Lathom sternly.

"Ow! Oh dear! Nunno, sir; not at all! I—I—Blake must be mistaken, sir. It was really only a lark, sir," said Trimble, with a groan. "What I really meant to say was that you hadn't given me permission, sir. You—you—"

"Silence! It is obvious to me that you are prevaricating, Trimble. You will do me a hundred lines for having the impudence to attempt to change into this study without permission, and you will come to me for a caning in class for telling falsehoods."

"Oh dear!"

"Clear this rubbish away at once!" thundered the master. "I will allow you five minutes to do that and to dress. If you are late in the Form-room I shall double your imposition."

"Yon, Blake and Herries, will do me fifty lines for taking matters into your own hands and causing this disturbance."

"Oh, yes, sir!"

Solution of Last Week's 'HIDDEN NAMES' Puzzle.

1. The Gem Library.
2. The Magnet Library.
3. Martin Clifford.
4. Owen Conquest.
5. Greyfriars School.
6. Friardale.
7. Sexton Blake.
8. Lord Eastwood.
9. The Greyfriars Holiday Annual.

The irate and scandalised master rustled away, carefully avoiding Trimble and his heap of "rubbish."

"Only fifty lines," grinned Blake. "We got off cheaply. Trimble, you fat worm—"

"Beasts!" groaned Trimble. "I wouldn't come into your mouldy old study after this if you asked me on your bended knees. Yah! Beasts!"

"Serves you right!" grinned Blake.

"Hear, hear!" said Levison.

And the three juniors walked away, chuckling, leaving Trimble scrambling desperately among his belongings. They made for the Fourth Form room for first lesson, and it was not until Trimble came in five minutes later and lessons started that Blake became aware that Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was absent from his place.

"Oh crumbs!" gasped Blake.

He blinked about him, but Arthur Augustus was undoubtedly absent.

"Blake!" snapped Mr. Lathom, peering over his glasses as was his wont. "D'Arcy appears to be absent from the Form-room. Do you know where he is?"

"Oh crumbs!" whispered Herries. "The—the awful ass!"

Blake gasped. Since they had entered Study No. 6 with the swell of the Fourth they had forgotten all about him. But he had evidently seen his chance when they were busy with Trimble and had slipped away.

"No-nunno, sir!" gasped Blake, standing up in his place. He certainly did not know where Gussy was, though he had a horrid suspicion.

"Very well. You will go and look for him, Blake," said Mr. Lathom testily. "We are already late with lessons, and I shall punish him severely when he does come in. Find him and bring him here without delay, Blake!"

"Oh, yes, sir!" gasped Blake.

Herries grew more and more uneasy, and the face of Mr. Lathom grew grimmer and grimmer as the minutes passed. Whether Arthur Augustus found the trail or not, there was fairly certain to be trouble awaiting him when he returned to St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 6.

The Kidnappers Mistake!

UNDER the thick rug Tom Merry lay still and quiet as the car rushed on through the night.

He was bewildered—utterly staggered by this new development—a development that seemed to make the whole mystery deeper and deeper. He had expected to be taken back to the house, and he had almost laughed to himself as he felt himself lifted and realised the mistake they were making. At that moment his one thought had been to save Digby. He did not intend them to find out their mistake until he knew Digby would have had ample chance to get clear.

But they had not taken him back to the house. The three men—Tom knew it now—were not confederates of Carter and the people at Green Shutters. They were obviously there at that hour, with no lights showing, for no good purpose and quite unknown to the people at Green Shutters.

Who were they? And why were they out to kidnap Robert Arthur Digby?

Tom Merry simply could not make head or tail of the strange development. Yet he was determined not to show by word or sign that the men had made a blunder—that they had got the wrong fellow—yet. As the car rushed on, Tom's thoughts were busy, and it came to him that he would be unwise to make a move. The hour was late, and he did

HIDDEN NAMES!



CAN YOU SOLVE THIS PUZZLE, CLUMS?

This week we are testing the ingenuity of our readers by giving them another difficult Anagram to solve.

Each of the following sentences, when the letters are correctly transposed, will be found to form the name of a well-known character at St. Jim's.

1. Do what, pally Crusader?
2. I lick, reader!
3. Grin, O sly cub!
4. Dance, flit on!
5. I've rare rims.
6. Stagger—a limp, eh?
7. My rash Ern ran.
8. Long battle raid.
9. Smart b'ho'y!

He left his place and hurried out, making straight for the cycle shed. If D'Arcy's machine was missing from the shed, then it was pretty clear what had happened to him. A single glance inside the shed told Blake the worst.

"Oh crumbs!" gasped Blake to himself. "The awful ass has gone, after all! Oh crumbs!"

Still hopeful that Arthur Augustus had not carried out his threat and gone on the trail of Digby and Tom Merry, Blake hurried back to the School House and looked in all the Fourth Form studies. But they were all empty, and Blake returned to the Form-room. But he saw no reason why he should give Gussy away. He felt pretty certain Gussy would soon find the search hopeless and return.

"You have not found him, Blake?" said Mr. Lathom.

"No, sir," said Blake, quite truthfully. "I can't find him anywhere."

"Very well," snapped the master, his face grim. "You may take your place, Blake."

"Yes, sir."

Blake sat down, and lessons proceeded—without Arthur Augustus. The swell of St. Jim's at that moment was riding along Rylcombe Lane with lessons far from his mind. He did not trouble to look for "sign" yet. He remembered that when Eggy Trimble had been kidnapped in mistake for Digby he had been taken in the car on to the Abbotsford road, and Arthur Augustus intended to start his investigations and tracking there. He rode serenely on, lessons and Form masters forgotten, while in the Fourth Form room at St. Jim's the faces of Blake and

not wish to be left stranded on the dark roads, possibly miles from anywhere. The men would undoubtedly be angry when they discovered their mistake, and if they did not actually harm him, they would, more likely than not, pitch him out of the car to shift for himself.

So he kept silent, lying still and motionless under the rug. Once only—just after leaving Green Shutters—one of the men leaned over him and spoke.

"You have nothing to fear, Master Digby," he said. "I think you can guess what this means. You are safe enough, and have no need to be afraid. We are taking you to your father now."

"I—I understand!" muttered Tom.

He could almost have laughed. That the men should expect him to believe that he was being taken to Sir Robert Digby struck him as being ludicrous in the extreme.

"You can sit up now," went on the man. "Put the rug round you—here!"

He helped Tom to his feet in the car. The other man moved aside to make room for him on the seat. With the rug round him the junior felt more comfortable now. Scarcely a moment later the car was rushing through Abbotsford, and it was soon through the town and out into open country again.

The men did not speak again, nor did Tom. How long the car sped on he could only guess, but it must have been an hour or two as they flashed through villages and towns. Tom was tired out, and he was dozing off when suddenly

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he became wide awake, aware that the car was slowing down.

Then came the crunch of gravel under the tyres of the car, and he realised they were passing along a drive. It was a long drive, and presently the car stopped before an imposing-looking house, white against the background of dark trees.

As he was helped out of the car, Tom looked about him keenly, and then he gave a start.

The house, even in the darkness, was familiar to him. He had been there before. He recognised the terrace, the balcony over the entrance porch, the wide stretches of lawn, visible even in the gloom.

It was Digby's home!

As Tom Merry stood staring about him, stupidly now, the hall doors opened and a flood of light shot over the steps. In the open doorway stood Sir Robert Digby.

The man who had spoken to him in the car grasped his arm and hurried him up the steps.

"Well?" demanded Sir Robert, peering out. "Have you—Ah!" His eyes fell on Tom Merry; but even as he saw him he started back, his face showing amazement and disappointment. "What—what—"

"We have succeeded, Sir Robert," said the man respectfully. "Here is Master Digby—"

"You—you have succeeded, you say?" bellowed the baronet, his face almost purple. "You—you blockheads! You—you dunderheads! This is not my son! What idiotic blunder is this, begad?"

"S-sus-sir Robert—" stammered the man.

"This is not my son!" gasped Sir Robert, glaring at the hapless Tom Merry. "Who— Good gad! I know you, boy; you are a chum of Robert's. Your name is Merry, and you have been here with Robert on holiday?"

"Ye-es, sir!" stammered Tom.

He was flabbergasted and dismayed. He saw the deep disappointment in the baronet's face, and it did not make him feel any the happier. But he felt sorrier for Digby's father than for himself in that moment.

It all seemed fairly clear to him now—the later development of the mystery, at all events. Sir Robert had obviously been acquainted with Digby's disappearance by Dr. Holmes, and he had lost no time in getting these men—possibly detectives—on the trail of the kidnapers. Yet even as that theory came to him Tom could not help seeing the flaws in it. Why had the men approached Green Shutters so cautiously if they were detectives, and why had they acted so secretly? They had taken him for Digby, had collared him and taken him away without troubling to see or apprehend the rascally kidnapers!

It all seemed beyond the junior.

He stood silent, and after eyeing him half angrily, half curiously, the baronet motioned to the man and went down the steps with him to the gravel drive. Tom heard his heated voice, though he did not distinguish the words—nor did he try to. Apparently Sir Robert was telling the detectives—if detectives they were—what he thought of them. Sir Robert, as Tom Merry knew, was a somewhat choleric gentleman with an uncertain temper, though he was also generous and good-natured to a fault, and all Dig's chums liked him immensely.

He came back to Tom presently, and led the junior to the library, bidding him to sit down—in kinder tones now.

"Tell me how you came to—to be at Green Shutters," he said, speaking as if with an effort. "But first of all—do you know where Robert is? As you have probably guessed, I have been to St. Jim's, and have learned from Dr. Holmes that my son was missing and that you had gone after the car in a plucky attempt to rescue your chum."

He waited, and Tom Merry told him what had happened from the moment when he had jumped into the saddle of St. Leger's motor-bike.

The baronet listened patiently, and he nodded at the end. "And you feel certain that Robert will be back at St. Jim's now?" he said.

"Yes, sir. Absolutely certain! If he had been caught again I should have heard or seen. I was last, and he had vanished when I ran down the drive, though I knew he must be in front of me."

"You do not think he would go back when he realised something must have happened to you?" asked the baronet.

"No, sir. In the ordinary way it was just what he would do, of course. But I told him before we started that if things went wrong, and if one didn't manage to get clear, the other was to take the bike and get away as soon as he could, making for St. Jim's to get help. He would not hear of the police. Better for one to get clear than for both to be recaptured," ended Tom.

"Yes, yes! Robert agreed to that then?"

"I don't remember his agreeing exactly," said Tom, frowning slightly. "But he must have done that; he'd be mad if he didn't. I'm certain he's safe at St. Jim's now, sir."

"You—you are quite sure that Robert has no idea what

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the business means?" said Sir Robert, biting his moustache and eyeing Tom sharply.

"Quite, sir; though he was upset, of course, and I could see he suspected all sorts of things. I don't think he imagines for one moment that the rascals are holding him to ransom, because they treated him and myself so well, I suppose. But it's all very queer, sir."

And Tom looked hard at the baronet. He wondered if Digby's father knew, or suspected, what it meant. It seemed inconceivable that he did not. Tom wondered if Sir Robert would tell him if he did. Naturally, the captain of the Shell was more than curious—a curiosity only natural under the circumstances. But if he expected Sir Robert to say anything he was mistaken.

The baronet rose quickly to his feet.

"Well, it is too late to do anything to-night, my boy," he said, his face expressionless. "I will arrange for you to have a meal, and I had already had a bed prepared for— for my son."

"Please don't bother about me, sir," said Tom uncomfortably. "I really couldn't eat anything."

"As you will," said the baronet. "You had better come to your bedroom, then. I will take you back to school early in the morning, and I trust we shall find Robert safely there."

"I hope so, sir!"

Ten minutes later, tired out and weary, Tom Merry was sleeping soundly under the roof of Digby's home.

CHAPTER 7. Astonishing!

"Gussy!"

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy almost fell off his bike. The swell of the Fourth had just turned on to the Abbotsford road from the Wayland road, and was just on the point of really making a start on his investigations.

At St. Jim's the task of getting on the trail of the kidnapers had seemed a very simple task—to Arthur Augustus, who not only prided himself on his tact and judgment and many, many other things, but also on his unusual powers as a scout and tracker.

He had, first of all, carefully examined the spot in Rylcombe Lane where Digby had been captured. There had been no rain since, and he had easily found tyre-marks of cars. Unfortunately, there seemed dozens of them, and they all seemed—to Arthur Augustus—alike. And as he had blinked at them, it had dawned upon the amateur tracker that it was not going to be an easy matter, after all, as Blake had remarked. Since the previous evening scores of cars had probably passed that way, and it was, indeed, like searching for a needle in a haystack.

Still, Arthur Augustus had not been disheartened. He had made straight for the Abbotsford road—though what he intended doing when he got there he had only a very vague idea. But he was grimly in earnest in the matter. He had felt the trouble with Digby more deeply than the others, and he was concerned for his chum's safety. That he was booked for serious trouble for having dared to "cut" lessons in such a reckless manner did not worry Arthur Augustus in the least. Self was always more or less in the background where Arthur Augustus was concerned.

Arthur Augustus had told his chums that he had quite made his mind up, and he meant it. He was resolved not to return to St. Jim's without his absent chums, or without some news of them.

But it began to look as if he wasn't going to find it at all easy. And the noble face of Arthur Augustus was rather glum and very thoughtful as he turned his bike on to the Abbotsford road, to begin his task of tracking down the missing juniors.

