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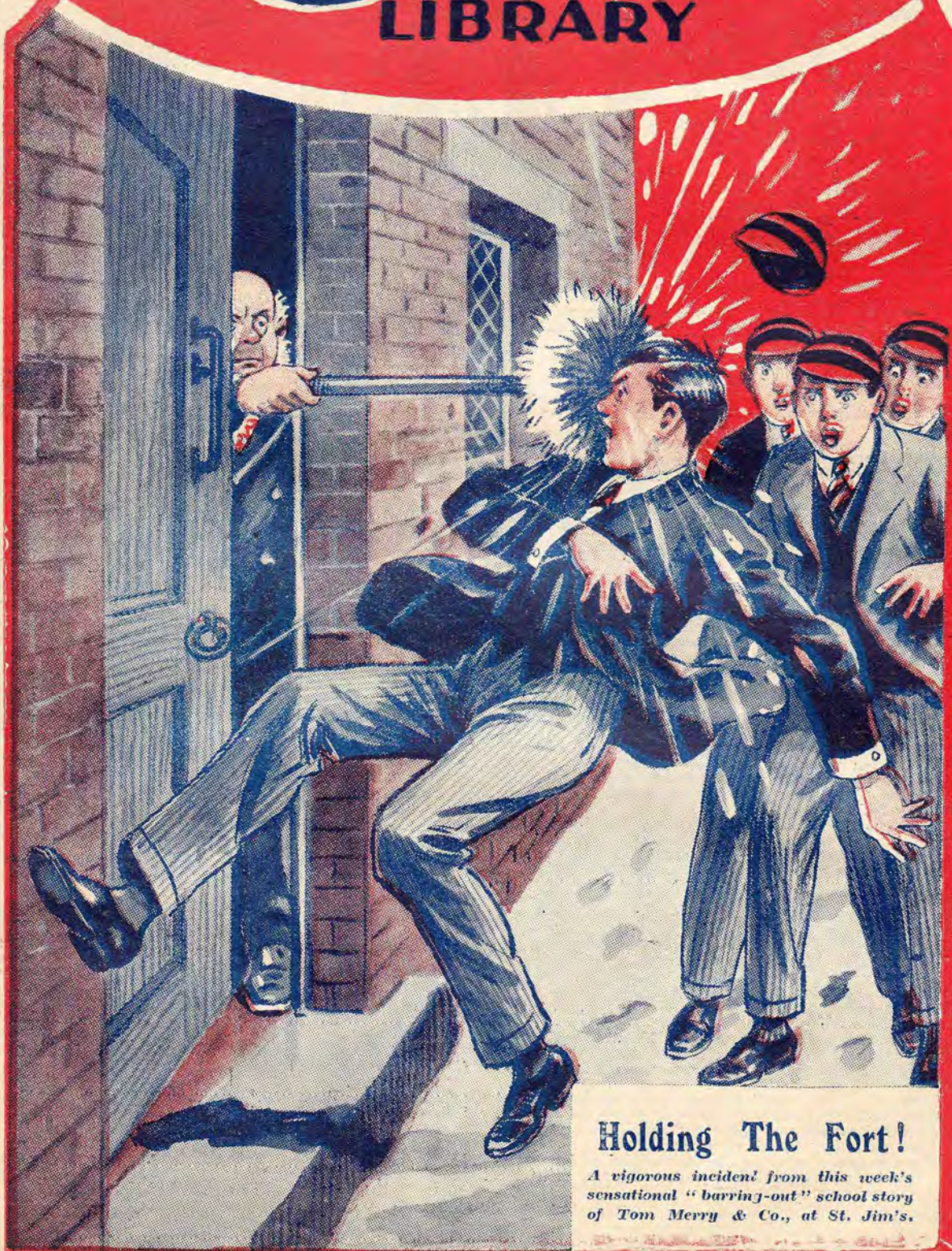
GEM

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No. 1,094.
Vol. XXXV.
February 2nd,
1929.

EVERY
WEDNESDAY.

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Holding The Fort!

A vigorous incident from this week's sensational "barring-out" school story of Tom Merry & Co., at St. Jim's.

SENSATION AT ST. JIM'S! THE SCHOOL PORTER IN REVOLT—

TAGGLES' BARRING-OUT!

by Martin Clifford

St. Jim's has witnessed many amazing happenings in its time—barrings-out among them. But never before have the Saints been provided with such a first-class, breath-taking sensation as when Ephraim Taggles, the porter, bars himself in his lodge and defies the school!

CHAPTER 1.

Poor Old Taggy!

"THERE he is!"

There was a buzz in the old quadrangle of St. Jim's.

Almost a cheer arose as a gauntd, bewhiskered face appeared at the parlour window of the porter's lodge. It was the ancient and somewhat crusty-looking visage of Ephraim Taggles, the gate-porter.

Taggles was well known at the old school—had been well known, in fact, to generations of schoolboys at the famous Sussex school.

In far-flung outposts of Empire, in foreign countries, east and west, and in every corner of the kingdom were old St. Jim's fellows who remembered "old Taggy"—if not with affection, then with reminiscent amusement. When visiting their old school Old Boys rarely failed to ask after the old chap or to seek him out for a chat. St. Jim's, to them, would not have seemed the same place without Ephraim Taggles.

Taggles was an institution at St. Jim's—as much a part of it as the grey, time-worn stones of the school itself.

In the ordinary way, of course, Taggles was neither an important nor an imposing personage. He was just one of the least important members of the staff—as much taken for granted as the massive iron gates he unlocked and locked morning and night.

Yet to-day, on this winter's evening, Taggles was the sensation of the hour. For the unbelievable had happened: the next to impossible had come about, and the world of St. Jim's had been, as it were, rent asunder by this unlooked-for event.

Taggles had been sacked!

St. Jim's would soon know him no more. No longer would rising-bell be rung by his practised hand; no longer would late-comers at the gate after lock-up be greeted with his familiar and ominous "Which as 'ow I'll 'ave ter report yer, young gent!" No longer would irresponsible fags have the pleasure of waking him from a surreptitious nap with jumping-crackers, or knocking off his rusty "topper" with snowballs.

Taggles was sacked—was going! He was leaving St. Jim's—at least, everybody from the Head downwards believed that he was leaving. The only person who claimed that he wasn't was Ephraim Taggles himself.

Hence this fresh sensation now. For though the Head had sacked Taggles and told him to depart on the morrow, Taggles had refused to accept the "sack." He had stated, most emphatically, that he wasn't going!

It was an amazing situation—unparalleled and unprecedented. As yet the authorities were not aware of it—the



Head himself was in blissful ignorance of the fact that Taggles had refused to be "bunked." But the juniors were, and they gathered in a breathless crowd round the gate-porter's lodge, eager to see Taggles, the sensation of the hour.

Taggles suddenly appeared at the little barred window of the lodge, and there was a buzz and something approaching a cheer.

"There he is!" repeated Baggy Trimble, in an excited squeak. "He, he, he! Fancy a giddy servant refusing to be bunked, you fellows! What a scream!"

"Cheese it, you fat boulder!" snorted Jack Blake. "Kick that fat rotter, someone!"

"Oh, really—Yooop!"

Trimble howled and retired hastily as someone's boot landed on his fat person. There was always someone ready and willing to oblige by kicking Trimble.

"Poor old Taggy!" said Levison. "He isn't a bad old chap, when all's said and done. It's hard lines—"

Levison was interrupted. The lodge window opened, and Taggles' red face showed behind the bars.

"Wot I says is this 'ere," he bawled at the staring crowd. "You young varmin'ts clear haff outer this! My eye! Can't a man 'ave no peace at this 'ere school! Clear haff!"

"Same old Taggy!" grinned Cardew. "I say, Taggy, is it true—"

"You clear haff, young Cardew!" snorted Taggles wrathfully. "You clear haff afore I comes out to you!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Young Cardew, eh!" murmured Cardew. "Not 'Master Cardew,' you'll notice. I'm afraid he's gettin' a bit of a Bolshy!"

"The old chap's upset, and I don't wonder!" said Tom Merry, the captain of the Shell, frowning. "Don't rag him, you fellows. Play the game!"

Tom hesitated, and then he approached the window.

—SEE THE ROUSING STORY OF TOM MERRY & CO. BELOW!

"Taggy, old chap," began Tom quietly, "listen to me a minute."

Taggles' gnarled old face softened a little. Tom Merry had few enemies at St. Jim's, and certainly none among the school staff.

"Well, Master Merry?" said Taggles, quite respectfully. "We're sorry about this, Taggy!" said Tom. "Dashed sorry to hear the Head's sacked you! It's a bit thick—"

"Sacked me, 'as 'e?" interrupted the old chap, with a snort. "We'll see about that there! I ain't a-going to be sacked—not me!"

"But—"

"Man an' boy I bin at this 'ere school," went on Taggles, raising his voice, "and wot I says is this 'ere—I ain't a-goin' to let old 'Olmes sack me!"

"Old—old Holmes!" gasped Tom. "Look here, this won't do, Taggy. It won't do you any good to—"

"Old 'Olmes!" repeated Taggles doggedly. "An' who's he to give me the bloomin' sack? I bin 'ere longer nor 'im, ain't I? Man and boy I bin at this 'ere school longer nor nobody. I ain't done nothin' to deserve the sack, and, wot's more, I ain't a-goin'! The bloomin' 'Ead can sack me as much as he likes, but I ain't goin', an' that's flat!"

"But, Taggy, old chap—"



"I ain't no worm to be trodden on no longer!" said Taggles, with heat. "I hadmits as I clumped old Ratcliff on the 'ead with a broom—I hadmits it, and I ain't sorry for it. Mister Ratcliff is a master as treats a man like dirt, he does! But it weren't my fault when all's said an' done. 'Ow was I to know it was old Ratcliff, when I thought as 'ow it were young Master Kerr dressed up? I asks you, Master Merry?"

Tom Merry nodded. He knew the truth of Taggles' argument only too well. Taggy had "clumped" Mr. Ratcliff with a broom. But he had done so, believing him to be Kerr of the New House masquerading as the New House master. If the fault was anyone's, it was that of the juniors who had carried out the jape.

"We know that well enough, Taggy!" said Tom dismally. "It was our fault, and not yours at all. We're the ones who should suffer, and not you, old chap. But look here—we're not allowing it to go on, Taggy. We're going to own up and explain it all."

"Yaas, wathahl!" chimed in Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of St. Jim's, joining Tom Merry at the window just then. "Pway do not wowy, deah boy—it will soon be quite all wight. We will confess to the Head and get your notice wescinded."

Taggles shook his head hopelessly.

"It ain't no good!" he said. "The 'Ead's got a down on me these days. He says as 'ow I were hintoxicated, which I weren't. Leastways, I'd only 'ad a few drops—as if a

man can't 'ave a drop of somethin' warm' on 'is niece's weddin' day!"

"But you shouldn't have been at the wedding this afternoon," said Tom Merry, frowning. "And that's the trouble. The Head refused you permission to go, and you went. Still, that was all Gussy's fault—"

At that point Tom Merry was interrupted by the arrival of Knox of the Sixth. That lofty prefect glared round at the crowd.

"Now, you kids, clear off!" he ordered. "What the deuce are you hanging about here for? Clear—sharp!"

The crowd backed a few paces, but did not clear. Knox was a prefect who always found it necessary to back up an order by the boxing of ears or the aid of his ashplant.

"D'you hear me?" he bawled. "Clear out of this, you little sweeps! Merry, what are you doing at that window?"

"Admiring the scenery, Knox, please!" said Tom. "If it's a crime to—"

"Get away from that window!" snapped Knox, approaching the juniors wrathfully. "You're talking to that intoxicated ruffian, you mean!"

"Eh? What's that?" Taggles glared out at the senior, his gnarled features red with anger. "What's that? Who're you callin' names, young Knox?"