Indeed, so engrossed was he in the problem before him that he was all but run down at the cross-roads by a large open car that swept round the bend. Then had come that startling shout:

"Gussy!"

The shout had come from the car, and it was in the well-known, cheery voice of Tom Merry of the Shell at St. Jim's.

Under the circumstances, it was really no wonder that the swell of the Fourth nearly fell off his bike in his astonishment. He had been riding with his head down, and he had scarcely noticed the big car, though he had avoided it as by a miracle.

"Bai Jove!" gasped the junior, looking quickly over his shoulder. "Gweat Scott, it weally is Tom Merry! How wippin'!"

Arthur Augustus hurriedly dismounted from his machine. The car had come to a standstill, and was now backing towards him. At the wheel was an elderly gentleman with rather grim features, and Arthur Augustus recognised him as Sir Robert Digby. Tom Merry was seated by his side,

and they were the only occupants of the car. Arthur Augustus looked in vain for Dig, and his face fell a little. "Bai Jove! I am vewy glad indeed to see you, 'Tom Mewwy!'" he exclaimed eagerly. "Good-mornin', sir!" he added, raising his hat gracefully to Sir Robert. "I do not see Dig with you, sir; but I weally do twust that he is all wight?"

Arthur Augustus spoke breathlessly. Tom Merry stared at him in sudden, startled alarm.

Sir Robert started, twisting round abruptly in his seat.

"Eh! What's that, boy?" he gasped.

"Gussy!" stuttered Tom Merry. "What's wrong? What are you doing out here at this time of the day?"

"I am huntin' for clues, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus. "I have decided it is up to me to twack down the kidnappahs and wescue Dig. But—but if you have succeeded—"

"You mean you've left St. Jim's to hunt for Dig?" almost shouted Tom, as he opened the door of the car and stepped into the road.

"Yaas! The Head was most unweasonable, and so I decided to start out without permission," explained Arthur Augustus. "You see—"

"You mean to say that Dig isn't safe at St. Jim's?"

"Bai Jove! No, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, his face clouding again. "He is still missin' of course—"

"Good gad!" Sir Robert glared at D'Arcy, his features going purple. "What? Robert is not at St. Jim's, after all?"

"No, sir," said Arthur Augustus. "I wewet that Digbay has not been seen since he vanished last night, and nothin' whatevah has been heard of him. Have you seen nothin' of him, Tom Mewwy?"

Arthur Augustus' noble face was a picture of dismay. Though disturbed at only seeing Tom in the car, he had hoped they had news of Digby—news that he was safe and well. But, apparently, they had not, and had imagined he was at St. Jim's.

"Seen him?" echoed Tom Merry, his own face going pale. "Yes, Gussy: I followed the car last night—traced it to a house on the Abbotsford Road, a house called Green Shutters! But I was collared, too, and made a prisoner with Dig. We escaped, though, and I thought Dig would be safe at St. Jim's now."

And Tom hurriedly related his adventures, while the baronet, showing his disappointment and anger, looked on impatiently.

"Gweat Scott!" gasped Arthur Augustus, as Tom finished. "Then—then old Dig must have been captured again! He must be at that house now, for he did not return to St. Jim's."

"Of course he is!" exploded Sir Robert. "You were obviously mistaken, my boy, when you said that my son had escaped! As we are so near to St. Jim's, however, I will run you back there before going to that confounded house! Why did I leave the matter in the hands of those blundering idiots, instead of dealing with the matter myself? However, there shall be no blunder about the business this time. Jump in, boy!" he added irritably. "I must see Dr. Holmes, and then—well, we shall see!"

Tom Merry's face was crimson as he jumped into the car again. He had been so sure—so absolutely certain that Digby would have gone straight back to St. Jim's, as was practically arranged. But now he knew that Digby must have gone back to the Green Shutters and had, obviously, been captured again.

Without another glance at the astonished and bewildered Arthur Augustus, the baronet started the car, and it glided away, vanishing round the bend at a terrific speed.

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus stood with his machine and blinked through his monocle. Tom Merry's story was certainly startling in the extreme. But at the moment Arthur Augustus was thinking of the baronet's strange attitude.

"I am vewy much surprised at Sir Wobert!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "Had I been in his place, I should certainly have not bothated to waste furthah time by wushin' to St. Jim's. I should have been onlay too engah to go to Digbay's wescue. Tom Mewwy and I could have accompanied him, or he could have wushed off in the car alone, and Tom Mewwy could have weturned on my back step to St. Jim's. Howevah, Sir Wobert may have his weasons for not doin' so!"

In Arthur Augustus' noble mind, nobody—not even Dig's own father—was taking the matter seriously enough. And suddenly the noble eye of the swell of the Fourth gleamed with determination. In his view, every moment was precious, and the sooner Dig was rescued the better. And if nobody else was in a hurry to effect his rescue, then it must be left to Arthur Augustus. The rescue would be accomplished, alone and unaided, by Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

A moment after making the resolve, his bike had been whirled round, and he was riding once more towards

Abbotsford. But he rode hard now, going like the wind, his monocle streaming behind him at the end of its cord.

The name of the house was an unusual one, and Arthur remembered it easily enough. Moreover, there were few large houses on the Abbotsford road, and Arthur Augustus fancied he remembered having seen a house with green shutters, for obviously a house called by such a name would have green shutters to the windows.

Gussy rode on, not troubling to wonder how he was going to effect the rescue when he reached the house. That was a detail to Arthur Augustus. He was supremely confident of his own powers and capabilities, and such a thing as fear never even entered his noble mind.

He came to the house at last—there could be no mistaking it. He left his machine in the yew hedge, and then he began to scout round. Though unafraid, Arthur Augustus realised that caution was necessary. He also realised that strategy—and plenty of it—would be necessary, for obviously he could not take the house by assault and battery, as it were, and effect Digby's rescue that way.

"It is weally wathah difficult affah all," murmured the would-be rescuer, peering cautiously down the tree-shaded drive. "Yaas," he added, as he noted the name on the gateposts, "it is Gween Shuttahs wight enough. But weally it does not seem to be a place where one would expect despwate kidnappahs to live. It is vewy, vewy stwange! Howevah, I will scout wound!"

And Arthur Augustus began to scout round, beginning by making a dive into the laurels and other bushes of the shrubbery. It was a simple matter to approach the house unseen, and presently the junior found himself round the side of the house. There he stopped and scanned the windows, hoping to catch a glimpse of Digby—if his chum really was there.

And then, almost at once, he was rewarded.

At one of the upper windows a form appeared. It was Digby, and he started back in surprise as he sighted Arthur Augustus. Then, as the swell of the Fourth waved a hand, he answered quickly.

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus, in great excitement. "How vewy lucky!"

He was just on the point of moving nearer to the house when a man came round the corner of the building. He was the gardener, and just in time Arthur Augustus dodged down behind a clump of low bushes.

Fortunately he had not been seen, and the man started working on a flower-bed. But it was scarcely half a dozen yards away, and the low bushes barely hid the breathless junior.

"Oh, gweat Scott!" murmured Arthur Augustus.

His present hiding-place was undoubtedly unsafe. At any moment the man might move nearer and he could not fail to see him if he did. So the junior looked about him swiftly for another hiding-place.

His eye fell on the garage—a brick building with double doors just across the gravel path near where he was crouching. The doors stood invitingly half-open, and after hesitating a brief moment, Arthur Augustus took the plunge.

A quick look at the unsuspecting gardener, and the next instant he was darting on tiptoe for the garage. He reached it, and then he slipped inside, and peered back. The man was still working—evidently he had heard and seen nothing.

"Oh, good!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "Bai Jove! What am I to do now?"

It was a problem. It was more difficult to leave the garage without being seen than it had been to leave the shelter of the bushes. Arthur Augustus decided to wait there, at all events until the unwelcome gardener had moved.

But suddenly the question was decided for the junior.

There came the sound of a car, and Arthur Augustus heard it moving down the gravel drive, and stop before the house. After a moment or so, he heard it again, and this time—to his great alarm—it came towards the garage. In a flash the junior realised that discovery was imminent. The car had obviously brought somebody to the house, and was now going to be housed in the garage.

"Oh cwumbs!" groaned Gussy.

He had drawn the doors almost shut, and now he peeped through the narrow opening. A car was moving slowly towards the garage backwards. It was a big blue car, and D'Arcy recognised it as the car Trimble had been taken away in. The next moment the car stopped close to the door, and the chauffeur jumped out, coming towards the doors to open them wide.

Arthur Augustus recognised the man also. It was Johnson, the driver who had handled them so easily, and Arthur Augustus trembled, looking about him wildly.

But there was no place in the garage to hide, and Arthur Augustus swiftly decided to make a desperate rush for it the moment the doors opened.

He got no chance to do that, however.

Even as the man's fingers closed on the door-handle, footsteps sounded outside, and then a voice—a cultured, female voice:

"Oh, Johnson, I have changed my mind!" came the voice in firm, clear tones. "I will have the car at eleven, not twelve. Kindly have it at the door at eleven prompt! It will give me more time to do some necessary shopping in Lewes before going on to the boat at Newhaven."

"Very good, my lady!"

Arthur Augustus almost fainted. The voice was a voice he had heard before—it was familiar to him. And as he heard the chauffeur's answer, he knew to whom it belonged. The revelation staggered him.

And as he stood gasping, dumbfounded, the doors opened and Johnson stepped inside—colliding violently with Arthur Augustus as he did so, and knocking Gussy's topper over his eyes.

What happened next was rather unexpected and very embarrassing for the noble Arthur Augustus.

As both chauffeur and Gussy staggered back from the impact, somebody rushed past Johnson, and claspings Arthur Augustus, kissed him on both cheeks.

"Robert—my dear boy!"

"Oh, bai Jove!"

It was Lady Digby—Robert Digby's mother!

And it was obviously another case of mistaken identity! Arthur Augustus saw that at once. He had recognised the voice, and as he stood amazed, Johnson had barged into him, knocking his hat over his eyes, and hiding half his face.

And at that moment, Lady Digby—who clearly knew her son as at Green Shutters—had turned and seen him.

Being in Etons and about Digby's height and build, she had naturally taken him for Digby—not dreaming any other St. Jim's fellow was within miles, it was a very natural and simple mistake on her part.

"Oh!"

Lady Digby had realised her mistake now, however, and she started back with a cry of astonishment.

"Oh!" she repeated breathlessly. "I thought— Oh, it is you, D'Arcy! I—I thought it was Robert!"

Arthur Augustus blushed crimson; but he did not forget his manners, and, raising his hat, he bowed. He had never been more bewildered in his life. Arthur Augustus knew Dig's mother well, of course, having spent more than one holiday at her house. She was a tall, stately lady, with kindly features. Yet it was a firm face, showing unusual strength of will and character.

She seemed to force a smile now; and she held out her hand to the flustered and bewildered Arthur Augustus.

"I—I did not know that you were here—that any of Robert's friends were here," she said, with a glance at the startled Johnson. "I was not told— But you must excuse me. I must see Robert at once. If you will walk about the garden until Robert can see you—"

"Oh—oh, yes, Lady Digby!" gasped Arthur Augustus dazedly. "I—I am all wight; pway do not wowwy about me."

Lady Digby forced another smile, nodded, and hurried away. She was obviously much taken aback and agitated at discovering him there, obviously not dreaming that he had been hiding there unknown to the people in the house. And Arthur Augustus had been far too staggered and flustered to explain or ask questions. He stared and stared after Digby's mother, his monocle dangling from its cord, his mouth open. He was, as he would have put it, "all in a fluttah."

He was! Lady Digby—Dig's mother—was the very last person he could have dreamed of finding at that house—the house where her son, kidnapped, was held a prisoner. And she knew he was there, whether she was aware he was a prisoner or not.

It was amazing. All sorts of strange theories flashed through the junior's troubled mind. That she had come there to get Digby released—to bring the ransom, if ransom had been demanded of her, seemed absurd in the circumstances. She had spoken to Johnson as she would have spoken to her own chauffeur, and the words she had used were certainly very strange indeed.

Arthur Augustus thought of rushing after her to warn her—to tell her the truth in case she did not know it. But it was probably too late to do that in any case now.

"Oh, bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus replaced his topper and jammed his monocle into his eye. He looked at Johnson, who was regarding him curiously as he started to move about the garage. He wondered why Johnson did not attack him and make him prisoner as he had made Digby. And yet such proceeding seemed absurd on the face of things.

The junior walked away, his eyes on the house, and glancing behind next moment, Arthur Augustus saw that Johnson was taking no further notice of him.

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"Oh, bai Jove!" repeated Arthur Augustus dazedly once more. "Oh, gweat Scott! Whatevah can be the meanin' of the mystewy!"

As he strolled about Arthur Augustus started several times as if to go up boldly to the house, but each time he changed his mind again, remembering Lady Digby's request to walk in the garden. It came to him that she did not want him in the house—yet.

Suddenly the junior jumped as a hurried step sounded behind him, and next instant a hand clutched his arm. He jumped round, to recognise Digby, who was hatless.

"Bai Jove! Dig—"

"Quick!" gasped Digby. "Run for it, Gussy!"

"What?"

Arthur Augustus jumped. He stared at Digby's white and agitated face.

"Bai Jove! Dig—"

"Clear, you idiot!" snapped Digby, grabbing Gussy's arm and fairly dragging him into the bushes. "After me, and mind nobody sees us! Quick!"

"But—"

"Come on!" hissed Digby savagely.

"But weally, Dig—your mothah—"

"Come on!"

"Oh, gweat Scott!"

Gussy was astounded, but Digby's voice was so urgent that he allowed himself to be hustled and rushed through the bushes of the shrubbery, Digby glancing behind him every second to make sure they were unobserved. They reached the gateway at last, and there Digby halted a brief instant.

"You biked, I suppose, Gussy? Where's your jigger?"

"Oh, deah!" Arthur Augustus panted.

"In the hedge heah! But—"



Baggy Trimble left Study No. 6 in a succession of bumps and sprays. A shower of articles followed and rained down upon him. "Ow! S dazedly, but a hefty Latin dictionary flew from Blake's hand, and bowl At that moment Mr. Lathom turned the corner of the pass

Digby sighted the machine in the hedge and sprang towards it. He dragged it into the road.

"You must lend me this, Gussy—you must!" he gasped. "I'll explain everything perhaps later. You see that clump of trees along the road there?"

"Oh, yaas! But—"

"You'll find St. Leger's motor-bike there—hidden on the opposite side of the road behind the hedge. Get it and rush it along to the garage farther along. Get some petrol in the tank. You've got some cash?"

"Yaas. Weally—"

"Fill up and come after me as hard as you can pelt. Watch out as you pass here, and don't stop. You should catch me up before I get far. You can have your bike back then, and I'll take the mo'-bike."

"Gweat Scott! Weally, Dig—"

Digby did not wait. He grabbed the machine and leaped into the saddle. The next moment he was racing hard along the road in the direction of St. Jim's. Arthur Augustus gaped after him in dumbfounded amazement.

Then, realising there was need for haste, though utterly fogged, Arthur Augustus started off for the clump of trees at full-pelt. He easily found the bike, and ran it out into the road. Then he started off for the garage.

It was only a few minutes' walk, and after filling the petrol-tank, Arthur Augustus started back, getting the last ounce of speed out of St. Leger's machine. He was used to handling a motor-bike, and he went past Green Shutters like a streak, and settled down to an exhilarating ride.

But evidently Digby had fairly flown on the bicycle, for



awled in the Fourth Form passage. Stoppit! Yow!" Trimble sat up and yled him over again. "Yaroooh!" message. (See Chapter 5.)

he had nearly reached the cross-roads outside Rylcombe when he sighted his chum.

And Digby was not alone. He was standing with the machine by a car, and by the car was his father. Gussy realised what it meant. Sir Robert had started for Green Shutters after leaving Tom Merry at St. Jim's—indeed, Gussy wondered why he had taken so long getting such a short distance, not knowing that a breakdown had delayed the baronet.

But evidently all was well, for the engine of his car was running sweetly enough now, and as Gussy roared up and stopped, Sir Robert, who was looking strangely angry, climbed into his car and took the wheel. It was clear from the faces of Digby and his father that they had been discussing something very serious. Digby's face was white and deeply troubled.

"Heah I am, deah boy!" gasped Arthur Augustus, dropping from the saddle and raising his topper to the baronet. "You had better stick to the motor-bicycle, my boy!" exclaimed Sir Robert gruffly. "Robert will join me in the car, and the bicycle can be lifted on the rear seats."

"Vewy good, sir!"

Arthur Augustus was surprised, but Digby said nothing. He lifted his machine on to the car and made it secure, and a few moments later they were making for St. Jim's, Arthur Augustus riding behind the car. The swell of St. Jim's looked what he was—absolutely bewildered. But neither Sir Robert nor Dig seemed inclined to say anything, and Arthur Augustus wasn't the fellow to ask questions.

CHAPTER 8. Digby's Return!

"Gussy!"

"Here he is, the fathead!"

"Now for fireworks!"

A buzz ran through the class as Arthur Augustus marched into the Fourth Form-room close on the end of second lesson that morning.

It was generally known why Arthur Augustus had "cut" lessons now. As he failed to turn up, Mr. Lathom had cross-examined Blake, and that junior had felt obliged to mention that he believed Arthur Augustus had gone to hunt for the missing juniors.

The news had filled Mr. Lathom with towering wrath. And now Arthur Augustus had turned up, after defying his headmaster and ignoring such small matters as morning lessons!

It was not surprising that the Form anticipated a warm time for the swell of the Fourth.

The juniors were excited enough as it was, for Gussy's action was not the only sensation. It was during morning break that Tom Merry had arrived at St. Jim's with Sir Robert Digby, and scores of fellows had seen him arrive, and his arrival had been greeted with cheers. After that the whole school looked forward to hearing an exciting story from Tom Merry—and news of the missing Digby.

But no story was forthcoming—exciting or otherwise! The fact was that Sir Robert had asked Tom to keep his adventures a secret from the school in general, and Tom was not the fellow to disregard such a request in the peculiar circumstances. And after reporting his story to the Head—he had been obliged to do that, of course—Tom had been quietly commended for his pluck and resource by the Head and Mr. Railton, and had joined his Form at second lesson.

But to all eager appeals for information he had turned a deaf ear, only telling his own chums what had happened. And the school had been obliged to let their curiosity go unsatisfied.

And now the Fourth were eager to hear—in a more humorous way—what had been happening to Arthur Augustus. From the steely gleam in Mr. Lathom's eye they fancied they knew what was in store for him.

"So—" gasped Mr. Lathom, glowering at Arthur Augustus. "So you have had the goodness to return, D'Arcy!"

"Oh, yaas, sir! Yaas, wathah!"

Arthur Augustus was quite calm. He might have been just arriving a minute late for class instead of having played truant nearly the whole morning.

He handed a folded note to Mr. Lathom.

"From Dr. Holmes, sir!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, indeed!" snapped the master of the Fourth, taking the note but still glowering at the junior. "You have seen the headmaster then, D'Arcy?"

"Oh, yaas, sir!"

"Has he punished you for this—this extraordinary escapade?" demanded Mr. Lathom.

"Oh, no, sir! Ahem! I think he wishes you to punish me, sir!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "He is vewy busy at the moment!"

"I shall certainly do so most severely, D'Arcy," barked the master wrathfully. "You have dared to ignore classes in order to go on a perfectly ridiculous and absurd wild-geese chase."

"Not at all, sir," said Arthur Augustus, with mild indignation. "I have been on the twack of the kidnappahs in ordah to find Digbay and bwing him back."

"A perfectly idiotic proceeding in the circumstances," snorted Mr. Lathom. "I do not overlook your motive, but you must have been well aware that such a quest was hopeless."

"Not at all, sir," said Arthur Augustus. "You see, sir, I found Digbay, all wight, and have just awwived at St. Jim's with him."

"What?"

Mr. Lathom jumped. A thrill went through the Form. "The—silly duffer!" breathed Blake. "What the thump is the ass talking about?"

"You—you found Digby and have just arrived here with him?" stuttered Mr. Lathom faintly.

"Yaas, sir! Digby and his pater are with the Head now, and the Head asked me to hand you that note."

"Bless my soul!"

Mr. Lathom looked at the note then. He read it, and then he gazed at the swell of St. Jim's, his face showing his amazement.

"Digby certainly has returned," he said quietly. "I am exceedingly relieved and glad to hear it. Dr. Holmes, however, wishes me to cane you for your reckless defiance of his orders and missing morning lessons, D'Arcy. Kindly hold out your hand."

Arthur Augustus held out his hand calmly. Mr. Lathom gave him one on each hand. But they were exceedingly light, and Arthur Augustus still looked calm as he walked to his place.

"Well, you—you lucky beggar!" whispered Blake.

"Lucky isn't the word for it!" breathed Herries. "What the thump's happened, Gussy? Where's Dig been?"

"Yes, what's happened, Gussy?"

A chorus of eager whispers assailed the ears of Arthur Augustus; but he heeded them not. Mr. Lathom did, however, and the questioning ones ceased troubling him when Mr. Lathom had handed a few lines out with threats of canings. Shortly afterwards, however, the bell rang and morning lessons ended.

There was a rush round the swell of the Fourth. But he serenely disregarded the curious ones, and guarded by his chums marched to find sanctuary in Study No. 6. They were joined a few seconds later by Tom Merry, Monty Lowther and Manners.

Tom Merry closed the door after them and looked at Gussy.

"You've got back, then, Gussy?" he said quietly. "I guessed you must have gone on afterwards when you didn't turn up. You've been to Green Shutters, of course?"

Arthur Augustus hesitated.

"I see you haven't told these chaps anything yet," said Tom quietly again. "But I can't see any harm in it, Gussy. I've told Lowther and Manners all I know. The Head told me to keep the matter to myself because Sir Robert asked him to. But Sir Robert told me he had no objection to my speaking about it to my chums, who were Dig's chums, and whom we knew would keep it to themselves."

"Then—then you know what the whole blessed mystery means?" explained Blake eagerly.

"Not at all!" said Tom Merry. "It beats me hollow. Sir Robert told me nothing. I only know what happened to Dig and to me. Dig doesn't know anything either—or he didn't last night."

"You'll tell us that!" said Blake eagerly. "I—I'm dashed worried about old Dig, and I bear no malice over his, not trusting me over that phone affair. He was worried—we know that! I only wish we knew what was the matter and could help him."

"I'll tell you all I know, anyway," said Tom. "You can say what you think about it. Then perhaps Gussy will tell us how he got on."

"Vewy well, deah boys!" said Arthur Augustus.

Tom Merry told them of his chase after the kidnappers, and of his adventures afterwards until Sir Robert had brought him back to St. Jim's.

His chums listened in amazed silence—only Arthur Augustus showing no surprise.

"Well, my hat!" breathed Blake, when he had finished.

"What a—what a queer affair!"

"Jolly queer!" agreed Herries, looking bewildered.

"What on earth can it all mean? Gussy—"

"My stow will make it seem queewah still, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus. "It is heapin' mystewy on mystewy! Listen!"

Arthur Augustus described his adventures that morning, and when he mentioned his meeting with Lady Digby his chums fairly jumped. They were still more amazed as he told of Digby's strange conduct afterwards.

There was silence when he had finished.

"Phew!" breathed Tom Merry. "It fairly beats the band, chaps! What does the Head think about it all, Gussy?"

"I weally do not know," said Arthur Augustus, shaking his head. "I just welated what had happened, and then Sir Wobert came in with old Dig, and the Head sent me with that note to Lathom. But he looked vewy stwange, I thought!"

There was a silence. Before anyone could speak again

the door opened and Digby walked in. He stopped short as he saw the juniors together there. He would have gone out again had not Blake jumped forward and caught him by the arm.

"Dig!" he gasped. "Dig old chap—"

"Let me go!" said Digby thickly. He shook Blake's arm off savagely. "Let go, you cad!"

Blake staggered back, biting his lip hard.

It did not occur to him that Digby knew nothing of what had happened at St. Jim's since he had been absent—of the fact that Racke had been bowled out, and that he had owned up to his caddish trick over the phone message.

But Tom saw the reason for Dig's action in a flash, and he jumped to the door and put his back to it.

"Hold on, Dig!" he exclaimed eagerly. "There's something you don't know yet—something that's happened while you've been away!"

"Bai Jove! Yaas, wathah!" chimed in Arthur Augustus excitedly. "Dig, deah boy—"

"Merry, you cad!" said Digby, his face white and passionate. "Let me go!"

"Not yet!" said Tom firmly. "If you'd been at St. Jim's five minutes later yesterday evening you would have learned something, Dig—something you shall hear now!"

"If it's about that cad," said Digby, glaring at Blake, "I won't listen! Let me pass!"

"Listen to me, Dig," said Tom patiently. "You've always been as keen on fair play as any other chap, and I want you to listen to me now, and give Blake fair play."

"I'm listening, then," said Digby, compressing his lips. "Go on."

"You said to me last night," went on Tom, speaking calmly, "that Blake must have funk'd meeting you behind the boathouse. He did nothing of the sort. It was Gussy, here, who was responsible. Gussy, the old ass, made sure that you should not fight Blake by locking Blake and Herries in the wood-shed!"

"Oh!"

"It was a silly-ass trick—"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Dry up a minute, Gussy. Well, it turned out for the best in one way. While they were locked in the shed, Blake and Herries heard Racke and his pals come along. They were there for a quiet smoke. And they were bragging and gloating over the fact that it was Racke who had taken that message from your pater, checked him, and given Blake's name, to pay you out for what you gave him, and to make more trouble between Blake and you."

"Wha-at!"

Digby went white, and then crimson.

"You—you mean that!" he muttered.

"Every word! When Racke opened the door, Blake and Herries rushed out and collared him. They forced him to own up by threatening to report the matter. Racke owned up. He also told that it was Trimble who had first set that yarn about that your pater had gone smash—and not Blake, Herries, or D'Arcy."

Digby said nothing. He looked at Blake strangely.

"That was why Blake didn't turn up for the fight in time," said Tom. "But he did turn up—at least, he meant to, and he yanked Racke along with him, meaning to make him own up to you himself. But—well, you can guess the rest. When he came along you had just gone—taken away by those men."

Digby licked his lips. Then he turned to Blake.

"I'm sorry, Blake," he stammered. "I—I've been a rotten cad. I—I'd like to shake and make it up, but—well, I suppose you wouldn't after this. I ought to have believed you. I'm sorry! I can't say more—except that my only excuse is that I've been worried about things."

Blake held his hand out promptly and frankly.