Knox jumped. It was the first time he had been addressed as "young Knox" since he had been a junior.

"Wha-what did you call me, you drunken rascal?" he gasped.

"Young Knox—that's wot I called you!" bawled Taggles in a rage. "Think I'm a-goin' to be called names like that there by a long-nosed streak of misery like you, young Knox?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the delighted juniors; they felt the description just fitted Knox.

Knox gasped for breath.

"You—you insolent old rotter!" he gasped at length. "D'you know whom you are speaking to, Taggles?"

"Yes, I does!" bawled Taggy, independently. "An' wot's more, if you call me names like that there agen I'll come out to you and give you one on the nose, old as I ham!"

Taggles paused for breath. Knox answered him by turning his back to the window. The Sixth-Former addressed Tom Merry and D'Arcy.

"I shall report you for speaking to that drunken old fool!" he snapped. "You know perfectly well that he's sacked and is no longer a member of the school. Now clear—sharp!"

Tom moved away, as did Arthur Augustus. They felt it wiser before any further and worse outbreak on Taggles' part. Knox moved after them. Taggy had vanished from the window, and Knox felt thankful the incident was over.

But it wasn't over—quite. For Taggles had only left the

window in order to come outside by the door. There was the sound of bolts hurriedly drawn, and next moment Knox jumped back in alarm as old Taggles, his features flushed with rage, pranced before him and shook a gnarled fist under his nose.

There was little doubt that Taggles had had "a few drops of somethin' warm" that afternoon! Though he affirmed that his principles were strictly teetotal, it was a fact that Taggy liked a drop of gin now and again, and his niece's wedding had been his undoing; he had certainly overdone it a little. The Head's notice had sobered him somewhat, but he obviously was still far from being himself.

"Drunk old fool, ham I?" he hooted, dancing about in his rage. "You say that agen, young Knox—say it agen!"

He backed away, and Taggy followed, his fist bobbing under the prefect's startled eyes.

"You dare to touch me, you drunken—"

It was out before Knox could stop himself. The cad of the Sixth was in a rage himself; the crowd of juniors were roaring with laughter, and he felt the humiliating situation keenly. But it was enough for the enraged Taggles. His fist tapped Knox's nose.

"You sed it agen!" he roared. "Drunk, ham I? Well, take that, and—"

But Knox didn't wait to take any more; one tap, light as it was, was more than enough.

As Taggles came at him, he turned tail and ran for it.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Go it, Taggy!"

"Oh, bai Jove! Taggy, deah boy—"

In great alarm Tom Merry, Gussy, and the more sensible fellows shouted to Taggles. But the old porter did not follow far—running was not in his line. Knox was already vanishing in the dusk towards the School House, and Taggles retraced his steps, muttering to himself, and vanished into the lodge.

The big door slammed, and the bolts rattled home. The next moment the blind was drawn at the window and a light appeared there.

Apparently the show—such as it was—was ended. And the juniors dispersed and went indoors, most of them still laughing, all of them in a buzz of excitement.

But Tom Merry and his chums were not laughing. Tom Merry himself was looking very serious indeed. Whatever they did now—whether they owned up or not—he felt that Taggy was done for. By his attack on Knox, much as the Sixth-Former had "asked for it," he had made matters much worse for himself—almost hopeless. It seemed certain now that old Taggy would have to go, whether he wanted to or not!

CHAPTER 2.

Putting His Foot In It!

"LEAVE it to me!" said Arthur Augustus.

Tea was over in Study No. 6, and the chums of the Fourth were gloomily discussing the affair of Ephraim Taggles.

Really it was a very serious matter. The old porter was sacked; and it was, more or less—mostly more, as all agreed—their fault.

Being decent fellows, Tom Merry & Co. had no intention of allowing Taggy to suffer, if they could help it. Unfortunately, it was beginning to look as if they could do very little to help it now. Taggy had gone too far—much too far. In the first place it had been all Gussy's fault—even Gussy agreed upon that, now it was too late. Afterwards they also had aided and abetted Taggles in his desire to attend his niece's wedding against the Head's orders.

It was up to them to own up and explain the unfortunate mistake Taggles had made when he had "biffed" Mr. Ratcliff with his broom. And they intended to do so. It would mean trouble for them—grave trouble. But it had to be done. The unfortunate part about it, however, was that they felt pretty certain that their confession would be in vain now. In attacking Knox of the Sixth, a prefect of St. Jim's, Taggles had committed a further crime, and one that seemed to make his chance of pardon hopeless.

None the less, the juniors intended to do all they could do, whatever the consequences to themselves. But while Arthur Augustus was in favour of seeing the authorities at once, his chums felt it wiser to wait until the Head had got over his anger and indignation somewhat.

"Leave it to you—eh?" snorted Blake, in answer to his over-eager chum. "And a nice muck-up you'd make of it, Gussy."

"Weally, Blake—"

"You'd put your silly hoof in it, as you always do!" said Blake. "You'll do Taggy more harm than good—just as you've done already! If you hadn't thought of that fat-

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headed idea of taking Taggy's place while he was away this wouldn't have happened."

"That's it!" said Herries. "Trust old Gussy to make a rare old muck of things!"

"And now he wants to make matters worse!" said Digby.

"Weally, you fellows," said Arthur Augustus indignantly. "I do not see that I have made a muck of things at all. There is no occasion to wub it in, anyway. I suggested the ideals to Taggy for the best. It was just unfortunate—"

"You always do mean well!" sniffed Blake. "Anyway, we're leaving it until the Head's cooled down a bit, and then we'll all go and own up together. Besides, it'll need careful handling if we're not to give those New House bounders away. The Head's bound to want to know who the fellow was who impersonated old Ratty."

"You can leave it to me, Blake!" said Arthur Augustus firmly. "As the fellow mostly responsible for Taggy's position now, I feel it my duty to save him."

"Oh, you do admit it was all your silly fault, then?" sniffed Blake.

"To some extent—yaas!" admitted Gussy. "I did it for the best, however, and if you youngsters, and especially Kerr, had not chipped in, all would undoubtedly have been well. This wewettable affair would neva have come about, you know."

"Oh, my hat!"

"You nerry boulder—"

"I wefuse to be called a nerry boundah, Blake!" said Arthur Augustus, with dignity. "If you fellows had not insisted upon Lowthah impersonatin' Taggy, instead of allowin' me to do it, this would neva have happened at all!"

"You silly owl—"

"Wats! I am now goin' to visit Dr. Holmes, to put the mattah cleahly before him as fwom one gentleman to another!" said Arthur Augustus.

With that he rose gracefully from the table and started towards the door.

"Oh, my hat! Stop the born idiot!" gasped Blake, in great alarm.

He sprang up from his chair and jumped after Arthur Augustus.

But that aristocratic and obstinate youth refused to be stopped. His mind was firmly made up. When Gussy's mind was firmly made up it remained a fixture. Wild horses, much less Blake, Herries, and Digby, could scarcely have stopped him.

As Blake jumped at him and grabbed him, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's fist took him in the chest. Blake sat down in the coal-scuttle with a bump and a howl.

Herries and Digby were yards too late even to touch their noble chum.

In a flash Gussy was through the door and the door had slammed behind him. The next moment came an ominous click; it was the key turning in the lock on the outside. Swiftly as he had departed, Gussy had managed to grab the key from the inside before going.

Leaving the door locked and the irate trio hammering on the other side of it, Arthur Augustus walked away towards the Head's study.

The swell of St. Jim's was neither disturbed nor apprehensive. The matter was simple enough. Tactfully, and with nice judgment, Arthur Augustus intended to explain matters to the Head. Having explained them, and having appeased the Head's wrath, all would be well—for Taggy. The Head would undoubtedly rescind his order dismissing Taggles. Taggles would be saved.

Naturally, Tom Merry & Co. would get it hot—they expected to get it hot. But, in Gussy's noble view, they would not get it anything like so hot if the matter was left to him to deal with. With the due exercise of his celebrated tact and judgment, Arthur Augustus meant to smooth away the billows of wrath, and explain the matter calmly and soberly, as from one gentleman to another.

For the general good Arthur Augustus had taken it upon himself to deal with the matter.

He knocked gently on the Head's door, and entered the sacred apartment calmly and sedately. As he entered he heard Dr. Holmes speaking.

"Rest assured, Knox," he was remarking in tones which trembled slightly with indignant wrath, "the ruffian shall leave this school in the morning. I have been lenient with him—tolerant and generous, indeed! But he has gone too far; he has acted like a ruffian, a person totally unfitted for a post at this school. I have already dismissed him, and he shall go early in the morning."

"He came out and attacked me without any provocation whatever, sir!" said Gerald Knox, who was standing before the Head's desk, stroking his nose. "The ruffian was the worse for drink, of course. I merely requested the juniors to go away, and—"

"Bai Jove!" interrupted Arthur Augustus, unable to resist questioning that statement. "That is totally untwue, Knox! You called poor old Taggy a dwunken wascal and an insolent old wuffian! You are quite awah that you taunted him into attackin' you. Yaas, wathah!"

"D'Arcy!"

The Head's voice was so thunderous that Arthur Augustus nearly jumped out of his skin.

"D'Arcy!" boomed the Head again, regarding the startled swell of the Fourth like a Gorgon. "How dare you! How dare you enter my room and interrupt a conversation in that monstrous manner! How dare you, I say!"

"Weally, sir, I was there and——"

"Silence!"



"Intoxicated, ham I?" roared Taggles, his features flushed with rage. The old porter's gnarled fist tapped Gerald Knox on the nose. "Take that, and——" But Knox didn't wait to take any more. As the enraged Taggles came at him, he turned tail and ran for it. "Ha, ha, ha!" roared the onlookers. "Go it, Taggy!" (See Chapter 1.)

"But, weally, sir, in stwict justice to Taggles——"

"Will you be silent, D'Arcy?" thundered the Head.

"But I have not yet explained mattahs, sir!" gasped Gussy indignantly. "Knox is wathah untwuthful——"

"What?"

"And I also desiah to explain the posish wegardin' Taggles," said Gussy, with dignity, "and to intercede with you on his behalf, sir."

The Head seemed thunderstruck.

"You—you charge a prefect with untruthfulness, and—you desire to intercede on behalf of a dismissed servant?" gasped Dr. Holmes. "Bless my soul! You, a junior boy, have the audacity, the brazen effrontery to—to——"

Words failed the Head. Instead of trying to finish, he grabbed up a cane from the bookshelves.

"D'Arcy," he gasped, "hold out your hand!"

"Oh, bai Jove! Weally, sir——"

"Hold out your hand!"

It was a bellow. D'Arcy held out his hand. He realised at long last that the Head was not to be appeased so easily. Somehow it was most difficult to get his tact and judgment to work in such circumstances. The only thing to do at the moment was to appease the Head's wrath by holding out his hand.

Swish!

"Now the other hand!"

"Ow! Yaas, sir! But——"

Swish!

The Head was in a mood of action, and not words.

He pointed with his cane towards the open door.

"Go!" he snapped.

"But, sir——"

"Go!"

"Weally, sir——" Arthur Augustus never did know when it was time to retreat. But as he started again Knox took a grasp on his collar.

"I'll put him outside, sir!" he said. "Come along, D'Arcy!"

Knox put him outside; with an iron grip on his collar

Arthur Augustus had no choice about that. Before he realised quite where he was he found himself staring at the closed door of the Head's study—on the outside.

"Oh, bai Jove!" gasped Gussy.

His first thought was to rush inside again and demand a hearing; his second—and wisest—was to think better of that. So, in a state of great indignation, Arthur Augustus went away. Evidently it was not a suitable time to explain matters as from one gentleman to another, and in such circumstances even tact and judgment were useless. So he gave it up.

CHAPTER 3.

A Forlorn Hope!

"HALLO! Here's Gussy!" said Tom Merry.

"Looks as if he's been licked!" remarked Lowther. "Had it bad, Gussy?"

Arthur Augustus had met Tom Merry & Co. on his way back from the Head's study, and he paused.

"Ow! Yaas, deah boy!" he gasped in answer to Monty Lowther's question. "The—the fact is——"

Gussy paused, naturally reluctant to explain what the fact was after his dismal failure. Still, it would be as well to warn Tom Merry that it was not a suitable time to visit the Head.

"Well, what is the fact?" asked Lowther, with interest.

"Been to the Head to offer him the address of your tailor?"

"Wats! The—the fact is, deah boys, I have just been to the Head about Taggles," said Gussy.

"You—you have?" gasped Tom.

"Yaas. You see——"

"On your own?"

"Yaas."

"Well, you burbling bandersnatch!" snorted Tom. "I bet you've made a fearful muck of it! Oh, you——"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy," said Gussy stiffly, "there is no

weason at all to be wude in the mattah! Had the Head only given me time to explain it would have been quite all wight. But he seemed to be vewy waxy indeed when I spoke, for some weason or othah. He seemed to think it wathah cheekay of me to chip in, you know."

"Go hon!" said Lowther. "You don't really mean to say you think that?"

"Yaas," said Gussy innocently. "I weally am surprised at Dr. Holmes. I feah he is gettin' wathah unweasonable, you know."

And Arthur Augustus explained what had happened.

The Terrible Three glared at him.

"You—you awful ass!" said Tom. "You've about mucked everything up now! Why didn't you leave it to us, you footling owl?"

"Trust Gussy to put his hoof in things!" said Manners. "Good job he got licked, though! Every little lesson will help to restore his reason."

"Weally, Mannahs, you—"

"Oh, cheese it!" said Tom Merry, interrupting Gussy's indignant remarks. "You shouldn't have gone, Gussy—"

"Oh, wats!"

Arthur Augustus was also feeling that his visit to the Head had been unwise, but he objected to being told so. So he marched off in a huff, still rubbing his tingling palms. He was quite surprised to find the door of Study No. 6 locked—until he remembered having locked it himself.

He unlocked the door, pushed it open, and entered with the key in his hand. A moment later he went to the floor with a thump, and his irate chums were all over him, so to speak.

"Lock us in our study, would you, you cheeky owl?" hooted Blake. "Biff a chap in the chest and sit him in the coalbox, eh? We'll see about that!"

"Weally, Blake, welease me, you wuffian!" gasped Gussy, in great wrath. "I was obliged to lock you in in ordah to— Yooooop!"

Bump!

The bump really came before the howl, but it was followed quickly enough by a whole series of bumps and howls as Blake, Herries, and Digby got to work in earnest.

The Terrible Three came along, and they just jumped out of the way in time as Arthur Augustus came flying through the doorway into the passage, all waving arms and legs. Instead of taking his bumping quietly, Arthur Augustus had proved troublesome, seemingly inclined to fight it out. So his affectionate chums were throwing him out—to save him from further harm.

"Any more coming out?" asked Tom Merry blandly. "If not, we'll come in. I see—Hallo, here's that cripple, Figgy!"

Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn came along the passage. The New House juniors eyed the grovelling Gussy in some astonishment.

"Throwing your rubbish out!" remarked Figgins to Blake affably. "But, my dear man, why don't you wait until the dustman calls?"

"That isn't rubbish, you silly ass!" said Kerr severely. "It's their new doormat, of course. Don't be rude, Figgy!"

With great solemnity, Francis Kerr wiped both his feet in turn on Arthur Augustus. Before Gussy had time to get up, Figgins and Fatty Wynn had done likewise. Then they marched into Study No. 6.

Blake waited until the Terrible Three had entered, and then he closed the door and locked it—just in time. A few seconds later Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, raging with wrath, was pounding upon it. He hammered and yelled for some moments, and then he gave it up and marched away, after promising the occupants of the study a "feahful thwashin'!"

"He's gone," said Blake, in relief, as Gussy's footsteps died away. "That tailor's dummy will bring my grey hairs down in sorrow to the grave before he's finished."

"Poor old Gussy!" remarked Tom Merry. "You ought to have left him alone, Blake. After all, he had a licking from the Head!"

"The—the Head!" snorted Blake. "We've been bumping the ass for biffing me in the chest, and locking us in so he could go to the Head."

"So he did go, then?" said Herries, looking at Tom.

"Yes, and got a couple of the Head's best for his pains," said Lowther. "Luckily he got 'em and was kicked out before he had the chance to say much and do much harm. But what are these New House worms after?"

"Only come on a friendly visit to you School House insects," said Figgins affably. "It's pax, of course," he added hastily. "The fact is—"

"I think I can guess what you've come for, Figgy," said Tom. "It's about old Taggy, of course."

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Figgins nodded, quite serious for once.

"We can't let this go on, you fellows," he said, looking round at the group. "Taggles wasn't to blame—or, at any rate, he was least to blame over it all. We've got to own up, Tom Merry."

"And we intend to," agreed Tom. "I knew you'd be along when you'd heard the news, Figgy. I'm afraid our owning up won't do Taggy much good now. But it's the decent thing to do, and we've got to do it."

"I vote we go to the Head now," said Figgins.

"I vote we go to Railton, and get him to explain to the Head," said Tom. "From Gussy's account, the Head's in rather a fine bate, and isn't likely to listen to us. In any case, there's no need for all of us to go, or be dragged into it at all. Somebody's got to pay the piper, but there's no need for all to pay. I vote, Blake, Figgy, and I go."

"Burnt offerings!" grinned Blake ruefully. "But you're right, Tommy. I'm on!"

"Same here!" said Figgy coolly. "We three can stand the racket—the slings and arrows of outraged giddy fortune."

"So you three agree to that, do you?" said Lowther grimly. "Well, we jolly well don't—thanks all the same! I say we should all own up together. It isn't so serious, I suppose, impersonating a gate-porter; but impersonating a master is a different matter—especially a giddy House-master like Ratty. It may mean the order of the boot—especially if only three own up. They can't very well sack the lot of us, though. We're all in this together, I say."

"Hear, hear!"

"Yes, rather!"

Manners, Herries, Digby, Fatty Wynn, and Kerr were in hearty agreement with the sentiments expressed by Monty Lowther.

"Very well," said Tom, with a grim laugh. "What about going now? After this affair with Knox, Taggy may be bunked this very evening. Sooner we go the better, after all!"

"I'm ready!" said Blake.

It had to be done; all were agreed upon that. And they were only too anxious to get it over. Nine juniors followed Tom with dismal faces as he led the way to Mr. Railton's study.

CHAPTER 4.

No Go!

TAP!

"Come in!" Mr. Railton's deep voice came in response to the tap on his study door.

Tom Merry & Co. and the New House trio went in. None of them looked at all happy or calmly resigned; none of them had the look of martyrs about to suffer in a good cause. The cause might be good, and they might be martyrs suffering for it, or about to suffer for it. But the dismal reflection that it was extremely unlikely to do any good to Taggles quite took away even that satisfaction.

Still, they had the satisfaction of knowing they were doing the right thing. And the thought cheered them a trifle when once they were in the Housemaster's study.

Mr. Railton eyed the crowd in some surprise.

"Well, boys?" he said. "What is the matter?"

"We—we want to speak to you about Taggles, sir," said Tom, plunging into business at once. "What happened this afternoon was not Taggles' fault—at least, it would never have happened but for us."

Mr. Railton raised his eyebrows.

"Oh, indeed!" he said grimly. "Pray explain yourself, Merry!"

Tom Merry did his best, and started at the beginning.

"We wanted to help Taggles, sir!" he said, omitting to explain that it was really Arthur Augustus who had wanted to do so in the first place. "We—at least, one of us—felt it rather hard lines that Taggles couldn't go to his niece's wedding this afternoon. So—so we—that is one of us—persuaded Taggles to go, though he was afraid to go, and wouldn't have gone on his own."

"That was very foolish and absurd!" snapped Mr. Railton. "The Head would be very angry if he knew this, Merry. None the less, it does not excuse Taggles in any way—far from it."

"I know that, sir—at least, I suppose not," said Tom. "But—but that isn't all, sir. In order to let Taggles go, one of us impersonated him, and took his place in the lodge for the afternoon."

"What?"

The Housemaster nearly jumped from his chair.

"You—you say one of you had the audacity to play such an impudent prank?" he snapped. "Bless my soul!"

"Y-yes, sir! You—you see, we thought it rather a lark at the time, and we wanted to help Taggles!" gasped Tom. "And you are confessing this to me now in the hope that it will have some effect upon the Head's decision regarding the gate-porter?" said Mr. Railton sternly. "If so—"

"Not exactly that, sir!" said Tom. "You—you see, sir, that isn't all; that was only the beginning. Some other fellows—"

Tom paused and looked at Figgins. He scarcely liked to explain the rest—which meant bringing the New House trio of guilty youths into the picture, as it were. Figgins stepped into the breach at once.

"We in the New House were responsible for what happened after that, sir," he said steadily. "We—we heard what the School House chaps were up to, and so we thought of a lark to play on them. Knowing the chap in the lodge was not Taggy, but a School House fellow disguised as him, one of us got up as—Mr. Ratcliff!"

It was out at last—Figgys got it out with a gasp. Mr. Railton started, and his face set very grimly.

"Go on, Figgins," he said in an ominous tone. "Mr. Ratcliff has already reported to the headmaster that someone was impersonating him this afternoon. I was about to investigate that matter this evening."

"It—it was one of us, sir!" gasped Figgins.

"Who was the impudent boy?" snapped Mr. Railton.

"I—I can't say that, sir," said Figgins promptly. "It was one of us—but we were all in it together."

"I think I can guess that," said Mr. Railton, his glance resting for a brief second upon Kerr. "But go on—this is very interesting, Figgins—very interesting indeed."

There was a far from reassuring note in the Housemaster's voice. Figgins went on, not very cheerfully.

"He—it was done without any disrespect to Mr. Ratcliff!" he gasped. "It was just done to play a joke on the School House fellows. But—but old Ratt—I mean, the real Mr. Ratcliff turned up, and the fellow impersonating him bolted and took refuge in Taggles' shed behind the lodge. But we got him away safely, and then—"

Figgins paused and looked at Tom Merry, who took up the sad story again.

"Then Taggles himself turned up, sir," Tom said dismally. "He was fearfully waxy because the—the chap dressed up as Mr. Ratcliff had damaged his silk hat—torn it and squashed it in, you know. He got very excited about it. And then—then Mr. Ratcliff himself came to the lodge, and—and—"

"Ah," murmured Mr. Railton grimly, "I am beginning to understand now! But go on, Merry."

"It was all a mistake, sir, and very unfortunate," mumbled Tom. "As soon as Taggles saw Mr. Ratcliff he thought it was the chap impersonating him—the chap who'd smashed his top-hat in, and—well, he went for him with a broom."

"Bless my soul! So that is the true explanation of this amazing affair," said the Housemaster sternly.

"Ye-es, sir. It wasn't Taggles' fault at all. The old chap was very excited, and I don't think for one moment he meant to hit Mr. Ratcliff with the broom, and in any case he barely touched him."

"So—so we're really to blame for it all, and not old Taggles, sir!" added Blake eagerly.

"And we thought," said Tom Merry, in hopeful conclusion, "that you might explain the facts to the Head. It seems rather hard on poor old Taggles, sir, doesn't it?"

Mr. Railton pursed his lips.

"This certainly does throw a fresh complexion on the affair," he said sternly. "The Head must be acquainted with the facts, and I am glad you boys have had the courage and decency to bring them forward now. None the less, you will be severely punished for such an unlawful and foolish series of pranks."