"You've said enough, old chap," he said. "Shake, and let's forget it! Old Gussy's an awful ass, but he did the right thing for once—though it was by accident."

There was a chuckle, and Arthur Augustus frowned. But Dig did not smile. He shook hands frankly enough, first with Blake, and then with the others.

"Good men!" said Tom Merry. "Take your example from the Shell, you Fourth Kids, and live together happily after this."

"It's too late for that," said Digby quietly.

"Eh? What's that?"

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus. "What do you mean, Dig, deah boy?"

"I mean that I'm leaving St. Jim's this evening—for good, I believe," said Digby, his face working strangely. "My pater told me this morning. I'm to leave St. Jim's to-night. I'm to go with him, and be with him. It's rotten!"

"Oh, bai Jove!"

CHAPTER 9.

Rough on Racke!

DIGBY'S startling news was a blow to his chums. They stared at him aghast.

"You—you mean that, Dig?" gasped Blake.

"Yes. I shall be busy packing this afternoon. The pater's coming with the car at five this evening. I've been ordered not to go out of gates this afternoon."

"How feafully wotten, Dig!"

The faces of Blake & Co. were pictures of dismay. The rift in the lute had been healed; all was clear; the clouds had vanished, and now this was to happen. They were to lose Digby, after all!

"But why?" demanded Blake.

"I can't tell you that," said Digby, his face flushing. "I—I expect you fellows are mystified about the whole business. I know you must be, and I know you feel I ought to tell you everything. But I can't. I told Tom Merry last night that I didn't know what it all meant; and I didn't then. But—but I do know now! I can't tell you fellows, though, and I hope you won't ask me. That's all!"

"We certainly won't worry you again about it, old chap," said Tom Merry frankly. "But if you want any help—well, you've only got to ask for it."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Digby. He did not like it. Certainly Racke had acted abominably; but he had been amply punished, in Tom's view. Still, as Lowther had said, it would do him no harm, and Racke had richly earned many lickings which he had escaped in the past. But, after all, it was Digby's affair, in a way. Racke had insulted his father—a thing no fellow could be expected to stand quietly.

And obviously Digby was determined to make Aubrey Racke pay for his caddishness.

He reached Racke's door, kicked it open, and strode into the room. Baggy Trimble, as usual when trouble was about, was on the spot, and he gave a shout as he saw Digby march into Racke's study.

"I say, you chaps—quick! Old Digby's after Racke! It's about that phone affair, I bet. He, he, he!"

"Shut up, Trimble!"

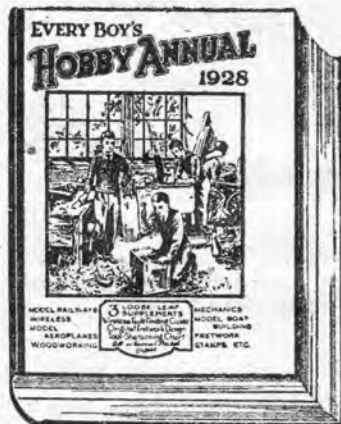
"Yarrooogh!"

Blake's boot clumped behind Trimble, and his cachinnation changed abruptly to a howl.

But several curious faces had looked out into the passage, and soon a crowd was behind Tom Merry & Co. in the doorway.

Racke had looked up as Digby entered, but he leaped to his feet as he recognised his visitor. He soon saw from the Fourth-Former's face what Digby's visit meant.

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"But we're sorry you're going," said Tom glumly. "It's rotten!"

"I wish I wasn't going, I can tell you," said Digby. "But," he added, his eyes glinting, "there's one thing I mean to do before I go. I'm going to give that cad Racke the licking of his life. It was all through him—though I admit a lot of it was my own fault—that I fell out with my pals. You fellows can come with me, and I'll deal with him now."

And Digby started for the door, and, judging by his face, there was a rough time ahead for the cad of the Shell. Tom Merry stopped him.

"Hold on," he said quickly. "Let that drop now, old man. Racke's been punished enough—he's been pitched into a ditch, and the fellows in the Fourth ducked him in the dormitory. And on top of that, after he had owned up to the Head, he got a jolly tough licking from him."

"It makes no difference," said Digby, through his teeth. "Stand aside!"

Tom Merry stood aside. Digby's expression showed him that it would be useless to argue the matter.

"Let it go on," said Lowther. "Another little licking won't do dear old Racke any harm; it'll do him good. Come on!"

And Lowther followed Digby as he left the study. Tom Merry frowned, and joined the others as they hurried after

Indeed, Racke had dreaded Digby's return, knowing there would have to be a reckoning with him.

It had come now, and Racke shivered.

"I—I— Look here!" he blustered. "Who—who asked you to barge in my room like this, Digby?"

It was the blustering fear of a coward.

"Nobody asked me, Racke," said Digby. "I fancy you know why I'm here. You and I have got to have a reckoning, Racke, you cad!"

"Get out!" spluttered Racke.

"Not much. You can take your coat off, and these fellows will see fair play."

"You—you call it fair play," muttered Racke savagely. "You know you can lick me. I don't call it fair play. It's rotten bullying!"

"You should have thought of that before playing your dirty, caddish trick!" said Digby. "Take your coat off and put your fists up. You may as well make a fight of it, you funk! If you don't I shall start on you just the same. Look lively!"

"I—I won't!" gasped Racke, glaring about him as if meditating a dash for escape. "Look here! I've been punished for what I did. The fellows have ragged me, and I've been ducked in a ditch, too, and my clothes almost ruined. And I've had a Head's licking, too!"

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"That makes no difference to me," said Digby calmly. "You've had hidings and lickings before, and they've done you no good. You deserve more than you've already had. And, anyway, I'm the man to settle with you for your caddish cheek to my pater. If you'd had a dozen duckings and lickings it would make no difference to me. Put your fists up!"

"I—I won't! Tom Merry, stop this, can't you? You're junior skipper."

"It's not for me to stop it," said Tom Merry, his lip curling as he looked at the shivering cad of the Shell. "Apologise to Digby, though, if you funk a scrap, and perhaps he'll let you off."

"An apology won't suit me, not an apology from that scheming cad!" said Digby. "I'm leaving St. Jim's to-day, but I'm licking that rotter before I go! Racke set it about that I was leaving when it wasn't true. Well, it's true now—"

"Look here!" panted Racke. "I swear I didn't set that story about, Digby! It was Trimble! He was listening outside your study door when you were talking about trouble at home. He knew your pater hadn't sent you any cash lately, and he jumped to the conclusion that he'd gone smash. He added the rest about your leaving, too. It's been proved he did it. Grundy caught him listening outside your study door and kicked him along the passage."

"That's right," said Jack Blake, nodding. "You remember hearing Trimble howl, Dig. We rushed out and just saw Grundy chasing the fat rotter along the passage?"

"It was Trimble!" hissed Racke.

There was a sudden laugh from the passage as a commotion came from round the doorway, followed by the sound of scudding feet.

"Trimble's gone while the going's good!" chuckled Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

But Digby did not laugh.

"I'm not dealing with that matter now, Racke," he said, losing patience suddenly. "I'll give you two seconds. Put your fists up! Ready? Here goes!"

His fist shot out. Racke just dodged it, and next moment they were at it, Racke hitting out and guarding desperately. He saw now that there was nothing for it but a scrap, and he defended himself as best he could.

It was an exceedingly brief fight, but while it lasted Racke had the time of his life. It lasted exactly three minutes, but it seemed like three years to the hapless Aubrey. Digby drove him round the study about a dozen times, and by that time Racke's nose was streaming red, his right eye showing purple, and rapidly closing.

"That's enough, Dig!" called Tom sharply. "Stop!"

Digby dropped his hands. He was not really a vengeful junior. Far from it. His indignation and anger had been given vent, and he was feeling better. Racke was on his back on the carpet, obviously with no intention of getting up again. Digby turned abruptly and left the room, the crowd round the doorway opening to let him through. It was just as well the fight had stopped when it did, for it was surprising that no master or prefect had appeared on the scene already.

"Well, that's that!" said Blake. "Come on!"

"Is it true Dig's leaving?" asked Bernard Glyn.

"Yes."

"Oh, how rotten!"

And it was rotten—rotten news to all the fellows who knew Digby and liked him, and they were many. But the glumest face in the dining-hall that day was Digby's own. He scarcely ate anything, and he could not speak even to his own chums. It was to be his last appearance in Hall, and he felt it keenly. And that was not all. Digby knew what the mystery was that surrounded him now, and even his own chums, respecting his desire for secrecy in the matter, little dreamed of the deep despair and misery in his heart.

CHAPTER 10.

Digby's Resolve!

"DIG, deah boy—"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy spoke haltingly.

It was some time after dinner. Robert Arthur Digby was packing in Study No. 6. His heart was heavy, and he worked slowly, stopping every now and again as if undecided whether to go on with the unpleasant job or not.

His chums were in the study now. Although Digby had told them some time ago that he wished to be alone, and that he needed no help, his chums could not bring themselves to go. They looked on as miserably as Dig himself. What thoughts were passing in Digby's mind they could only guess. But it was clear from his strangely undecided

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actions that he scarcely knew where he was or what he was doing. He packed things in his bag, and he took them out again the next moment. It almost seemed as though he was intentionally wasting time—intentionally taking as much time over the unpleasant job as he could.

"Dig, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus again, "I—I suppose it's no good tacklin' your pater, twyin' to persuade him to allow you to stay at St. Jim's? Although I say it myself, I wathah pwide myself on my tact in mattahs of this nature. If I talked to him—told him how wotten it is, he might—"

"No use," said Digby, with a faint smile. "You're a good sort, old chap, but you wouldn't be able to move the pater a fraction of an inch. He says I'm to go, and I shall have to go unless—"

"Bai Jové! Unless what, deah boy?"

"A chance?" said Blake eagerly.

"Nothing!" said Digby, setting his lips. "Look here, you fellows, no good you wasting a whole half just watching me pack. I wish you'd trot out—really! I'd much rather be alone. We'll have tea together. I'll get it ready myself. You chaps go down to the footer."

"If—if you really mean it—" said Tom Merry hesitatingly.

"I do. I hardly know what I'm doing," said Digby. "Don't misunderstand me. I'm glad enough and grateful enough. But—but just now I want to think something out."

That settled the matter for Tom Merry and the rest. They left Digby to it and went out of doors. But they did not go down to the playing-fields. There was no match on that afternoon, and they did not feel like footer at all. They went out for a stroll, gloomily discussing the matter. Among themselves they had gone over everything relating to the strange mystery that surrounded their chum, and they simply could not make head or tail of things.

And now, to top all, Digby was leaving, and he would give no reason for it. That it was for financial reasons they could not believe. That theory was impossible to credit, despite Trimble's belief in such a possibility. Sir Robert Digby was a wealthy man, and Lady Digby herself had money of her own—they knew that well enough. It was not financial trouble.

And there was the mysterious kidnapping. Had that anything to do with Digby's leaving? Had Sir Robert come to the conclusion that he was in danger at St. Jim's—that he would never be free from the risk of being kidnapped while at St. Jim's?

It certainly looked like it. Digby's chums were agreed upon that. Hadn't Digby been told that on no account was he to leave the school that afternoon? It was obviously because danger threatened him—or so the chums believed.

And meanwhile, back at St. Jim's, Digby himself had stopped his packing the moment his chums had gone. He seated himself at the table, his head in his hands, staring before him with unseeing eyes. But his mind was busy.

For a long while—an hour or more—he sat thus, scarcely moving. And then he jumped up suddenly, decision in his pale face.

"Taking no further heed of the bag he had half-packed, he got his cap and stuffed it carefully into his pocket. Then he went out into the passage."

Mr. Railton, the Housemaster of the School House, was just coming along the passage. He stopped and spoke to Digby, laying a kindly hand on the boy's shoulder.

"You have not forgotten your father's advice—that you are not to leave the precincts of the school, Digby?" he asked.

"No, sir, I have not forgotten."

"I am very sorry indeed that you are leaving us, my boy," said Mr. Railton kindly. "But possibly you may return later on. I hope so, Digby. We shall all be very sorry to lose you."

"It—it is good of you to say that, sir," said Digby huskily. "I'm sorry to have to go, too—more sorry than I can say."

"Never mind," said Mr. Railton, patting his shoulder. "I should like to have a few words with you before you go, however. Come to my room when you have finished packing, my boy."

"Very good, sir, and thank you!"

Mr. Railton smiled and passed on. Digby drew a deep breath and waited a few moments. Then he hurried on, making for the stairs. He went down them, and made his way through the Hall into the quad.

As yet he had met nobody who was likely to stop him, and he reached the gates in safety, feeling thankful that Taggies was not in sight. A moment later and he was scudding at top speed along Rycombe Lane.

He stopped presently on reaching the stile that gave admittance to the footpath through the woods. Crossing the stile, he hurried on, diving into the heart of the quiet

woods. He kept away from the well-worn path, walking slowly. He strolled along, purposely wasting time.

The woods were deep and fairly extensive. But Digby only crossed one corner of them, and presently he came out in the meadows near the river.

Then he stopped short suddenly.

So engrossed had he been with his own miserable thoughts that he had forgotten caution—that he was under orders to remain within gates that afternoon, and that he did not wish to be seen, if it could be avoided.

But he remembered suddenly as he almost collided with six juniors who had just been about to enter the woods.

They were Tom Merry & Co., just returning from their ramble. They stared in astonishment at Digby.

The junior coloured.