"Y-yes, sir. But Taggles—"

"I am afraid your story will have little effect upon the Head's decision regarding Taggles. You will all remain here until I send for you," said the Housemaster grimly.

He rose and quitted the study—apparently to visit Dr. Holmes. In gloomy silence the luckless culprits waited until at last a tap came to the door and Toby, the School House page, appeared.

"Which as 'ow the 'Ead wants you young gents in 'is study at once, Master Merry!" said Toby.

"Right, Toby!"

The dread summons had come at last. In silence the ten juniors went along to Dr. Holmes' study. The Head eyed

them icily as they ranged themselves before his desk a minute later.

"Mr. Railton has told me of your abominable behaviour," he said in his stern, deep voice. "I look upon your disgraceful and impudent interference in the affairs of the school porter as nothing less than insolence to me, your headmaster. You have added still further to your offences by an unlawful and disrespectful impersonation of one of the masters of this school."

"We—we're awfully sorry now, sir!" stammered Tom Merry. "We meant no disrespect to you or to Mr. Ratcliff. It—it was more in the nature of a joke than anything else."

"A foolish and an abominable joke, then!" snapped the Head. "You were, apparently, well aware that I had refused Taggles permission to absent himself from duty this afternoon?"

"Y-yes, sir!"

"Yet in impudent defiance of my orders you persuaded the man to neglect his duty!" said the Head angrily. "That alone is a serious offence. The only point in mitigation of your misdemeanour is that you have voluntarily confessed your share in the matter."

"It—it was only right to do that, sir," said Blake. "We couldn't see Taggles suffer for what was really our fault."

"Bless my soul! Do you suppose for one moment," boomed the Head, "that your confession will make any difference to my dismissal of Taggles?"

"We—we hoped, sir—"

"Nonsense! The man had no right whatever to allow himself to be influenced against my express commands by a few unruly and foolish juniors in the Lower School!" thundered Dr. Holmes. "He has neglected his duty, and must suffer the consequences. For some time now I have been gravely displeased with his work and conduct. More-

over, the fact that he believed the person he attacked was not Mr. Ratcliff makes little difference to my view of his conduct. He was obviously intoxicated and acted in a manner that shows he is unfitted for his post at this school. He will leave St. Jim's to-morrow."

"But—but, sir—" began Tom.

"Enough! How dare you attempt to argue such a matter with your headmaster?" thundered Dr. Holmes. "Not another word, Merry!"

The Head jumped up from his chair and took a cane from his bookshelves. The juniors eyed it apprehensively, prepared as they were for such a proceeding. Their apprehension was justified by what followed.

"Touch your toes, Merry!"

The captain of the Shell obeyed. What followed was distinctly painful and unpleasant for ten members of the Lower School. In the next few tragic moments Dr. Holmes showed that he viewed their conduct in a very serious light indeed. When at length the hapless juniors crawled from the dreaded presence, apparently trying to twist themselves into knots, their faces screwed up with anguish, they looked pictures of woe. And the reflection that it had all been in vain—that Taggles was still to go—did not make them feel any the happier.

CHAPTER 5.

Defiance!

TOM MERRY & CO. spent the rest of that evening very much in retirement. The Common-room did not see them, nor did any of the other studies.

They spent the evening nursing their aches and pains, and cushions were in great demand, both in Study No. 6 of the Fourth, and Study No. 10 of the Shell. Sitting down was a very painful and uncomfortable operation indeed for Tom Merry & Co. Dr. Holmes had used the rod not wisely, but too well in the opinion of those hapless youths.

None the less, they all realised they had really got off very lightly. Impersonating a master was alone a serious offence—they understood that well enough now. Certainly, Figgins & Co. were to blame for this, and not themselves. Still, they had agreed that all should face the music equally, and they had done so—with the single exception of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

And as that elegant junior had been the whole cause of the trouble in the first place, the sufferers felt very sore

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indeed about it, and their feelings towards the swell of the Fourth were none too amiable.

Save for those two strokes of the Head's cane, Gussy had escaped the general punishment. He had no need to wriggle, nor had he need of cushions. Only manful and praiseworthy exercise of self-control prevented Gussy's fond chums from slaughtering him that evening.

Rising-bell went as usual the next morning—though it was generally known that Kildare had rung it instead of Taggles. Until a new porter appeared on the scene, the Head had arranged for the prefects to ring the bell for a day in turn, and Kildare took the first turn.

Tom Merry & Co. were among the first down that morning, and their footsteps turned instinctively towards the porter's lodge. It also proved to be an object of interest to a great number of fellows, and soon a little crowd had collected there.

"Looks as if the old bird isn't up yet!" remarked Olive, glancing up at the ancient, twisted chimneys. "No smoke, and the blinds still down."

"Perhaps he's gone!" grinned Trimble. "What a pity if the old beggar has! I was hoping for some fun to-day."

"Hallo! Gates not opened yet, either!" said Levison, making a fresh discovery. "Oh, my hat!"

"Here's Kildare!" said someone breathlessly.

The captain of St. Jim's made his way to the lodge, taking a glance at the closed gates as he did so.

"Gates not opened yet, Kildare!" called out Cardew. "You'll be gettin' the giddy sack, too, if you neglect your new job so soon!"

"What a rise in the world for Kildare!" chuckled Glyn. "From captain to gate-porter! How Little Eric rose in the world! Taking up your residence at the lodge, Kildare?"

Kildare frowned, but did not deign to reply to the frivolous remarks. He stopped at the front door of the lodge and knocked sharply.

Taggles was evidently up and about, for, after a short wait, the front door opened a few inches and the old porter looked out.

"Wot's this 'ere?" he began grumpily. "Oh, which it's you, Master Kildare?"

"Yes, Taggles," said Kildare, eyeing him curiously. "The Head has sent me for the keys of the gates and of the masters' side door. I understand you refused to hand them over to Toby last evening."

"Ho!" said Taggles. "You've come for them there keys, 'ave you?"

"Yes, and to give you this, from the Head!" went on the captain of St. Jim's.

And he handed a sealed envelope to Taggles.

"Ho!" said Taggles. "Old 'ard about them there keys until I've seen wot this 'ere is, Master Kildare."

He tore open the envelope with a gnarled thumb and forefinger. Inside was a brief note and a cheque. The note was a curt, official confirmation of his notice, and the cheque was his week's wages, together with another week's pay in lieu of notice.

Taggles stared at it, and his jaw dropped; his weather-beaten features went suddenly white, and his hands trembled. It was clear from his expression that it came as a shock to him—that up to the last he had hoped that the impossible, the inconceivable, would not happen after all.

Kildare felt a sudden pity for the old fellow as he saw the expression of forlorn misery on his gnarled face. Obviously, he had hoped that the Head would relent; possibly he had relied upon the juniors' confession to save him at the last moment.

"I'm very sorry about this, Taggy, old man!" said Kildare. "You were very foolish to behave as you have done, though. Still, I'm dashed sorry."

"Which I knows you are!" said Taggles brokenly. "If all of 'em—masters and young gents—were like you, Master Kildare, this 'ere school would be all right! But—it's 'ard—'ard, 'aving to leave this 'ere place arter all these years. Man an' boy I bin 'ere, long as I can remember, an' it's mortal 'ard to 'ave to leave like this 'ere."

"Well, it looks as if you'll have to," said Kildare quietly. "Anyway, I'll have those keys, if you don't mind, Taggy."

"Them—them keys?"

"Yes, certainly. The gates must be opened at once, Taggles. Buck up!"

"You—you want them keys?"

"Yes—buck up!" Kildare was getting a bit impatient.

Taggles stared at him, the expression on his face changing slowly. It seemed as if Kildare's final demand for the keys had really brought home to him the terrible, awful fact that he was, actually and indeed, sacked—discharged—fired! Taggles' brain only grasped truths a bit at a time, and then in a vague way.

But he grasped the truth now, and as he did so, his face grew red and wrathful, grim and resolute. He held out the

envelope to Kildare, having already replaced cheque and note.

"Take that there," he growled huskily, "an' give it back to the bloomin' 'Ead with my compliments. Tell 'im as 'ow I refuse to take the blessed sack from 'im!"

"Wha-at?"

Kildare nearly fell down on the step.

"Who's 'e, to give a man the sack—a man as 'as bin 'ere longer nor 'im?" said Taggles, raising his voice wrathfully. "Think I care for old 'Olmes?"

"Old—old Holmes!" stuttered Kildare.

"Yes—old bloomin' 'Olmes!" snorted Taggles. "I used to think as 'ow he was a fine old gent, kind-'earted and just, like! But this 'ere shows as he ain't. I ain't takin' no sack from 'im, and wot's more, I ain't goin'!"

"You—you aren't going?" gasped Kildare.

"No, I ain't, and nobody 'ere is goin' to shift me, neither!" exclaimed Taggles, raising his voice to a roar that could be easily heard in the quadrangle. "'Ere I am, and 'ere I stays until the 'Ead says as 'ow I can stay. That's flat!"

"Well, my hat!" stuttered Kildare. "Are you mad, Taggy? This sort of silly talk won't do at all. You'll have to go, whether you want to or not. Hand over those keys—I can't stand here all morning!"

Kildare was getting a trifle exasperated.

"Which I ain't goin' to do nothin' of the sort!" bawled Taggles. "I ain't 'andin' over no keys, and I ain't goin'!"

"Oh, aren't you?" snapped Kildare grimly. "I'm sorry, Taggy, but if you won't hand those keys over I shall have to enter and take them. The gates must be unlocked at once!"

"You'll take 'em, will you?" snorted Taggy. "We'll see about that!"

He tried to slam the door. Just in the nick of time Kildare got one foot in and prevented him. But it was a short-lived victory for the captain of St. Jim's.

Even as he did so, Taggles gave him a violent shove in the chest—a terrific shove, in fact. And as Kildare, at the moment, had one foot on the doorstep and another on the next step, he lost his balance at once.

Before he knew what was happening he had sat down with a bump on the hard, unsympathetic ground. Then the door slammed.

"Oh, my hat!"

"Oh, bai Jove!"

From behind the closed door came a bellow.

"Which I'm sorry, Master Kildare, but I 'ad to do it!" bawled Taggy through the keyhole. "Now go and tell the bloomin' 'Ead what I says! Caneel that bloomin' notice, and he can 'ave 'is bloomin' keys if he wants 'em. But I ain't 'andin' 'em over otherwise!"

The bolts were heard to shoot into place behind the massive door. And Kildare sat on the ground in front of the porter's lodge.

CHAPTER 6.

The Attack!

"WELL, my hat!" spluttered Kildare.

"Old Kildare's taking a rest cure!" explained Cardew.

Kildare really seemed incapable of rising, so astonished was he by Taggles' amazing defiance. But as Cardew passed his remark he jumped to his feet, red in the face with wrath and humiliation. Fellows often enough pulled Kildare's august leg gently, knowing quite well that he was far too good-natured to object. But he was in a right royal rage now.

"Take a hundred lines, Cardew, you cheeky young sweep!" he spluttered. "That—that old fool! He must be absolutely off his dot! Taggles, you old fool!"

"Kildare, you young fool!" bawled back Taggy independently. "Wot I says is this 'ere—you clear huff with that there message, young Kildare! I ain't takin' no more lip from any young gent arter this. You clear huff!"

"Young Kildare!" murmured Kildare blankly. "Oh, my hat!"

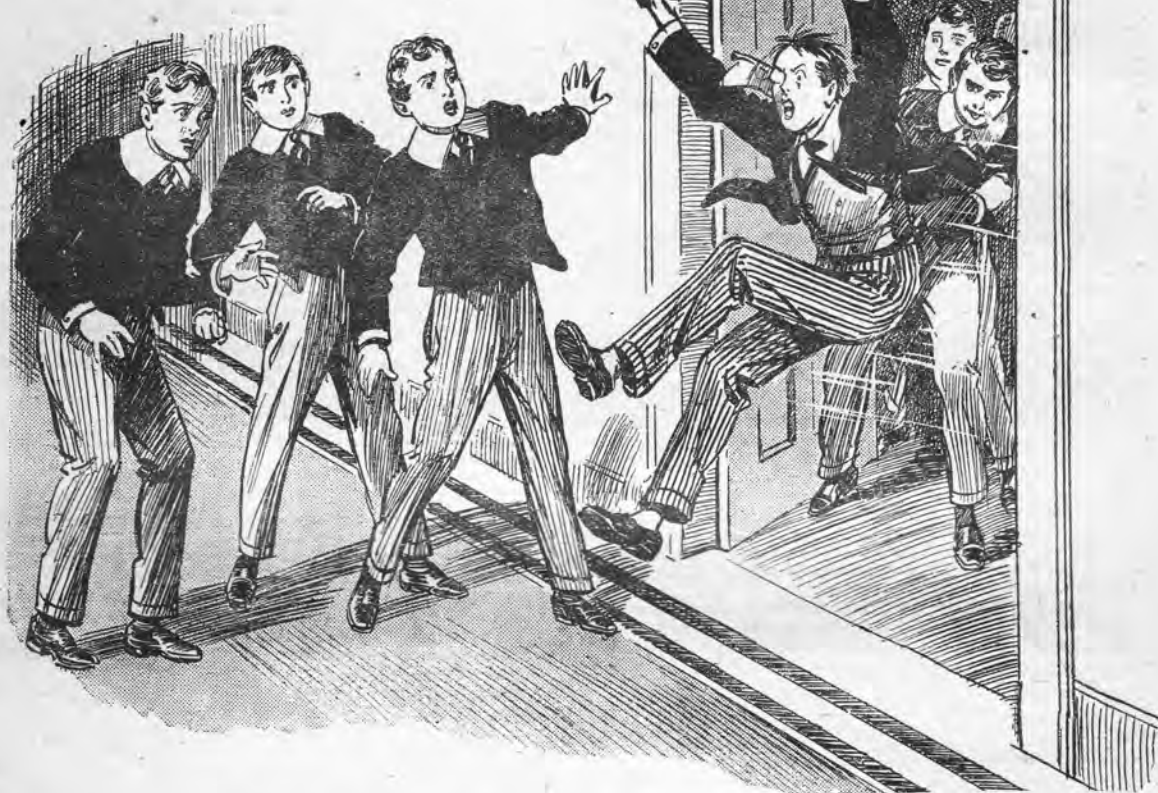
In sudden wrath the school captain grabbed at the big handle of the oak door and tried it. But the futility of this soon dawned in upon Kildare, and with a shrug of his shoulders he walked away with a glare at the staring juniors, many of whom were grinning delightedly.

"He, he, he!" chortled Trimble. "I knew there was going to be some fun! Just what I said—old Taggy's turned Bolshy! I say, Kildare's gone for the Head I'll bet."

There was little doubting that. The faces of Tom Merry & Co. were serious now. Taggy evidently intended to stick to his guns. It was no mere defiant gesture before going: Taggy had no intention of going—if he could help it.

"The silly old ass!" gasped Tom Merry. "He's only making matters far worse and more hopeless for himself by monkey-tricks like this."

The Terrible Three came along the Fourth Form passage, and they just jumped out of the way in time as Arthur Augustus D'Arcy flew through the doorway of Study No. 6, all waving arms and legs. Bump! "Yoooooop!" "Any more coming out?" asked Tom Merry blandly. (See Chapter 3.)



"Good luck to him, anyway!" said George Figgins. "If he wants any backing up we're the men for the job. A chap who biffs that beast Ratty deserves the thanks and hearty support of all decent-minded youths—like little us!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus, nodding. "Good luck to the old fellow! I have been thinkin' deah boys. If—"

"You've been thinking," said Blake, staring. "Then that brings the seven wonders of the earth up to eight! You don't feel ill or anything—"

"Pway don't wot, Blake," said Gussy seriously. "This is vewy wowwyin', you know. Aftah all, it was entirely our fault that poor old Taggy is in this distwessin' posish."

"Your silly fault, you mean!" corrected Blake.

"Well, mine, then!" conceded Gussy, with unusual mildness. "I feel vewy wotten about it all. It is like dwaggin' one of the old elms up by the woots to take poor old Taggy from St. Jim's," went on Gussy poetically. "His whole life is bound up in the old place. I am vewy surprised indeed at Dr. Holmes. He knows, of course, that Taggy has relatives at Wayland, and that he will be well-enough off as regards cash if he didn't get another job—or the Head certainly wouldn't turn him adwift like this."

"What a brain!" remarked Lowther. "Fancy Gussy thinking that out!"

"Well, in stwict justice to the Head we must admit that!" resumed Gussy, shaking his head. "None the less, I am surprised that the Head doesn't see what a tewwible wench it will be for old Taggy."

"Go and point it out to him!" suggested Lowther. "We've had ours, and it would be some comfort to know that the born idiot who started the trouble has had a dose, too!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Weally! Howeyah, this is not the time to argue," said Gussy stiffly. "I was about to suggest that it is our bare duty to support old Taggy by vewy means in our power. Yaas, wathah!"

"What good would that do, you burbling chump?"

"A gweat deal, deah boys. The Head is in a feahful bate now, but when he has time to considah the mattah at

his leisure, I am quite certain he will look upon Taggy's behaviour with a more tolewant eye. I weally believe Taggy is bankin' upon that, y'know, in wefusin' to go at once."

"Well, there's something in that!" admitted Tom. "But he's going a funny way about it if he wants to appease the Head, anyway! I'd better talk to the old chap—see if I can calm him down a bit before the Head comes. Just keep cave a sec."

Tom hurried to the window, where Taggles could be seen moodily glowering out into the quadrangle.

"Taggy, old man—"

"Well, what is it, young Merry?" growled Taggy. "Wot I says—"

"Just listen to me a sec—before the Head comes along," said Tom breathlessly. "Look here, old chap, this sort of thing won't do—cheeking prefects and all that. If you want to get round the Head you'd better change your tune a bit. If you must stick it out and defy the Head's notice, then be civil about it. It's only making matters worse for—"

"Ho! And hain't I bein' civil?" snorted Taggles. "Hain't it enough to make a man wild to be treated as I'm bein' treated. I honly wants justice—that's all I wants. As for the bloomin' 'Ead, I'll show 'im as he ain't everybody at this 'ere—"

"Now, do drop that rot, Taggy—" Tom was beginning, when a warning cry of "Cave!" sounded.

Looking round, Tom glimpsed the Head coming across the quad with Kildare and Mr. Railton.

"Oh, my hat! Look out, here's the Head, Taggy!"

"Blow the 'Ead!" snorted Taggy.

Tom hurriedly rejoined his chums, though he would have liked a bit longer with Taggles to try to persuade the stubborn old fellow to adopt a different attitude. But it was too late now.

With towering wrath and amazement on his scholarly features, Dr. Holmes sailed majestically across the quadrangle. He waved the juniors sternly back and approached the front door of the lodge.

He rapped on it sharply, commandingly.

Taggles' red face vanished from the window.

There was a shuffling in the passage, and then Taggles' voice was heard.

"'Allo? Who's that? Is that old 'Olmes?"

"Wha-at?"

Like Kildare, the Head of St. Jim's nearly fell down on the step.

It was the first time he had been addressed as "Old Holmes" by anyone, much less by a gate-porter.

"Bless my soul!" he gasped, going crimson in the face.

"Taggles—abandoned wretch—did you address me?"

"O' course I did!" bawled Taggles through the keyhole.

"I seed you comin' all right, don't you worrit!"

"Good heavens!" gasped the Head faintly. "The—

wretched man must either be mad or intoxicated again.

This—is this too much. Taggles, do you hear me?"

"Go on—shout!" bawled Taggles back. "O' course I can

'ear you, shoutin' like that there."

"Good gracious!" articulated the Head, pink in the face

with indignant wrath. "This—is this is scandalous—out-

rageous! You were quite right, Kildare; the foolish man is

deceiving me! Taggles!"

"Yes, old 'Olmes?"

"I—I order you to open this door without delay!"

boomed the Head in a majestic voice. "I also order you

to hand over the keys in your possession—the keys no

longer in your charge!"

"No bloomin' fear!"

"What—what?"

"No bloomin' fear!" called Taggles through the keyhole.

"I wants a hunderstandin' with you first, 'Olmes! Ham

I, or ham I not, sacked from this 'ere job of gate-porter

to this 'ere school? If I ham not, then I ain't givin' hup these

'ere keys to nobody; if I ham not, then I'll unlock this 'ere

door and them there gates and carry on with me job as

usual. That's my—my hultimatum, as the soldier fellers

say!"

"Bless my soul!"

The Head was thunderstruck.

Never in the whole extent of his scholastic career had he

been faced with such a situation as this. He had had

defiant boys to deal with often enough; but a defiant school

porter was a different proposition.

He passed a hand across his august brow, quite overcome

and taken aback. Getting rid of Taggles was not so easy

as he had imagined. As a matter of fact, the Head—kindly

enough as a rule—hated the task of getting rid of the old

porter. The Head had known Taggles for years—many,

many years—and, naturally, the thought of "sacking" him

was distasteful to a degree. In fact, had he only seen

way out, the Head, doubtless enough, would have taken it.

But there was Mr. Ratcliff to be considered, and discipline

had to be maintained; authority could not be defied as

Taggles had defied it. Taggles must go!

But Taggles wouldn't go—apparently. The Head had

snorted when Kildare had told him that. He had now

come, feeling quite certain that the sight of his august

figure alone would be enough to subdue the defiant Taggles.

But it was only too obvious that it wasn't.

Taggles, the gate porter, one of the least important of

the domestic staff, had actually defied him; had referred

to him before a crowd of staring juniors and seniors as

"Old Holmes!"

The Head seethed inwardly with righteous indignation

and anger. The lurking sympathy and regrets he had felt

for the ancient porter vanished abruptly. His awe-inspiring

features set hard, and a dark frown appeared on his august

brow.

"This—is this is too much!" he stuttered. "Railton, you—

you heard that wretched man—"

"Abominable, sir!" said Mr. Railton. "Unprecedented

and unheard of! The man must be removed by force if

he refuses to go after this!"

Like the Head, the Housemaster had suddenly lost all

sympathy with the old porter.

"Taggles!" thundered the Head, rapping angrily at the

great oak door. "Open this door this very instant! You

hear me!"

"Yes, old 'Olmes, I 'ears you. But there ain't nothing

doing, old cove! I ain't opening this 'ere door, and I ain't

goin' to leave St. Jim's!"

"Bless my soul! You—you actually say that you refuse

to go, Taggles?"

"You've 'it it, old 'Olmes!"

Dr. Holmes breathed hard.

"If you do not go you will be removed by force! You

are surely aware of that, Taggles?" he called. "If you

refuse to open the door, it shall be forced open!"

"Go ahead, then! I'd like to see the man as can force

this 'ere door open!" bawled Taggles jeeringly.

The Head set his lips hard. He beckoned to Kildare

and one or two more seniors who were standing round

expectantly.

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"Force this door open at once!" he commanded, his voice trembling with rage. "Force the door and evict that wretched man without a moment's delay!"

"Oh, y-yes, sir!"

Kildare, Knox, North, Monteith, and several other seniors and prefects came forward. There was an excited buzz.

"Oh, bai Jove!" mumbled Arthur Augustus, in alarm.

"Now for it! Poor old Taggy is done for!"

But that remained to be seen.

CHAPTER 7.

4 Holding the Fort!

"Be careful, Kildare!" said the Head. "Be careful to cause as little damage as possible to the door. I think you had better obtain a crowbar, or some such implement, to force the locks."