As Arthur Augustus D'Arcy stood gasping, his topper over his eyes, somebody rushed past the chauffeur and kissed the swell of St. Jim's on both cheeks. "Robert—my dear boy!" "Oh, bai Jove!" gasped D'Arcy. (See Chapter 7.)

"You hunting for us, Dig?" asked Blake. "What luck!"

"But I thought you weren't supposed to go out of gates, Dig?" said Tom Merry, eyeing Digby's face keenly. "You—haven't—"

"I have," said Digby calmly, though he was flushing. "I hope you fellows don't think I'm spoofing you—that I intended to go out, after all. I didn't decide until after you'd gone."

"You've risked it and come out, despite what your pater said?" said Tom, frowning.

"Yes. I made up my mind quite suddenly, and I came out. I hope you fellows will keep mum about me when you get in. Don't say you've seen me at all."

The juniors stared at him.

"You—you're not coming back with us now, you mean?" said Blake.

"No."

"But—but—" Blake stared at him blankly. "But you've none too much time, if your pater's coming at five, Dig. You can't have finished packing yet. And then there's tea. We were hoping to have a last jolly tea together."

"We'll make it a supper, then," said Digby, smiling grimly. "I'm not coming back yet—not until well after five o'clock."

"But your pater's coming with the car at five, you said!" almost yelled Tom Merry.

"I know. That's just why I'm not coming until well after five," said Digby calmly.

"Phew! Then your pater will be jolly waxy, if you keep him waiting. I thought you said he would be in a hurry to be off."

"He will, and he will go off, and he'll be waxy, too. But it can't be helped," said Digby, his face grave again. "The fact is, I want my pater to go off—without me! He's got an important directors' meeting to attend in London to-night, and won't wait. If he does, he will have

to wait a long time. I shall stay out until late, to make quite sure of missing him."

"Gweat Scott!"

Arthur Augustus looked quite shocked. The others stared blankly at Digby.

"But—but—" stuttered Blake.

"I'm going to hide," went on Digby. "I don't like doing it, but it can't be helped. I'm going to hang on at St. Jim's as long as I possibly can. I don't want to go, and I've more than one reason for not wanting to go. You fellows, promise me you won't say you have seen me out this afternoon!"

"We'll promise you quickly enough, of course," said Tom Merry. "But—but I don't catch on to this at all, Dig. I know you don't want to leave St. Jim's, but I can't see how you can hang on if your pater says you're to go, and the Head knows you're going."

"He'll keep me over night at St. Jim's, anyway," said Digby, his eyes gleaming. "He can't do anything else when the pater is gone, I suppose. And to-morrow—who knows what may happen then? I'm going to hide now until I'm certain the pater will have gone. You fellows needn't know where, in case you do happen to be asked—as you will, I fancy. You'd better get on."

"You—you really mean this?"

"Yes!"

"Good luck to you, then, whatever your game is, Dig!" called Blake, as the juniors went on towards the school.

"Thanks, old chap!"

Digby walked on over the meadows, taking the field-path now. Tom Merry & Co. stared after him a moment, and then they went on into the woods, feeling more mystified than ever. As they went, three heads came into view over a grassy hummock some yards to the left. Under the trees at the fringe of the wood three juniors, wearing St. Jim's

caps, had been sitting. They were Racke, Crooke, and Scrope, and the three shady "sports" of the Shell had been passing the afternoon in their usual manner—with smokes and cards.

At the sight of Tom Merry & Co. coming along by the field-path, they had hidden their smokes and lain quiet, their heads down. The black sheep had no desire to be seen by Tom Merry & Co.—at least, not with cigarettes in their mouths.

And, so close though they were, Tom and his chums had failed to see them, for their attention had been attracted by Digby emerging from the woods just then. To that junior Racke & Co. were hidden completely by the hillock.

"Well, I'm blowed!" grinned Crooke, as he stared after Digby. "That cad has a nerve and no mistake! Fancy him playing a silly trick like that on his dashed pater!"

"Silly ass!" commented Scrope. "He's got to leave—no good playing the goat about it! Blow him, anyway! I'd like to see the whole crew kicked out!"

Racke said nothing for the moment. His eyes were fixed on Digby's figure disappearing across the field. He jumped up suddenly.

"After Digby, you men!" he said, his eyes gleaming vengefully. "We've got to see where the cad hides. You heard what was said. He said he was going to hide until his pater had gone. We're going to see into this."

"Oh, chuck it, Aubrey!" said Crooke uneasily. "Haven't you had enough trouble over that cad? Let the brute rip! We'll soon be rid of him, in any case!"

"Shut up!" was Racke's savage answer. Racke was a fellow who was never likely to learn by experience. "Shut up, you funk! Do you think I've forgotten so soon—with my face in the state it's in? Look at it!"

"It does look a sight!" agreed Crooke pleasantly, as Racke touched his swollen nose and his blackened eye. "But what's the good of asking the cad to make it worse? Let him rip, I say!"

"Hang you!" snarled Racke. "If you won't come I'll go myself, you funks! Blake and Herries overheard us talking, hang them, and that was how they bowled me out. I'm going to bowl out that cad in the same way."

He started off at a run, and his chums, after a moment's hesitation, followed, though very reluctantly. Digby was out of sight now, being in the next meadow, but they sighted him as they reached the hedge and looked over the stile.

They had no need to follow farther, however.

As they watched they saw Digby look swiftly around him. Then he started off along the hedge, leaving the field-path. They watched him from their place of concealment until he reached a barn in the far corner of the meadow, and the next moment, with another cautious look round, he had vanished inside it.

"That's good enough!" breathed Racke, his eyes glinting with malice. "Now we'll stroll back home, and keep our eyes open for that cad's giddy pater. One bad turn deserves another, and it won't be my fault if Digby doesn't leave St. Jim's to-night!"

And Racke grinned, his mean nature full of glee at the anticipation of getting his own back with interest.

CHAPTER 11. In Deadly Peril!

DIGBY entered the old wooden barn, closing the doors after him carefully. He had remembered the barn as a useful hiding-place at once—a place where anyone was unlikely to look for him. Not that Digby expected to be searched for. He knew his father only too well.

Certainly Sir Robert was acutely anxious that Dig should leave St. Jim's with him, and accompany him to London. But Digby had his reasons for being doubtful whether his father would miss that important meeting, even at the risk of his son's safety in that respect.

He could just imagine his father's towering wrath when he found he was missing. The baronet would know from the fact that Digby had pleaded and begged to be allowed to stay on at St. Jim's that Digby had gone out purposely to miss the car.

And he would soon realise why. Not for one moment did Digby think his father would imagine that he had been kidnapped again.

Digby flung himself down on some old straw. It was not over-clean, for the barn had long been disused. A rickety, broken ladder led up into the loft through an aperture in the ceiling. Through numerous gaps and crannies in the cracked and broken roof and in the rough, tarred walls came streaks and patches of daylight.

The place was a dilapidated ruin; but it was a hiding-place and a resting-place for the junior, and he was glad to rest there. He had put a bold front on matters to

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his chums, but now his apparent calmness left him. His face showed his inward, miserable feelings.

Once he fancied he heard a rustling in the loft above him, but he took the sounds for rats, and closed his eyes. He had scarcely slept a wink at Green Shutters the previous night, and he was tired out.

At the aperture at the top of the ladder four faces appeared, faces wearing grins that showed no good to the junior lying on the straw below. They belonged to Lacy, Carker, Mason, and Wilks, of Rylcombe Grammar School Fourth Form—four fellows of somewhat similar kidney to Racke & Co. at St. Jim's.

What Lacy & Co. were doing there could be guessed easily enough by anyone knowing their shady characters. They had simply gone there for a quiet smoke—and possibly a little quiet game of cards—and Digby's entrance into the barn had scared them into silence.

Breathlessly they had waited, and then, on peering cautiously down, they had seen Digby—alone.

Had he not been alone—had even Arthur Augustus been with him—Messrs. Lacy & Co. would probably have left the two severely alone. They were not fighting-men—only finding their courage when the odds were heavily in their favour.

And the odds were in their favour now.

The Grammarian black sheep grinned gleefully down at the unconscious junior.

"It's that chap, Digby!" breathed Lacy, with a soft chuckle. "One of those cads from St. Jim's. The brute punched my nose the other day—all for nothing!"

"You were kicking that funny idiot, Skimpole," reminded Carker in a grinning whisper.

"Oh, rats! We're going to have some fun with this merchant! Shove some of that straw over to start with," breathed Lacy, his eyes glinting. "Bury the boulder with it."

"Yes, rather!"

There was heaps of straw in the loft. Digby down below was just thinking the noise up above could scarcely be made by rats when he got most of the straw—suddenly and unexpectedly.

Over the edge of the trapdoor it came whooping down and Digby was fairly smothered under it, vanishing completely from sight of the jokers above.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a yell of laughter from the loft. Spluttering and gasping, Digby managed to scramble out of the piled-up straw at last. He blinked dazedly upwards, and when he saw the well-known Grammarian caps he gave a roar.

"You Grammar cads!" he shouted wrathfully. "I'll smash you for that!"

Digby had already recognised the Grammarians, and had the faces behind those of Gordon Gay & Co. he might have hesitated. But he had neither fear nor respect for Lacy & Co. and he went rushing up the rickety ladder, heedless of the odds.

It was scarcely wise, for four to one is long odds—even four such fellows as Lacy & Co. Digby found this out to his cost the next moment. He was easily collared, and he went sliding and tumbling back down the ladder next instant.

But he was up again in a flash, breathing fire and slaughter, so to speak. The same thing happened again—only this time Lacy & Co. laughing uproariously, followed him down. On the earthen floor of the barn they threw themselves on him, and the next moment a furious struggle was in progress.

"Go it!" panted Lacy desperately. "Collar the cad, you fools! Wilks, you funk, pile in!"

But Wilks did not seem to relish the idea of "piling in" at the moment—having been sent spinning across the barn by a hefty drive from Dig's right. It had been a very painful drive, and Wilks was not anxious for another.

But the next moment Digby tripped and went down with the enemy sprawling over him, Wilks piling in quickly enough now he was down.

"Collar him! Oh, good! Hold the brute down now—I'll soon fix him up! I— Yarooooogh!"

Lacy howled fiendishly as Digby suddenly got a fist free and let him have it—full on the nose. It was the second time within a week or so that Digby's fist had connected with his sharp nose and he went backwards, the back of his head cracking hard on the brick floor of the barn.

Once again Lacy howled. Then he scrambled up, an ugly look on his decidedly unwholesome features.

"All right, you cad!" he hissed vengefully. "You're going through it for that, my pippin!"

"Rats, you sneaking, funky worm!" snorted Digby, glaring up half-winded. Overpowered at last, he was helpless in the grip of Carker, Mason, and Wilks. "Let me get up and I'll lick the lot of you!"

The invitation was not accepted. They felt that Digby was much safer down than up.

"You—you rotter!" gritted Lacy, hugging his nose. "Gad! I—I'll make you squirm!"

Algernon Lacy jumped to a corner of the barn and dragged from the straw a few stray lengths of ragged rope. He tested its strength and found it strong enough. In a few moments, despite his desperate struggles, Digby was trussed up securely.

"Now, you cheeky, cocky sweep!" said Lacy, taking out a cigarette, lighting up, and passing the packet round. "You're going through it, Digby."

"You rotter!" gasped Digby. "I'll pay you for this, you worm!"

Lacy blew out a cloud of smoke and grinned.

"What the thump can we do with him now, chaps?" he remarked. "I know; we'll introduce him to the mysteries of knuckle grind! Then we'll treat him to a bit of chin-pie. Do you like chin-pie, Digby?"

"If you try any of those games on me," panted Digby, glowering, "I'll make you wish you were never born, Lacy!"

"Hark to him!" murmured Lacy, yawning. "Cocky as ever! Hold him, chaps!"

"What-ho!"

None of the "chaps" seemed frightfully keen. Perhaps they were more given to looking ahead than their leader. But they obeyed, and held the bound and helpless Digby upright. Digby had been glad of the barn as a haven of refuge; but it began to look as if it was going to be anything but that.

Lacy started work at once with the "knuckle-grind"—a far from pleasant diversion for the victim. Clenching his fist, Lacy began to grind at Digby's scalp with his knuckles—hard!

It was hard work for the elegant Lacy—quite a change, in fact. But he seemed to be enjoying it as he watched Digby clenching his teeth to keep back a cry.

But the vicious young rascal was tired at last, and he proceeded with the next diversion—chin-pie. With his bony hand spread across Digby's chin he began to knead and squeeze the St. Jim's junior's chin with all his force. It was refined torture, and Digby gasped and struggled. But Lacy's own hand ached before Digby gave voice to his pain, and he desisted at last, grinning.

"How's that, Digby?" he chuckled. "I fancy you'll think twice before you punch my dashed nose again, you outsider! Now what else can we do, chaps?"

"Roll the cad over and over!" suggested Carker. "He'll think he's looping the giddy loop!"

"Ha, ha! Yes!"

"And afterwards we'll give him some of the mud from the ditch outside," added Lacy.

"Good egg!"

They proceeded with the rolling. Lacy & Co. were fellows who were never very particular how far they went. It was not often they managed to get a fellow like Digby into their clutches, and they were making the most of it. Certainly, Lacy's pals would not have gone so far on their own. But Lacy's influence was strong, and he was in a reckless, vengeful mood.

Digby, in a state of seething fury now, panting for breath, and smothered in dust, was rolled over and over on the brick floor in the dirt and straw. He was bruised and aching in every limb when they finished.

"Now the mud!" said Lacy, pausing breathlessly. "My hat! Don't he look a sight!"

"That's enough now, Lacy," said Wilks. "Chuck it!"

"Not much!" said Lacy, throwing away his cigarette end and striding to the door. "I'm jolly well goin'—"

Good gad!" The ejaculation burst from his lips as he opened the door. "Look out! St. Jim's cads! Run for it!"

The startled Grammarians followed their leader in a wild dash out of the barn. They saw what had alarmed Lacy at once—half a dozen figures running towards the barn across a distant meadow. Even at that distance they knew them for St. Jim's fellows.

"Run for it!"

Digby forgotten now, Lacy & Co. ran for it.

They took the opposite direction, darting along the rutted cart-track that led to the barn from a distant farm.

But even as Lacy led the way down it he pulled up with a gasp of alarm, and turned off at a tangent, charging through the hedge into a field beyond. For along the cart-track a car was bumping and lurching.

Who was in it the Grammarians did not stay to learn. They flew.

And as they went there came a sudden terrified yell from Digby within the barn.

Even as Lacy crashed the doors shut after him, Digby had been startled to see a sudden flame leap up from the straw piled in the corner of the barn—the corner in which the rascally Lacy had flung his cigarette-end with such criminal carelessness.

It had evidently smouldered amid the bone-dry old straw, unseen by anyone, and now the straw had burst into flames—flames that were already leaping high within the old barn.

"Good heavens!" panted Digby hoarsely. "Lacy, come back! Help! Come back, you fool!"

But Lacy was already far away, scudding for his life, little dreaming of the terrible danger into which he had left his victim, bound hand and foot, helpless, with the hot, scorching flames leaping nearer and nearer every second.

CHAPTER 12.

Race's Revenge!

"ALLO! Oh, my hat!"
"What the thump!"

"He's come already," breathed Tom Merry. "That's Sir Robert's car right enough!"

"Oh, bai Jove!"
Tom was right—there was no doubting it.

The juniors had taken it easy in their walk back to St. Jim's. They had no desire to get in too early now they knew Dig was out of gates. And on the way they had had yet another queer development in the mystery of Digby to discuss.

Why had Digby suddenly decided to stay behind—to give his pater the slip? Digby did not wish to leave St. Jim's—far from it. Yet they could not imagine Digby doing such a thing simply because of that. It seemed such a futile thing to do; merely putting off the hour of leaving, and causing trouble to all concerned. It would obviously make both Sir Robert and the Head very angry indeed.

Yet Digby meant to do it, fully realising what he was doing!

Why? What was his real motive? That he had another reason besides the desire to stay, Digby had admitted himself. It seemed on a par with Digby's strange action in running away with Arthur Augustus from Green Shutters, knowing as he must have done, that his mother was there. But now it was his father from whom he seemed anxious to escape.

It was really extraordinary.

And now the juniors had arrived back at St. Jim's to find that Sir Robert Digby had arrived an hour earlier than he was expected from Wayland. At least the car they saw standing at the front of the School House steps as they entered the quad was certainly Sir Robert's car.

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Spluttering and gasping, Digby scrambled out of the piled-up straw. He blinked dazedly, and when he saw the Grammarian caps he gave a roar. "You Grammar-School cads!" he shouted wrathfully. "I'll smash you for this!" (See Chapter 11.)

"It's only just after four," said Tom Merry. "We'd better keep away a bit in case questions are asked, chaps."

"Bai Jove! aaas, wathah!"

None of the juniors wished to be asked if they had seen Digby. They knew that question would soon be asked high and low over St. Jim's.

So they strolled away from the scene, and were just going back under the archway out of the quad again when Racke, Crooke, and Scrope came through.

They glanced at Tom Merry & Co., and Racke said something to his chums and there was a laugh.

"Got something on, I bet," grunted Blake. "Hallo, let's be moving. Here's Dig's pater and Railton!"

It was. Sir Robert Digby came to the top of the steps with the Housemaster behind him. Sir Robert's face was red with wrath, and Mr. Railton also looked disturbed and angry.

Both looked quickly out into the quad.

Then Mr. Railton sighted Racke & Co., and he beckoned to them.

"Racke," he exclaimed. "Have you just been out of gates?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you seen anything of Digby during the last half-hour?"

"Why, yes, sir," said Racke, affecting a look of surprise. "We saw him scarcely twenty minutes ago."

"Where did you see him, Racke?" demanded Mr. Railton.

"In the river meadows, sir," said Racke calmly. "We saw him enter a barn—"

"A what?" gasped the master, whilst Sir Robert bristled.

"A barn, sir—the old barn in the meadows just beyond the woods, sir," said Racke respectfully.

"But—but what would Digby be doing there, Racke?" ejaculated Mr. Railton.

"I really couldn't say, sir," said Racke innocently. "But, now I come to think of it, his actions did seem rather strange. He entered the place rather stealthily, as if he didn't wish to be seen going in, and he closed the door after him. Is—is anything wrong, sir?"

"Bless my soul!" said Mr. Railton, with some heat. "Digby has acted very wrongly indeed in going out of gates against your express wish, Sir Robert. I will send these boys without delay—"

"I—I will go myself," spluttered the baronet. "I—I am very angry indeed with Robert. I strongly suspect—"

He pulled himself up sharply. "I—I will go at once in the car. Is this—this barn near the school?"

"It's less than a mile, sir," said Racke. "I could—"

"If you really intend to go, Sir Robert," said Mr. Railton quickly. "Kildare will go with you. The place is bound to be familiar to him. Racke, will you tell Kildare where you saw Digby?"

"Oh, yes, sir—certainly, sir."

Kildare had just come up, evidently to report to the Housemaster. Mr. Railton turned to him.

"Racke has seen Digby out of gates, Kildare," he said briefly. "He saw him enter an old barn in the river meadows some time ago. Will you kindly go in the car with Sir Robert Digby to show him the way, as the matter is urgent."

"Very good, sir."

"Jump in!" snapped Digby's father.

Kildare leaped lightly into the car after Sir Robert. He knew the barn well enough, as did every fellow at St. Jim's, and the next moment the car shot under the archway out of the quad and went speeding out through the gates.

Racke's eyes glimmered with triumph.

Mr. Railton went back into the School House. Tom Merry & Co. stared at each other in alarm. They could scarcely fail to understand the meaning of it. Indeed, they had caught Kildare's words as he was speaking to Sir Robert when the car ran past them.

"Not far—bad road, though, sir! Just a cart-track through woods—old wooden barn—" They heard no more. The car was gone.

"Well," gasped Tom Merry, in alarm. "That cad, Racke—he knew, and he's given Dig away purposely! By jingo! Come on, chaps! We'll save old Dig, and do these cads down yet! Quick!"

He was off with a rush, and his chums followed him full-tilt. They knew it was a forlorn hope. But it was a bare chance. The car would have to go a roundabout way, whereas they could cut direct across country. If they could get there first and warn old Dig—

The six chums vanished through the gates, going like the wind.

Racke & Co. saw them go, and Racke's eyes glittered.

"You chaps saw that?" he snapped.

"Yes," said Crooke. "They—they've gone to warn Digby. They'll do you, Racke!"

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"Will they?" snarled Racke. "No, they jolly well won't! They'll have to put it on to do it, anyway. That old fool's mad as blazes, and I bet he makes that car fly! You'll see! Come on! We may as well trot after them and see what there is to be seen."

"I'm keeping out of it after this," grinned Crooke. "We'll leave the rest to you, Racke."

"Yes, rather!" said Scrope. "Tom Merry's lot suspect us already. They'll—"

"Rats, you rotten funks!" snapped Racke; and without waiting for his chums he pelted down to the gates and ran out into the road.

As he did so a big, blue, closed car, glimmering in the afternoon sunlight, came gliding swiftly down Rylcombe Lane. It stopped with a sound of swiftly applied brakes as it approached the cad of the Shell, and a smartly dressed lady stepped out of the car as the door swung open.

"One moment, my boy!"

Racke stopped and raised his hat, eyeing the lady curiously. Somehow her features seemed familiar to him, though he could not place the likeness at the moment.

"Yes, ma'am! If you want Dr. Holmes—"

"I do not want to see Dr. Holmes—not at the moment," said the lady, whose lips were set in a hard line. "I have come to St. Jim's to see my son—Robert Digby! I wonder if you would be so good as to find him—tell him I am waiting here, and must see him at once."

"Oh!" Racke gasped. He understood now. This was Lady Digby, of course—Digby's mater! A hard gleam came suddenly into Racke's eyes. He was in a savage, reckless mood. "You—you want to see Digby of the Fourth—"

"Yes, yes!" Lady Digby almost snapped the words. "Do you know where he is to be found? I shall—"

"Yes, I do happen to know where he is, Lady Digby," said Racke. And he quickly explained what he had already explained to Mr. Railton and Sir Robert Digby. But he did not say a word regarding Sir Robert. Why, Racke couldn't himself have told, excepting that he had a dim determination to cause as much trouble as he could for Digby. It also came to him that possibly Lady Digby would feel it unnecessary to go if she knew Sir Robert was already on Digby's track. And Racke was vengefully determined to humiliate Digby as much as he could. His suspicion was that Digby was hiding from his parents, and he wanted both his parents to find him hiding like a fugitive in that dirty, dilapidated barn. "I could direct you there in a very few minutes, Lady Digby," he ended quickly. "It is a very rough road for a car. But if you wish to see Digby urgently—"

"I do—I certainly do. If you would be so good—"

Racke smiled.

"Pleased, Lady Digby," he answered promptly. "I think I had better sit with the driver."

"Oh, thank you very much!"

Lady Digby stepped back into the luxuriously upholstered car, and Racke jumped up by the driver, who eyed him keenly. But he nodded as Racke began to give him directions curtly, and the next instant the car was on the move. Aubrey Racke smiled. He could imagine Digby's feelings at being found there by his parents. Why Digby wanted to dodge them—and he obviously did—was utterly beyond Racke, as it was beyond Tom Merry & Co. Nor did he care a scrap. It was sufficient for him to feel that he was venting his spite and malice on the fellow he hated. Aubrey Racke fancied he was due to see some interesting developments, but he little dreamed what those developments would be!

CHAPTER 13.

To the Rescue!

"G O it, chaps!"

The juniors were going like the wind already, but they increased the pace at Tom Merry's urgent call. Racke's treachery had filled them with rage—a rage that seemed to lend them wings. They were determined, if it was possible, to frustrate the scally's schemer's trick.

But they realised that the chance of their getting to the barn before the car was a slender one.

The road certainly was rutty—in wet weather impassable for a car. But the weather was dry, and they knew that the fuming Sir Robert would not stop at small obstacles, nor would he use ordinary care in his present mood.

Yet there was a chance, and Tom Merry meant to make the most of it. He led the way, keeping up a terrific pace. Arthur Augustus, who was perhaps the best runner next to Tom in the School House, came next, struggling along gallantly, his celebrated eyeglass streaming behind him at the end of its cord. It was terribly rough going, especially through the woods, but they stuck it gamely.

They were through the wood at last, and as they came in sight of the open meadows Tom gave a gasp of alarm. They

could see the car; it was lurching and bounding along the rough field track towards the barn.

"Oh, blow the luck!" panted Tom Merry. "They've done us! I—Hullo! Some fellows have just left the barn—Grammarians, or I'm a Dutchman! I hope—"

"Look!" yelled Lowther, a second later. "Oh, look!"

"Good heavens!"

They all saw it now—billowy smoke that came from the old barn, through cracks and crannies and holes. And then quite abruptly a tongue of flame shot from the side of the tarred structure, leaping skywards.

"Put it on!" panted Tom.

Pumped as they were they obeyed, putting every ounce of energy to the strain. They did not know if Digby was still in the burning barn; they devoutly hoped that he was not! To their throbbing ears came the crackle of fiercely blazing timber. The old wood, soaked through and through with innumerable coatings of tar, was burning like tinder.

They made a beeline for it, leaping hedges and ditches that they would never have tackled in the ordinary way. But long before they had reached the scene the car had stopped before the barn. Out from it leaped Sir Robert Digby and Kildare, their faces showing their alarm.

From within the buildings came a sudden cry for help!

was sprinkled over Digby's blackened face. His eyes flickered open. He stared blankly about him. Then his eyes fell upon the faces of his mother and father.

"Is—is everything all—right now?" he panted.

The eyes of Sir Robert Digby and Lady Digby met. Both nodded.

"All right—yes, my poor dear boy!" whispered Lady Digby, smiling at Sir Robert through her tears. "But your father is almost as badly scorched as you, Bob!" she gasped, suddenly noting the baronet's blackened face and singed hair. "You must both be attended to quickly."

"The school sanatorium is nearest," said Kildare. "Now, you fellows!"

In a moment Digby was lifted and carried to the closed car—Kildare had long ago cut the ropes away—and Lady Digby and Sir Robert followed him as he was lifted into the saloon. Kildare had promised to take the open car back to St. Jim's, and after the big car had moved slowly along the cart-track towards St. Jim's, Kildare nodded to the juniors.

"Jump in!" he said briefly. "You may as well come along with me. That show's done for, anyway," he added, as the roof of the barn fell in and tongues of flames and pungent smoke shot skywards. "The barn wasn't worth keep-

Start the New Year Well, Chums!