"It's bolted, as well as locked, sir!" said Kildare. "I'm afraid it won't be an easy matter without doing some damage, at all events."

"But an entry must be made, at all costs!" snapped the Head impatiently. "It is impossible for the gates to remain closed all day, or until this insolent rascal chooses to hand the keys over. An entry must be made into the lodge, and Taggles removed at the earliest possible moment."

"We'll do our best, sir!" said Kildare grimly.

He hurried round to the back of the lodge to Taggles' toolshed. All he found there, however, was a rusty iron chisel on the floor of the shed. Evidently Taggles had anticipated an assault on the lodge and had removed his tools into the house. But he had dropped the chisel.

Kildare hurried back to the front, after making sure no other tools were to be had.

"Taggles seems to have moved the tools; this is all I could find!" said Kildare grimly.

Selecting a large stone to use as a hammer, Kildare attempted to drive his chisel between the door and the jamb. It was really a hopeless proceeding. Kildare realised that after a few minutes' breathless effort. At the end of that time all he had accomplished was to splinter the old oak on the surface and to damage a thumb and finger.

"It's no good, sir!" said Kildare, gasping. "I don't believe even a crowbar would do it. There's bolts as well as the lock—"

Taggles interrupted him.

"Go hon!" he bawled, with heavy and bitter sarcasm. "Go hon! What you stoppin' for, young Kildare? You only got to smash that there big lock, and two big bolts, and then shift a 'eap of timber as I've jammed across from the stairs to the door, top and bottom! Go hon; don't lose 'eart, young Eric!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a splutter of laughter from the entertained crowd within hearing.

"Bless my soul!" gasped the Head, pink with indignant wrath. "The wretched man appears to have anticipated this. He has even gone to the audacious extent of barricading the door. An entrance must be forced at some other point, Kildare."

"Yes, sir!"

Kildare spoke without enthusiasm. The captain saw the ridiculous side of the affair, and the chortles of the crowd were getting on his nerves.

"Only a battering-ram would do it, sir," he said.

"That is out of the question, Kildare. It would be a scandalous and wicked act to break down that fine old door just to evict a stupid, rascally porter. Impossible! Perhaps you will be able to force an entrance by one of the windows."

"Yes, sir! But—"

"I—I will leave you now to take charge of the matter; too much of my time has already been wasted on this scandalous affair!" said the Head, with dignity. "Kindly endeavour to do as little damage as possible, Kildare."

"Yes, sir!"

"And—and please avoid rough measures in evicting Taggles. The wretched man is evidently scarcely responsible for his actions."

"I understand sir—quite!"

The Head nodded to Mr. Railton, and those two frowning gentlemen sailed away with a rustle of gowns. It was an unpleasant and humiliating affair. As the Head went he waved a commanding hand to the crowd. It was obviously a command to dismiss. The Head sailed on without a glance back, evidently expecting his august command to be obeyed without question.

But it wasn't. That commanding gesture passed by like the idle wind, and the crowd pressed closer to the attacking operations on the lodge.

"Go on, Kildare!"

"On the ball, Knoxy!"

"Up and at 'em!"

"Charge, Chester—charge!" called Cardew.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Kildare flushed crimson. Now that the somewhat restraining influence of the Head and Mr. Railton was gone the crowd were evidently going to enjoy the affair. A chorus of encouraging shouts—humorous and otherwise—assailed the burning ears of the seniors.

"Come on!" gasped Kildare to his fellow-prefects. "We've got to end this silly rot quickly, chaps! Let's try the windows!"

The seniors moved round the lodge, abandoning the massive iron-studded door. At the side window of the parlour they halted.

"Barred!" said Kildare. "That's no good!"

"Let's try the bars!" said Knox. "They may be loose!"

It was a chance. Knox stepped quickly up to the window. There was no love lost between Knox and Taggles, and the cad of the Sixth was also anxious to distinguish himself as the fellow who had solved the problem. He grabbed one of the bars and tried it. He was still tugging away at it when something shot through the open window with startling suddenness.

It was a wet floor-mop, and it took the zealous prefect full in the face.

Flop!

Bump!

"Yarooooooop!"

Knox sat down violently, his face streaming with dirty water.

"First blood to Taggy!" called Cardew.

most of the crowd naturally followed, anxious to see the fun. Tom Merry & Co. started the rush; it was the only way they could think of to warn Taggles that he was being attacked in the rear.

Lowther even ventured to yell:

"Round to the back, chaps, if you want to see the fun!"

"Lowther, you young fool!" panted Knox.

But the damage was done—as Lowther intended.

Taggles saw the rush and heard the shout. Though far from quick-witted as a rule, he grasped the danger on the instant. He vanished from the window, and even outside they could hear him clumping upstairs in his heavy boots.

Unaware of base treachery, Kildare swarmed up the ladder.

After him went Darrell, North, and Rushden with a rush, Baker of the Sixth remaining at the foot of the ladder.

The window, like the others, was a lattice window, and it was fastened on the inside. But with his chisel Kildare smashed the glass, and, thrusting his hand through the hole thus made, grabbed the catch and twisted it.

The next moment the window was opened wide. Victory was in the grasp of the attacking force—or seemed to be. Unfortunately, just at that moment Taggles arrived in the little bed-room.

He gave a roar as he sighted Kildare's head and shoulders, and, with another roar, he sprang across the room and made a desperate thrust with his long, wet mop.

Really it was a dangerous thing to do—distinctly dangerous. But, obviously, Taggy was too excited to think of the consequences to Kildare. It was a wonder the captain of St. Jim's didn't break his neck the next moment.

Fortunately he didn't. The mop took him clean under

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"Groogh!" gasped Knox. "Ow—ow! The—the confounded brute!"

"Come hon; don't 'ang back like that there!" Taggles' excited features, flushed with triumph, appeared at the window. "Come hon! Any more of you kids as wants a wash—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Nobody did. The mop was ready at the window, with Taggy's brawny arm to wield it. Dirty water streamed over Knox's face and collar and tie and waistcoat as he staggered up and shook his fist at the window.

"Come on!" whispered Kildare to North, Darrell, and two more seniors. "Knox, you and the rest stay here and keep the old fool here somehow—keep making dashes at the window to keep his attention here. We'll try the back windows."

Kildare and the fellows he had selected slipped away and went round to the back yard of the lodge. Kildare pointed up to the small bed-room window above the scullery. It was a recent addition to the old building, and the window was very small, but unbarred. It was a chance.

"But how—" began North.

Kildare soon showed him. He ran into the shed, and came out a moment later staggering beneath the weight of a ladder. Quickly the seniors ran it up to the window.

Alas for their hopes, however!

Having seen Kildare and his men slip round to the back,

the chin, sending dirty water spurting up into his face. It came with the force of Taggy's brawny arm behind it, and it almost lifted Kildare clean off the ladder.

As it was it sent him toppling backwards. Fortunately for him—his supporters were underneath.

Kildare yelled—everybody yelled—and then he struck Darrell. Darrell struck North, and in turn North struck Rushden, and, amid a wild chorus of howls and startled yells, all four seniors went down the ladder again—much quicker than they had ascended it.

They came down with a wild, whirling rush, and all of them, fortunately for themselves, fell on top of the startled Baker at the bottom.

Fortunately again, it was no great distance. But it was quite far enough for the five seniors concerned.

Crash, crash! Bump, bump, bump!

"Yarooooooop!"

"Look out! Oh, my— Yoooop!"

"What the— Yarooooooogh!"

Amid a chorus of howls they arrived in a struggling, kicking heap at the foot of the ladder. Baker had disappeared from sight.

"My heye! Oh, my heye!" Taggles appeared at the window—startled now at what he had done. "My heye! Wot I says is this 'ere—which I didn't mean to do that—blessed if I did!"

He stared down at the struggling forms, while the crowd rushed to help them. Kildare was dragged out first, and

it was soon obvious that he was not seriously hurt. He shook a furious fist up at the scared Taggy.

"You old fool!" he roared. "But we'll have you out of that after this, confound you! Any of you fellows hurt?"

It was really a stupid question to ask. Every one of the siege-party was obviously hurt. But fortunately none of them was hurt badly—no bones were broken. They all scrambled up at length, Baker looking, and obviously feeling, a wreck.

"Up again, you fellows!" panted Kildare. "I'll watch he doesn't—"

"No fear!" groaned Baker. "I've had enough! The old fool can stay there for ever, confound him! Yow-ow!"

"Same here!" gasped North. "Ow! Grooogh! Ow, ow!"

Kildare breathed hard. The crowd were in the yard—most of them grinning now they saw no serious damage was done. To give in and confess himself beaten was not Kildare's way.

"Then you and I will do it, Darrell!" he gasped. "Come—Oh, mum-my hat!"

Kildare had left it a trifle too late. Even as he raised his foot to step on the bottom rung of the ladder, the ladder itself went sailing upwards.

He made a grab at it, but he was too late.

With masterly strategy Taggles had grasped the ladder and hauled it up—Taggy was a strong old fellow, and he managed it easily.

Kildare glared upwards in time to see the old porter drag the ladder over the sill into the room, until only the end of the ladder projected outwards.

"M-mum-my hat!" gasped Kildare.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A howl of laughter greeted Taggy's bold move. Once again Taggy had won. He still held the fort. Kildare stared blankly upwards, crimson in the face with wrath and dismay. As he stood thus there was the rustle of a gown, and Mr. Railton came bustling into the yard.

"What—what—bless my soul! Haven't you obtained an entrance yet, Kildare?"

"N-unno, sir. You—you see—"

"What has happened?" snapped Mr. Railton. "This—this outrageous affair cannot go on, Kildare."

Kildare grunted and told what had happened.

"Upon my word!" gasped Mr. Railton. "The wretched man is obviously determined to persist in this unwarranted and scandalous defiance. Taggles!"

"Allo!" Taggles grinned down triumphantly. "Allo! Come hon, young Railton—you come and see wot you can do!"

"Taggles!" thundered the Housemaster. "How—how dare you? I order you to cease this amazing and disgraceful defiance! I command you to allow me an entrance into the lodge without delay!"

"Ho, does you?" grinned Taggles. "'Ow nice of you!"

"Bless my soul!" Mr. Railton turned to Kildare, his face red. "It is obviously useless to appeal to the man," he said. "The Head is very angry indeed, Kildare. For the present, as you have failed to obtain an entrance, the matter must be allowed to rest for the time being. You will hurry at once and ring the bell for breakfast, which has been delayed long enough. Boys, dismiss and return indoors at once. Any boy found in the quadrangle in two minutes' time will be severely punished!"

Mr. Railton rustled away angrily. Kildare gave Taggles a glare and followed. The first battle for possession of the lodge was ended, and it had ended in victory for Taggles. In a buzz of excitement, and amidst much hilarity, the crowd dispersed and went hastily indoors; they had no intention of being punished severely. Breakfast passed and lessons commenced amid a ceaseless buzz of excitement that morning. Taggles was providing St. Jim's with a first-class sensation—the biggest and most extraordinary ever known to the oldest inhabitant.

Meanwhile, the gates remained locked and Taggles remained in possession of the keys.

CHAPTER 8.

A Wash-out!

"I SAY, you fellows—"

"Oh, buzz off, Trimble—"

"But, I say, they're going it again! Come on, quick!"

Trimble's voice was wild with excitement.

"Oh!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "You mean at the lodge—"

"Yes!" yelled Trimble. "A giddy grand assault this time! I've just heard Knox and Cutts talking about it. They're going to use the giddy fire-engine—"

"What?"

It was a yell.

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"It's a fact!" gasped Trimble, almost bursting with his great news. "It was Kildare's idea; they're going to turn the blessed hosepipe on the window to drive old Taggy back while they get in. Come on—quick! They'll be starting in a few minutes. I spotted a gang of seniors rushing off to the fire-engine shed."