You all know George Alfred Grundy—you all know what an obstinate and pig-headed bounder he is.

You all know that if he says "black is white," he really begins to believe that black is white.

And you all know his weakness for putting his foot in it!

Yet, despite these drawbacks, there's something mighty attractive about the burly Shell fellow.

Agreed?

Right, then! You'll not be disappointed when you read

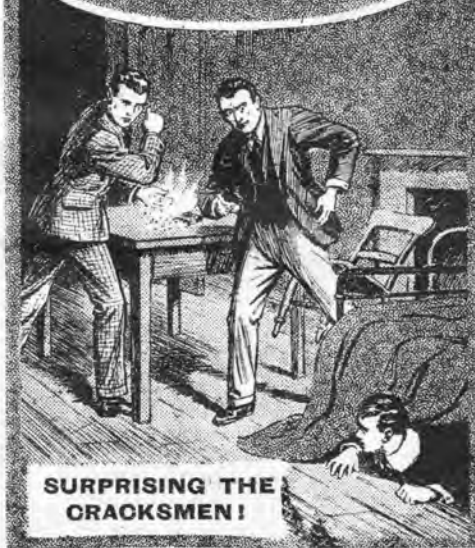
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**SURPRISING THE
CRACKSMEN!**

It was enough!

All doubts were set at rest. Somebody was in the burning barn—someone obviously helpless to aid himself.

There was a rush; but it was the baronet who was inside first. As the doors were dragged wide he plunged in, heedless of the choking, swirling smoke and sparks that whirled out skywards.

But Kildare was hard on his heels.

Another cry, and scarcely a moment afterwards Sir Robert emerged, and with him was Kildare. Between them they carried a form—unconscious now! Tom Merry & Co. thudded up, panting hoarsely. They were just in time to help lay the limp form of Digby on the grass, well away from the blazing inferno.

And as they did so a second car came bounding along the rutty field-track—a big closed car. But nobody had any eyes for it just then, and not until Lady Digby, her face white and trembling, had hurriedly joined the group round the unconscious junior were they aware of her approach.

Tom Merry & Co. jumped away to make room for her, and she dropped on her knee at Digby's side.

"Is he—Bob—my poor boy—?" Her voice broke. She exchanged a dumb glance with Sir Robert.

"He is only slightly scorched—overcome by the smoke, I hope and trust," said Sir Robert huskily. "We arrived in the very nick of time, by a merciful Providence! Ah! Well done, my boy!"

Tom Merry dashed up, water streaming from his cap. It

ing on its legs; but there'll be trouble about this, of course. Hallo! Here comes the farmer Johnnie. We'll go, I think! If he wants the facts he must inquire at the school for them."

And as Tom Merry & Co. swarmed on to the car Kildare let in the clutch, and the car bounded away, just as the farmer came up, with several men at his heels.

The St. Jim's captain kept the touring-car behind the big saloon, and it was as they jumped out in the quadrangle that Kildare turned to the juniors again, his face very grim.

"You saw those ropes?" he demanded. "You realised that Digby had been bound hand and foot and left in that barn?"

"Yes," said Tom Merry quietly. "I know. But—"

"Those fellows we saw running away," said Kildare—"did you know them?"

"No," said Tom Merry, honestly enough. "But they weren't St. Jim's fellows, Kildare."

"I know that," said Kildare grimly. "But we shall know when Digby can talk."

And Kildare hurried away towards the sanatorium. Tom Merry & Co. looked at each other. They were astounded at the turn of events; but somehow they felt curiously relieved.

"Well," gasped Tom Merry, "who would have expected a thing like this to happen? It was that cad Racke who brought Dig's mater along; I spotted him scudding away when he saw what was on."

"We'll deal with him!" said Blake, his eyes glittering.

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"But we'll soon know who those rotters were who tied poor old Dig up. If it was Lacy—"

"I believe it was," muttered Tom. "But we shall soon know from old Dig. I—I wonder if he'll be going after this, you fellows? Somehow I don't think he will—and that every blessed thing will be all right now. Goodness knows why, but I do!"

Tom Merry & Co. were not long before they knew that Tom's prophecy—instinctive as it was—was true! Everything was all right.

They saw Digby alone in the sanny that evening; and, to their surprise, he met them with a cheery grin.

"Come to see the giddy invalid?" he said. "I'm as right as rain really; got a few bruises and burns, that's all. You fellows are fairly wondering what all this mysterious business means, I bet. I don't mean about the fire; that was another thing altogether. Lacy and his pals caught me in the barn, and they put me through it. Then they saw you fellows coming, and they got the wind up and bolted."

"But—but—"

"It was Lacy—left a fag-end burning behind him—an accident, of course. But the dear man will have to pay up for that barn, I fancy. Luckily, his people have plenty of tin. Still, I think I've got a little settlement with him. But that can keep."

He paused.

"I'm going to tell you fellows now what all this mysterious kidnapping business means," he went on quietly now. "It's very simple really, though it might have ended very differently. It's a wonder to me you fellows haven't guessed it already—especially Gussy."

"Bai Jove! I am afraid I am as much in the dark as evah, Dig, deah boy."

"Then you'll soon see daylight," said Digby. "I shall expect you fellows to keep it to yourselves, of course. I don't even know if the pater has explained things to the Head even—though he must have done, I fancy. Goodness knows what the beak will think about it! Anyway, it was all about me—"

"We could guess that, of course," said Tom.

"You know what giddy paters and things are," said Digby, with a smile. "And—well, I'm the only son, you know! To cut things short, my mater got the idea I wasn't looking well, and she wanted me to leave St. Jim's for a time and go with her to the South of France. But the pater—well, he thought I was fit enough. He didn't want me to leave St. Jim's—to neglect my giddy studies and all that. Well, from a mild difference of opinion the blessed affair developed into a most fearful shindy. My pater and mater quarrelled about me—badly."

"Oh!"

"It was really all most absurd," went on Digby grimly. "But you know how things do go when they start. My

father has a pretty tough will, and the mater happens to be the same. She has money of her own, too. The mater took Green Shutters—that giddy house near Abbotsford—and then they started scrapping as to who should have me. The mater said that if my pater wouldn't agree to her taking me off to France, then she'd take me by force."

"Pshaw!"

"So now I think you see the rest," said Digby, flushing a little. "It was all ridiculous, and yet it was really serious. The mater was determined to carry the thing through—to get hold of me—and she never dreamed, of course, as to how it would develop, and the complications it would lead to. She knew it was useless to come and ask me to join her; for she knew I wouldn't take either side. And also both wanted to keep it from me if they could. But the mater hoped that once she got me at her house she would soon talk me round to going. And—well, as you know, she succeeded—up to a point. She got me there; and then, when she turned up this morning, she frankly explained the position. Well, as Gussy has told you, I slipped out and bolted. And for the very same reason I bolted from the pater this afternoon. He wanted to take me away to be with him when he realised the mater was in real earnest. But I bolted again."

He paused again.

"You can guess why. I knew it couldn't last. I knew it was only obstinacy on both sides, and I felt that if I could only hold the giddy fort—stick to St. Jim's for a bit longer—it would all blow over, and the pater and mater would come together again."

"And—and they have!" breathed Tom Merry. "We saw—we heard what your mater said at the fire, Dig. She said it was all right. I hope it is!"

"Bai Jove! Yaas, wathah!"

"Well, it is," said Digby, grinning. "It's really rather funny, and yet it might have been serious—especially if the giddy bobbies had been brought into it."

"So now you know all the mystery. I didn't even suspect it myself until the mater told me. I knew it couldn't be money matters, though. Carter was the butler, of course; and he and the chauffeur, though they funked the job rather, tackled it at last, the mater convincing them that she would take full responsibility. And—well, I think you know the rest, and don't need further horrid details. That fire affair knocked the bottom out of the whole giddy show, and—Well, you should see the pater and mater now—everything's ripping! Even giddy old fogies need lessons, you know! Goodness knows what the Head thinks about it! He came over with Railton a bit ago, and they were both jolly decent. But they said nothing about it. Well, what d'you think about it all?"

"Nothing," said Tom Merry promptly, "excepting that I'm jolly glad all's serene, Dig, old man! Good! And you're staying, of course?"

"Of course! That is unless Blake kicks me out of Study No. 6," said Digby. "I've treated him rottenly!"

"Rats!" said Blake. "Don't be an ass!"

"You're decent sorts," said Digby, "and I'm jolly glad to be staying with you as a pal. But I'm going home to-morrow—"

"Wha-at?"

"Bai Jove!"

"For the week-end," said Digby, with a chuckle; "and you fellows are coming with me. The pater's arranged it with the Head all serene. But we're not going to Green Shutters; that house is a back number. We're all going home, and we'll have a jolly good time together."

"What-ho!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

And they did!

It was a happy ending to the mystery of Digby. It was, perhaps, just as well the juniors concerned were away from the school that week-end, for all St. Jim's wondered and speculated as to the real meaning of it all. But they never knew that. And, though it was a nine days' wonder at St. Jim's, the sensation died down at last. And even Aubrey Racke never knew the happy effect of his own vengeful scheming.

THE END.

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ping long story of Tom Merry and Co.,
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THE OPENING CHAPTERS.

VALENTINE MORNINGTON quarrels with his chum, Kit Erroll, over an imaginary slight, and goes off for the afternoon with Peele & Co., a shady set of rotters. Anxious to patch up the row, Erroll follows, but is hailed in the lane by a youthful tramp, whom he recognises as Albert Biggs, an acquaintance of his former dark days.

Biggs is on his way to Rookwood to apply for a job as garden-boy. Erroll, pleased to see him, offers to help him. Going back to the school for money, Kit returns to find Peele & Co. ragging Biggs, while Mornington, perched on a near-by stile, is looking on. Erroll chips in to save his friend, and Peele & Co. are beaten off. On the way to the village tuck-shop Erroll and Biggs encounter Mr. Dalton, the master of the Fourth. Mr. Dalton listens to Erroll's story and promises to do his best for the youth, with the result that Biggs gets the post.

Angry at Erroll's refusal to "drop" his ragged friend, Mornington puts forward a suggestion to raid Biggs' room that night, tie the new garden-boy up in his bedclothes, and then shove him out in the lane and lock him out.

"I'm on!" agrees Peele, his eyes glinting. "Gad! Yes—rather!"

(Now Read On.)

At Dead of Night!

"LOOK here!" began Gower.

"Gower's on, too!" said Peele coolly. "He knows better than to refuse to back me up—don't you, Gower?"

Gower said nothing.

"He's a dashed funk if he won't!" said Morny, his lip curling. "We can't manage it with less than three of us, that's certain. That chap will take some carrying! You're on, Gower?"

"Oh, all right! Though—" Gower halted feebly. He invariably objected to Peele's schemes—not because of their shadiness, but because of the risk. Gower was no hero! Yet he knew what to expect from his "pal" if he refused, and he invariably gave in in the end. He did so now, though with obvious unwillingness. "All right," he repeated; "I'm on. But—"

"That's enough!" snapped Mornington, cutting him short. "That's settled, then. And if the cad won't take the hint from bein' slung out in the middle of the night, then we're goin' to keep on until he does get fed-up!"

"Yes, rather!" grinned Peele. "But we'll have to be careful not to wake Tupper, or anyone!"

"We'll see to that—we'll gag the blighter, first go off!" said Mornington coolly. "Anyway, I'll see to all that,

and I'll give you chaps the tip when to get up to-night. Now I'm off to get some rope from somewhere."

With that Mornington threw what remained of his cigarette into the fire and walked out coolly. Peele looked at Gower and grinned.

"It's risky!" muttered Gower. "Peele, old chap—"

"Oh, dry up, you funk!" grinned Cyril Peele. "Fancy Morny startin' his old games again! I knew he hadn't really reformed—at least, I knew it couldn't last. Well, I'm dashed glad—there'll be some fun goin' now! As for that cad Erroll—well, we'll see!" added Peele, his eyes glittering. "Hang that dashed guttersnipe! I'm up against the bound willingly enough! But Erroll's my meat, an' whether Morny likes it or not, I'm goin' to get my own back! I haven't finished with Erroll, if Morny has! Gad! No fear!"

And Peele rubbed his nose savagely—the nose Erroll had damaged that afternoon. Morny was a fellow who rarely forgot or forgave, but Peele never did!

Kit Erroll woke suddenly.

What had awakened him he did not know for some moments. He opened his eyes drowsily and peered about the dark dormitory.

All was darkness, save for a dim glimmer of moonlight stealing in at the tall windows of the room. Around him was the soft breathing of his sleeping Fourth Form fellows, while from the corner where Tubby Muffin slept came a resounding snore.

Kit Erroll sat up—then he saw!

A figure stood by the side of the next bed to his, and from the movements dimly seen, he knew the figure was dressing. He also glimpsed three more dim forms farther along the row of beds.

"Morny!" he whispered. "What's on?"

The next bed was Mornington's and he knew it was Morny standing there. He guessed the other figures to be Peele and Gower and Lattrey—the three shady "sportsmen" of the Fourth. Erroll caught his breath.

To him it could only have one meaning, on first thoughts. Peele & Co. were known to go out at nights on the spree, and they were going out now, and Mornington was joining them. Mornington was starting his old games again!

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The thought filled Erroll with dismay. To the last he had hoped that his old chum was only "palling" with the shady gang to irritate him—to force him to agree to his demands regarding Biggs, probably.