And Trimble, having imparted his exciting news, rushed off.

Tom Merry & Co., who were chatting in the passage outside Study No. 6 at the moment, eyed each other in alarm.

It was after dinner. Since the incidents before breakfast hostilities had ceased—much to the disappointment of the Lower School! After breakfast until morning school a crowd had waited near the lodge—in vain. At morning break it was the same, and after morning school also. No new assault on the lodge had taken place, and Taggy had not even satisfied the excited crowd by showing himself at the windows of the lodge.

Tom Merry & Co.—out of sympathy for the old porter—were glad of it. But the rest of the juniors were not. They wanted to see more of what they considered to be the most exciting and entertaining affair of the term—of any term, in fact.

But now, according to Trimble, who was a fellow who always managed somehow to get to know everything, the "fun" was going to begin again.

Really, it was not to be wondered at. The gates were still locked. They could not be allowed to remain locked indefinitely. Something had to be done—drastic if necessary. The present intolerable state of affairs—in the view of the authorities—could not be allowed to continue. The sacked and rebellious Taggles had to be overcome and order restored to the school.

"Phew!" gasped Tom Merry, as Trimble rushed away in great excitement. "That's done it! Taggles is done for if Kildare's idea works—and it's bound to. Even Taggy can't stand up against a giddy hosepipe. He's done!"

"Looks like it!" said Blake dismally. "Poor old—Here, hold on, Gussy! Where—"

"I'm off to warn Taggy!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

And though they shouted after him in alarm, D'Arcy went his own way regardless. There were a lot of fellows in the quad, but Gussy avoided the crowd, and made his way by the devious route of the Head's garden to the back of the porter's lodge. Hurriedly scaling the wall, Arthur Augustus dropped down into the yard, the gate of which Kildare had locked and bolted that morning.

Though he was taking a great risk, Arthur Augustus did not hesitate. A fellow found supporting the rebellious Taggles was likely to receive short shrift from the authorities. Gussy knew this. But wasn't it all his fault? It was up to him to save Taggles—somehow.

The yard was empty, and behind the high wall nobody in the quadrangle could see him. D'Arcy hurried to the scullery door and knocked urgently. He had scarcely done so when Taggy's red face appeared at the little window above.

"Wot—'Ere, wot are you arter, young—" he was beginning when Arthur Augustus interrupted him.

"Quick, Taggy!" he whispered up. "I've come to warn you, deah boy! They're comin' with the fire-hose—goin' to twy and dwive you away fwom that window while Kildare and the othahs get in. Buck up and get a bawwicked up, for goodness' sake!"

"My heye!" Taggles groaned aloud in dismay. "My heye! Wot I says—"

But Arthur Augustus was already speeding back down the yard, having heard the distant sound of wheels rushing over gravel. It gave warning of the approach of the fire-engine.

"Oh, cwumbs!" panted Gussy.

He fairly flew down the lodge garden, and in a matter of seconds was safe in the shelter of the trees in the Head's shrubbery. From there it was an easy matter to get back into the quadrangle unseen, where he mingled with the crowd.

From every corner of the quad fellows were running now, making for the lodge. The general excitement was intense. Like lightning the news had gone round that a grand assault was to be made on the beleaguered garrison, and nobody wanted to miss it. The engine had reached the front of the lodge now where the hydrant was situated. Stalwart seniors were busy around it. Kildare, backed up by Darrell and North, rapidly unlocked the big double doors of the lodge yard, and flung them back.

The crowd surged inside the yard, unheeding Kildare's bawled orders to come out. The next moment two more seniors came staggering along, bearing another ladder—a longer one than had been used before that morning.

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Tom Merry. "They've got another giddy ladder, then. Taggy's number's up this time."

It certainly seemed so. There was no sign of Taggles

at the window now. Arthur Augustus joined his chums, looking very dismal and apprehensive. He had warned Taggy; but was his warning any use? It seemed not. Kildare's plan was sound, and seemed certain of success.

Scarcely had the ladder arrived when senior members of the school fire brigade came rushing along from the front of the lodge, rapidly and skilfully unrolling the hose-pipe as they came. In a matter of seconds the end was in the yard and the nozzle fitted on.

"Now, you fellows, up with that ladder!" called Kildare briskly. "We'll thundering soon have that old idiot out of it this time."

Kildare evidently meant business.

The ladder was raised, and thudded against the wall near the back window. As it did so, Taggies, looking not a little apprehensive now, showed at the window. He leaned out and grabbed at the ladder with a roar of defiance.

"Quick! Get your weight on the ladder, chaps!" rapped out Kildare.

He himself jumped on the bottom rung and held it. Taggy tugged, but he tugged in vain, as other seniors came to Kildare's assistance.

"Got the nozzle, Darrell?" cried Kildare. "Right! Tell them to buck up with the water! Get ready to back me up, you fellows!"

"What-ho!"

Most of the seniors were grinning now. Success seemed certain—if all went well. The fellows got ready to rush up the ladder at Kildare's heels the moment the hose was fairly at work and the skipper gave the word.

"Oh, my hat!" said Blake. "If only something would go wrong with the blessed engine! But—"

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus, his eyes gleaming. "If only—"

He broke off, and unnoticed by even his chums, he slipped away from the crowd and out of the yard. As he expected, not a soul was to be seen at the side of the lodge between the building itself and the school wall. But the long length of hose was there, running alongside the bushes to the front where the hydrant and engine were. All the spectators and workers were either at the front or back. To Gussy's ears came arguing voices, and the sound of a metallic hammering.

Apparently a hitch had occurred in the fitting up of the hydrant.

"Bai Jove! What wippin' luck!" breathed Gussy. "I'll do it—yaas, wathah!"

With another glance at the snake-like length of hose, Arthur Augustus, his noble mind made up, set off full-tilt across the quadrangle.

Meanwhile, Kildare was getting angry and impatient.

"What the dickens are those chaps doing?" he snorted. "One of you run round and see what they're playing at. Great Scott! Good job it isn't a blessed fire!"

It certainly was. Taggies had vanished again from the window, and he could be heard thudding up and down stairs, evidently preparing for the battle. Baker, who had run round to the front in response to Kildare's request, came running back a minute later.

"Couldn't get the blessed hydrant fixed, or something!" he said, with a sniff. "They were arguing instead of doing the dashed job. But the juice will be through soon."

"Time it was!" snorted Kildare. "Now, Darrell!"

(Continued on next page.)



Q. What are the Chiltern Hundreds?

A. I'll explain, "Young Liberal," of Leicester. You see, a member of the House of Commons is not allowed to resign his seat. However, if he accepts an office under the Crown, his seat automatically becomes vacant. To make the thing legal, when an M.P. wishes to throw in his hand, he gets appointed as a steward of the Chiltern Hundreds which is, as you know, a range of hills in Buckinghamshire. This stewardship is an ancient office, and has the merit that it has no duties attached to it. So in this somewhat curious way, the M.P. gives up his seat in the House of Commons.

Q. What is Charles' Wain?

A. One of the most familiar groups of stars in the heavens, Mabel Tullock. A wain is a wagon, or peasant's cart. The constellation is more commonly called the Plough or the Great Bear. In America it is also known as the Great Dipper—a dipper being a kind of ladle with a handle to it. The two stars at the far side of the bowl of the dipper—that is the farthest away from the "handle"—are pointers

One of the most familiar groups of stars in the heavens—the Plough, or Great Bear.

to the Pole Star. Look in the direction indicated by them, and you should be able to see the solitary star which is more or less directly above the North Pole.

Q. What is a potto?

A. A curious species of animal which inhabits Equatorial Africa. It is a creature of burly build and covered with soft, thick hair of a grey and reddish tint. It is very seldom seen by travellers, for it sleeps through the whole day rolled in a ball, and moves sluggishly about and feeds during the night-time.

Q. Is it true that Henry Ford is the most wealthy American?

A. So I have heard, Angus McFee, of Glasgow. Certainly he has amassed millions by the manufacture of motor-cars. For all that, he has had his ups and downs—and so have some of the owner-drivers of his cars!

Q. What colour is a lobster?

A. I have included this question sent in to me by George Copping of Spitalfields, because it is more interesting than it seems at first sight. In his letter, George says that he was reading a book called "Skipper Ironfist's Revenge," in which it said that when the skipper reproved a deckhand for dropping a pulley-block on his head, the unlucky hand turned "the colour of a lobster." There are two possibilities, George: Firstly, if the deckhand turned the colour of a live lobster, which is blue-black like ink, it seems to indicate that Skipper Ironfist landed him one between the lamps. If, however, he turned the colour of a boiled lobster, which is red, it indicates that the deckhand was of a

sensitive nature and blushed to hear his irate superior call him a naughty, naughty lad!

Q. Why has the lapel of a coat a nick in it?

A. Thanks for asking this question, "Observer," of Barnstaple, for it gives me the opportunity of firing off a bit of information I have had in cold storage for a long time. The nick in the lapel of a coat was a secret sign at the time of Napoleon and it was used by the supporters of General Moreau.

Q. Who was the first President of U.S.A.?

A. Tut-tut, Cedric Miller, of Walsall! Where were you when teacher gave out the history books? It was George Washington, famous as the fellow who never told a lie. Even as a boy he showed this beautiful tendency toward the truth. When he cut down the cherry tree with his little axe, he did not blame it on the cat, as a fellow like Trimble, of St. Jim's, might have done, but answered:

"Father, it was I." His name is still revered not only in the United States of America, but all over the world. The new President recently elected, is Herbert Hoover.



Q. What is the meaning of A.A.?

A. A junior reader named William Bennett, who states that he is "quick at noticing things," says he has seen this sign about. Yes, William, I expect you have seen it displayed at hotels, certain roadside telephone booths, and on a few hundred motor-cars. It stands for the Automobile Association, which exists for the benefit of motorists.

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Darrell grabbed the nozzle of the hose again and waited. He had scarcely grabbed it when the juice—otherwise the water—did come through. It came through much quicker than the unwary Darrell expected, and drenched him from head to foot before he was aware what was happening.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A roar of laughter went up. Darrell, gasping and drenched, dropped the hose as if it had suddenly become red-hot.

"Quick!" roared Kildare furiously. "Grab the blessed thing someone! Well, of all the—"

Words failed the captain of the amateur fire brigade. Darrell, spluttering and gasping and dripping, crawled away and made tracks for the School House—the first casualty. North, with great gallantry, grabbed at the nozzle of the hose and held it.

"Now, let him have it!" bawled Kildare.

Taggles was at the window now, glaring down at the preparations for his discomfiture. He gave a defiant yell.

"Yes, come hon!" he roared. "I got somethin' 'ere waitin' for you! Think I cares for your bloomin' hose? Come hon—the bloomin' lot of you! I got—"

Swoooooosh!

Taggles' words ended suddenly, as North swept up the hose and got a bullseye first go off, so to speak.

Taggles gave a muffled sort of spluttering howl and vanished from sight. A heavy bump sounded from the room above. A stream of water, solid and substantial, followed him through the open window.

"Now, you fellows!" yelled Kildare. "Keep it up—quick!"

The moment for the great offensive had come. A feeble cheer went up as Kildare raced up the ladder. At his heels went Baker, Rushden, Monteith, and Knox. It seemed that all was over with Taggy—all over bar shouting, as Blake gloomily expressed it.

But even now the attackers had not won the day!

At that exciting moment—the critical moment of the offensive, as it were—the water gave out.

The hosepipe gave a sort of convulsive shudder and seemed to collapse, flat as a pancake. From the nozzle, instead of a powerful jet, came a mere dribble.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped North. "What the—"

A fierce roar drowned North's astonished remarks. It came from Taggles, who just then bobbed into view at the window. He was gasping for breath, and dripping with water. But his ardour was obviously by no means damped.