Now he felt that it must be more serious than that. "Morny!" he breathed. "You're not going out with that gang? Don't be a fool!"

Mornington did not reply. He finished dressing, and with a whispered word to Peele, who was nearest, he left the dormitory. The next moment the other three left it just as silently.

Erroll sat motionless for a full minute. Then he sprang out of bed, and shoved on his trousers and jacket at express speed. Then, snatching a torch from his locker, he hurriedly left the room.

A sudden, startling thought had occurred to him. Was it for their usual blackguardly purposes that Peele & Co. were going out—and with Mornington? He felt suddenly certain that it couldn't be. It seemed impossible that Mornington could suddenly break out into such ways.

It was something else. He could not forget Mornington's threats, and he knew how ruthless and reckless his old chum could be; how headstrong and defiant. Moreover, he had not failed to note that there was something "on" between the cads and Morny.

In a flash the truth had come to Erroll. They were going to rag the new garden-boy—if not worse! It seemed a wild theory, and yet the junior felt instinctively that he was right. He would make sure, anyhow, and if they were up to tricks—

Erroll gritted his teeth as he hurried along the dim passages, now and again switching on his light. Albert Biggs was under his "wing" at Rookwood; he was in the position of a servant, and could scarcely defend himself against the cads. Well, it was up to him to do that, come what might.

By various dim passages, twisting and turning, Erroll hurried until he reached the servants' quarters. He came at last to the little, winding staircase, at the top of which he knew was the great garret bed-rooms occupied by Tupper and Biggs.

As he reached the foot of the stairs he paused a moment, fancying he heard a sound quite close to him. But after listening for a moment in the deep darkness he switched on his light and proceeded cautiously up the stairs.

The stairs creaked alarmingly, but he went on, reaching the landing at last. He knew which was Tupper's room, and as there were only two on the landing he knew the other must be the one.

Cautiously he turned the knob and peered into the room.

A pale glimmer of moonlight came into the room—right across the iron bed and its occupant. To his ears came the soft breathing of a sleeper. A glance round the room showed him there was no one else there; there was no place for anyone to hide.

Softly Erroll closed the door again; the catch slipping home with a click that made him catch his breath for a moment. Then he trod swiftly downstairs again. He knew Biggs had had a tiring day, and he saw no reason to wake him.

"I was wrong then!" he breathed to himself thankfully. "Well, I'm glad—glad Morny isn't up to those tricks again. But—oh, the fool! I never dreamed he would be fool enough to join those cads in their shady outings!"

And with a heavy heart Erroll went back to bed. He had scarcely disappeared down the narrow staircase, however, when a door at the bottom opened cautiously and a head looked out. It was Cyril Peele, his face showing white in the gloom.

"All serene!" he whispered. "He's gone!"

"Who was it?" said Mornington, though he guessed. "Was it—"

"Erroll, the sneak-in' cad!" breathed Peele. "I watched him through the crack of the door. Good job you spotted his light coming along behind, Lattrey!"

"He'll know it was us!" muttered Mornington. "But—but he won't give us away. Go on!"

"Better chuck it up after this!" muttered Gower uneasily. "He'll give us away quickly enough, you fool, Morny!"

"He won't, for my sake," said Morny, flushing in the darkness. "Don't be a dashed funk. Come—Shush! Back in here!"

Mornington's voice ended on a sudden, alarmed note. At the same moment a light flashed at the top of the stairs—the light of a candle. In a flash Morny and his companions had slipped back into the room, and this time they closed the door carefully. They waited in dead silence. Then, to their alarm, they heard footsteps on the stairs, and voices.

"Tupper!" breathed Peele. "And Biggs! He must have been warned by Erroll, and he's bringin' Tupper to look for us, the fool!"

The footsteps on the stairs sounded cautious, slow. They stopped at the door outside. The cads crouched down, their hearts beating fast. If they were discovered and reported by the two servants—

Click!

All the juniors jumped in great alarm.

It was the click of a key turning in the lock—the lock of the room they were in!

And as they waited in amazed, startled surprise they heard footsteps on the stairs—thumping footsteps without caution now. They died away, and a couple of moments later a new sound was heard—a sudden crash and a yell, followed by further yells in Tupper's well-known voice.

"Burglars! Quick, sir! We've got 'em nabbed! Quick! Burglars!"

"Oh gad!" panted Mornington.

"Burglars!"

IN the darkness of the box-room, behind the locked door, Peele & Co. and Mornington stood in scared alarm, their hearts thumping.

From somewhere downstairs came the murmur of excited, questioning voices, above which could be heard the shrill treble of Tupper's voice. The shouts of "Burglars!" had ceased now.

Mornington gave a stifled groan.

He guessed at once that the pageboy, Tupper, and the new garden-boy, Albert Biggs, must have seen them from the landing above, and had taken them for burglars—or was pretending to take them for burglars.

Tupper and Biggs apparently had crept downstairs and had quickly locked them in the room in which they had taken refuge!

And now—Mornington groaned again. Soon a swarm of masters and others would be coming to investigate. And they would find them locked in the box-room like rats in a trap.

To have left their beds at that hour was bad enough, but to be found in the servants' quarters was a far more serious matter. Moreover, Albert Biggs, knowing as he did how determined they were to persecute him, would undoubtedly claim that they had intended to rag him.

"Oh, my hat!" muttered Morny. "We're for it now, chaps!"

"I knew how it would be!" groaned Gower, fairly quaking with fright. "I advised you to leave the rotten cad alone, Peele! What a fool I was to come with you!"

"And I was a bigger fool!" snarled Mark Lattrey.

"Oh, shut up!" said Peele. "How could we expect this to happen! Gad! This is Erroll's doin', Morny! He's warned that cad Biggs and put him up to do this—to pretend he thought we were burglars. It's just his rotten, crafty way of sneakin'! Oh, the cad!"

Mornington said nothing, but his eyes were glittering in the darkness. The same thought had occurred to him. Erroll had seen them leave their beds and had followed. They themselves had watched him go up to Biggs' garret. He had warned Biggs, and had put the garden-boy up to this game.

"Oh, hang the luck!" muttered Peele. "That cad—Here they come! Now for it!"

With sudden energy Mornington switched on his electric torch and cast it about the room they were in. It was an unused room, dusty and empty. There wasn't a cupboard or packing-case—nothing where one of them could hide. And, though the window was unbarred, Mornington knew that escape that way was out of the question.

He stifled a groan, and his lips set hard. Morny was not the fellow to show funk even in such desperate straits.

Heavy footsteps sounded on the stairs, and there was a buzz of excited voices, loud enough now. A light showed under the door.

Then came a deep voice—Mr. Dalton's voice.

"Stand back, boys! Ah, Bulkeley, you, Neville, Lonsdale, and Price may remain here!"

"Yes, sir!"

The seniors' voices were excited, but determined. Mornington, even in that moment, could not restrain a grin. There was a surprise in store for the burglar-hunters!

The lock clicked. The next moment the door was flung wide, and the lights from several torches and candles flashed into the room.

In a last desperate hope the raggers had scrambled behind the shelter of the door. It availed them nothing, however.

Dicky Dalton marched boldly into the room with the four seniors behind him. A swarm of half-dressed fellows surged in the doorway.

"Oh!" gasped Dicky Dalton.

The light he carried flashed round the room and settled on Peele & Co. and Mornington, showing up their white, scared faces.

There was a yell from the crowd in the doorway, a yell of stupefaction.

"Peele! Oh, my hat!"

"And Morny! Well, my hat!" gasped Jimmy Silver, who was in the forefront of the crowd.

Mr. Dalton's brow grew dark as his eyes rested on the scared, frightened faces of the would-be raggars.

"Mornington—" he stuttered.

"Yes, sir?"

Mornington had a nerve of iron, and he had recovered it now. He was not the fellow to show fear or dismay, at all events.

"So—so this is the meaning of the disturbance!" exclaimed Mr. Dalton, his voice icy. "What are you boys doing here at this hour, may I inquire?"

"Nothing at present, sir," answered Mornington coolly. "We were just having a stroll round when some fool locked us in here!"

"Oh crumbs!"

There was a gasp at Mornington's studied insolence. Well as the juniors knew Mornington, they had, in the circumstances, scarcely expected such a reply.

Mr. Dalton's face grew grim.

"Insolence will not help you, Mornington!" he said quietly. "I demand to know what you are doing here? Answer me at once!"

"Nothing, sir!" said Mornington.

Mr. Dalton turned to Tupper, his eyes gleaming. The page was looking dumbfounded.

"Tupper, I was awakened by hearing someone pass my room. I hurried, and you, with this other boy, dashed into me shouting burglars!" he said grimly. "Did you not see these boys before you locked them in the room?"

Tupper's knees knocked.

"It weren't my fault, sir," he gasped. "This 'ere new feller wakened me up—said he'd heard noises and that somebody opened 'is door. We went out on the landin' to listen, and we saw some figures on the bottom landin'. We thought they was burglars, sir!"

"It were my fault, I s'pose, sir," stammered Albert Biggs, showing himself behind the scared Tupper. "I 'eard a noise right enough—I 'eard my door closed. Then I 'opped outer bed and wakened this feller. Then, arter we'd spotted somebody on the bottom landin' and saw 'em vanish inter this room, I 'opped downstairs and locked the door on 'em. I—I didn't know as it was these young gents, sir."

"I think I understand!" said Dicky Dalton, his glance resting on Mornington's hard face. "You are sure you heard your door close, Biggs?"

"Oh, yessir! Quite, sir!"

"Nothing has been interfered with in your room, my boy?"

"Nothin', sir! I lit me candle and looked round fust, sir!"

Mr. Dalton gazed sternly at the raggars.

"Mornington and the rest of you," he said sternly, "I wish to know why you are here, though the reason seems fairly clear to me after what happened to-day at the gates! Did you come into the servants' quarters to play a trick on this boy, Biggs?"

"Yes, sir!" said Mornington coolly. "Just that!"

Peele, Gower, and Lattrey scowled savagely, and gave Mornington bitter looks. They had determined to deny everything, but Mornington had "done" them now absolutely.

"I thought so!" said Dicky Dalton, his face showing his disgust and indignation. "I can imagine no other reason, indeed! I had occasion to punish three of you severely only this evening for an unwarranted attack on this boy! Why you should do so is beyond my comprehension. But—"

"The—the fellow is a beastly tramp!" said Mornington through his teeth. "He is a low thief and a hooligan, and

is not fit to be at Rookwood either as a servant or anything else!"

"Silence, Mornington! How dare you?"

"I don't care! The low hound—" Mornington paused as Dicky Dalton took an angry stride towards him.

"How dare you, Mornington!" said the master, angrily.

"Have you any knowledge of the boy's character?"

"No, sir, but—"

"Then you should be thoroughly ashamed of yourself!" said Mr. Dalton sharply. "You have basely slandered this lad for no reason whatever excepting your own suspicious dislike. If Biggs has injured you in any way you should have reported the matter, instead of taking the law into your own hands in this mean and cowardly manner. Biggs is a servant who cannot defend himself, and your persecution is unmanly and shameful!"

"The rotter struck me—" began Mornington savagely. "I myself witnessed the incident in the quadrangle!" snapped the master of the Fourth. "You attacked him—you attempted to turn him out through the gates by brutal force, Mornington. Any boy of spirit would have resented such treatment, and he had every excuse to strike back!"

"I—I—"

"That is enough!" snorted Mr. Dalton in disgust. "This is neither the time nor place to go into the matter. Apart from your unmanly attempt to play tricks on this boy, you have broken a strict rule of this school by leaving your dormitory after lights out, and a still stricter rule by entering the servants' quarters. The matter's very serious. I shall report it to Dr. Chisholm in the morning. Bulkeley, kindly see these boys back to bed!"

"Yes, sir!"

The captain of Rookwood gave the raggars a grim nod, and led them out, his face showing his own personal disgust. The rest of the crowd broke up and made for their dormitories, buzzing with excitement and discussing the affair in whispers. But it was plain that every fellow shared in Mr. Dalton's disgust, and even Mornington's face burned with shame as he noted the scornful glances cast at him.

The feeling soon passed, however; and when he reached the Fourth Form dormitory Mornington's handsome face was white with rage, and he was inwardly seething. Once again his hatred and persecution of Erroll's humble chum had brought him trouble. But this time Morny resolved that Erroll himself should pay.

Kit Erroll's face was white, and his heart was heavy as he made his way back to the dormitory with the crowd.

So he had been right, after all—Mornington and his shady companions had left their beds to rag Biggs as he had at first suspected!

Kit wished from the bottom of his heart that when he had visited the garret he had awakened Biggs instead of leaving him to sleep. He would have told Biggs what he suspected, and warned him to be on his guard. Biggs would then have known who the night-prowlers were, and the cry of "Burglars!" would never have arisen—nor would there have been any such disturbance.

More than ever was Erroll amazed at his chum's attitude. That Mornington should allow his foolish, unreasonable jealousy to go to such lengths filled him with astonishment as well as disgust. Well as he knew his chum's passionate, jealous disposition, he had scarce expected this.

And now Mornington was booked for serious trouble through his dogged, headstrong folly. Of Peele & Co. Erroll cared little—they certainly deserved all they got.

"Well, this beats the band!" said Jimmy Silver as the juniors crowded back into the dormitory. "Morny, I'm absolutely disgusted with you! You were a howling rotter to go trying to rag that poor beggar!"

Mornington said nothing. He seemed careless of the looks cast at him from all sides.

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