He reached the window just as Kildare came level with it. The next moment Taggles brought his trusty weapon—a wet mop—into play with a vengeance.

Biff, biff, biff!

"Yooooooop!" roared Kildare, as the business end of the mop thumped about his head and shoulders. "Yow! Stop it, you old fool! You'll have me—Yarroooooop!"

It was too much—even for the stalwart Sixth-Former. Taggy had lost his head in his excitement, and he brought the sodden mop thumping down without pause. Kildare ducked and dodged, yelling, and made frantic efforts to grab the whacking mop. His frantic efforts were his undoing.

A particularly hefty whack nearly sent him off his precarious perch. But, though it didn't quite do that, it caused him to lose his footing—one foot only being on the rung at the moment.

The next instant, grabbing frantically at the sides of the ladder, Kildare shot downwards, taking his startled supporters with him in his stride, so to speak.

It was history repeating itself with a vengeance as earlier in the day Kildare had knocked his supporters off the ladder below him like a row of skittles, amidst a chorus of howls of alarm.

Crash, crash! Thump! Bump!

They reached the foot of the ladder in a sprawling, kicking, struggling heap. And as they struggled there Taggles appeared again at the window above. This time he held a bucket in his hands. He lodged it for a brief instant on the sill and then he swung it outwards.

Swoooooosh!

A stream of water shot earthwards, and Kildare, Rushden, Knox, Baker, and Monteith got all of it as they struggled in a yelling heap below. The bucket vanished, and a jug appeared in its place—also full of water. The next instant, before they could scramble to safety, the seniors got the contents of that.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors in the crowd were howling with laughter by this time. It was obvious from the yells and wrathful threats coming from the heap of seniors that none of them was seriously damaged. They only seemed to be bruised and wet—awfully wet!

"Good old Taggy!"

"Taggy wins!"

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"Ha, ha, ha!"

Taggy had won—for even as the seniors grovelled in the lodge yard, before one of them could reach his feet, or anyone else interfere, the old porter had leaned out of the window and grabbed the ladder.

"Look out!" yelled Cutts of the Fifth. He ran to the spot and made a grab at the bottom of the ladder just as it was sailing upwards. But he was too late by a yard.

Taggles had a firm grip now, and he hauled the ladder upwards rung by rung. It was longer and heavier than the first, but he managed it easily enough. He had the top end through the window now, and he dragged it inside foot by foot. Evidently the door of the room was opposite

Darrell of the Sixth had scarcely grabbed the nozzle of the hose when the water came through. Swoooooosh! It came through much quicker than the unwary Darrell expected, and drenched him from head to foot before he was aware what was happening! There was a roar from the crowd. "Ha, ha, ha!" (See Chapter S.)



the window, and open, for the ladder vanished the next minute into the bed-room. The end of the delicate operation was greeted by a cheer from below, and Taggy grinned down at the laughing crowd with a drenched but flushed face.

"Any more of them there ladders a-comin'?" he bawled. "I can get a few more in by 'avin' 'arf in the bed-room and 'arf through the door on ter the landing. Any more, Master Kildare?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

More laughter greeted Taggy's humorous remarks. Apparently success was making Taggy good-humouredly sarcastic.

The distinctly uncomfortable seniors were on their feet now, drenched to the skin and raging.

"Well!" gasped Kildare dazedly, running his hand through his wet hair. "Well, of all the—the—the—"

"Wash-outs?" suggested Cardew; and there was a laugh. Kildare glared about him; and then he sighted North, still with the useless nozzle of the hosepipe in his hand.

"North, you born idiot!" he gasped. "What the dickens has happened? We'd have had him for a cert if the dashed water hadn't failed us just then! What—"

"How the dickens do I know?" snorted North. "The dashed water must have been cut off, or—"

"But the engine's still going!" bawled Kildare. "Can't you hear the dashed pump clanking? What the—the—"

Kildare broke off, deciding to waste no more words in futile questioning. The clanking of the fire-engine could still be heard; apparently the seniors at the front of the lodge still manned the pumps, ignorant of the sad retreat, and ignorant that no water was coming through.

It was an amazing mystery which Kildare wanted to clear up at once. He rushed from the yard, and the crowd went after him in a swarm. They found him staring fixedly at a rapidly swelling pool of water round the side of the lodge.



The little shrubbery there was flooded; a considerable part of the ground was under water.

The water came gushing and spouting from the hosepipe, which had been completely cut through, one part being flat and inert; the other doing its work well—but futilely.

The mystery was solved. Somebody—some unknown and dastardly miscreant—had chopped through the hose, thus cutting the water off at the seniors' end. Treachery was the undoubted cause of the defeat.

Kildare blinked and blinked in growing wrath and indignation. But he did not blink for long. The water was cold as well as wet, and it was not a time for reflection. Moreover, just then the bell for afternoon classes rang. Rushden and the other seniors, with one glance at the severed hose, gave wrathful growls and departed at top speed for the School House. The plan had failed; there wasn't a spare hose, nor was there another ladder. And they were wet through and shivering. If Kildare liked to continue the assault, he could do so on his own; they had had enough—more than enough!

But the skipper of St. Jim's had also no intention of continuing the attack just then.

He glared again at the severed pipe, and then he glared round at the grinning faces.

"So—so that's it!" he said, fairly stuttering with rage. "Well, the chap who did that had better look out for himself!"

Kildare walked away, water dripping from him. It was obvious from the look on his face that a warm time was in store for the culprit—if discovered.

The juniors gave the triumphant Taggles a parting cheer, and then they swarmed indoors.

"Well, my hat!" gasped Tom Merry, tears of merriment still on his cheeks. "Wasn't that a scream? So old Taggy wins again! But who the dickens cut that hosepipe?"

"I'd have done it myself if I'd thought about it!" grinned Blake. "I fancy it was Figgy, or— Hallo! Where the dickens have you been, Gussy?"

D'Arcy came along the passage towards them.

"Changin' my clobber, deah boys."

"Ch-changing your clobber?" yelled Blake. "But why on earth—"

"You see, I got feahfully wet when I cut that w'etched hosepipe thwough, you know!" explained Gussy. "I nevah expected the wotten watah to spurt out like it did, you know; I was absolutely dwenched, and it was neccessawy to change."

"Well, my only hat!"

"You—it was you who cut that pipe through?" gasped Blake. "You?"

"Yaas, deah boy! What happened? I weally do twust that it was not all in vain!"

"But—but how—"

"The idea came to me in a flash, you know," said D'Arcy modestly. "I wushed ovah to the woodshed and gwabbed an old axe there. Then I wushed back with it undah my coat, and fwom the sheltah of the bushes I hacked thwough the hose. It was weally vewy simple, but feahfully wet! But what happened—"

Blake & Co. arrived at the Fourth Form room just then, and as they were already late Gussy's question remained unanswered until break. He heard the story then, however, and as he chuckled his satisfaction he felt that even getting wet had been worth it. Taggy was saved, and still remained victorious and unconquered.

CHAPTER 9. Ob-Knox-ious!

"GLYN!"

"Yes, Knox!"

"I want you in my study a minute!"

"Oh—er—very well, Knox!"

It was after afternoon class. Glyn was just leaving the Form-room with Tom Merry, Lowther, and Manners. And they were discussing the exciting affair of Taggles. It would have been rather strange if they had been discussing anything else, in fact, for everybody at St. Jim's, from the Head downwards, was discussing the same topic.

Taggles had undoubtedly caused the sensation of the day, or week, or term. Even footer was taking a back seat; footer was a matter for everyday discussion and could be put off. But the doings of Taggles, the gate-porter, were not usually of absorbing interest. He had become the subject of universal talk now—the whole school had his name on its lips. For the old porter to defy the school authorities in this amazing manner was certainly something to talk about, and even write home about. It didn't happen every day. But he had defied, and he had fought and won—so far. He was still master of the lodge and the situation. The gates remained locked, and the keys remained in his possession. Taggles had been sacked, but he hadn't gone; and obviously it was going to be a matter of some difficulty to shift him.

And since the after-dinner battle there had been something else to discuss. That was the identity of the daring individual who had cut the hosepipe and thus frustrated the attackers—beaten them at the post, so to speak. Kildare had reported the matter to Mr. Railton, and the Housemaster, amazed and angry, had made a round of the Form-rooms that afternoon, and had questioned each Form—in vain. Naturally, Arthur Augustus, knowing that terrific punishment was in store for the culprit, was very backward in coming forward. He was very proud of his exploit; but he was too modest, in the circumstances, to own up to Mr. Railton.

And as only his closest chums knew, and were not likely to give him away, Mr. Railton was obliged to go on his way as ignorant of the culprit's identity as when he had started his investigations.

The seniors themselves, of course, were furious. It would have gone hard with the noble Gussy had they only discovered the truth. Knox, especially, was enraged, and it was plain that he suspected Tom Merry & Co. The

Terrible Three eyed him warily now—they had expected him to call them instead of Bernard Glyn.

But it was Glyn Knox wanted. As a matter of fact, Knox had a plan of his own to defeat Taggles. Kildare had tried—and failed dismally and completely. Knox did not intend to fail. He badly wanted to succeed—if only to score over the captain of St. Jim's. Knox bated Kildare, and he knew it would be a feather in his own cap if he succeeded where Kildare had failed.

So Knox had plotted a dark plot, and he required Glyn's aid to help him, though he didn't intend the schoolboy inventor to know that.

"Buok up, kid!"

He walked away now, and Glyn, with a wry grimace at the Terrible Three, followed him—slowly. Going to Knox's study was something like going into a lion's den, dangerous at all times. Knox was a bully, and given to using his ashplant unduly. Glyn followed the senior into his study. To his surprise Knox was quite genial as the door closed upon them.

"I just want you to do a little job for me, Glyn, old chap!" he began in quite honeyed tones. "I believe you're rather a clever kid at chemicals and all that kind of thing?"

Glyn nodded—admitting the soft impeachment. Glyn was known as the schoolboy inventor at St. Jim's, but he was a good deal of a scientist as well, and what he did not know about chemicals was scarcely worth knowing—according to his chums, at all events.

He looked at Knox suspiciously now. What was the senior after? He was not given to praising the abilities of anyone, much less those of juniors. He waited for the Sixth-Former to continue.

"The fact is," proceeded Knox smoothly, "I want you to make something for me. I shall pay you for the work, of course—pay you handsomely, kid. But, of course, it must be a secret between ourselves."

"Oh!"

Glyn satisfied himself with that non-committal remark.

"Last term," continued Knox, smiling, "I believe you played rather a neat trick on those New House kids—raided their grub in Pepper's barn by hurling smoke-bombs through the window and driving them out while you slipped in and collared the grub."

"Well, that's so!" agreed Glyn, with a reminiscent grin. "What about it, Knox? It was done outside school hours, and did no harm, and—"

"My dear man, don't think I'm speaking officially now," grinned Knox. "I'm not going to report the matter, if that's what's worrying you. I heard about it, of course, but just looked upon it as a lark. In fact, I considered it rather a neat score over those New House kids."

"Oh! Ah, yes!"

Glyn was more puzzled than ever.

"I merely reminded you of it because—well, the fact is," said Knox, coming to the point suddenly, "I want you to make me some giddy smoke-bombs, Glyn."

Glyn jumped.

To be asked by a senior, and a prefect, to make him some smoke-bombs, was distinctly uncommon and unusual. Seniors and prefects did not do such things. They never asked favours of fags, to begin with, and smoke-bombs—

Glyn was staggered.

"You—you want me to make you some—some smoke-bombs?" he stuttered. "Oh, my hat!"

"I know it's rather a queer request!" said Knox genially, "but I'll pay you for them, of course. I want them soon, though. You couldn't make them this evening, I suppose?"

"I could!" said Glyn, staring. "But tell me what you want them for, Knox?"

"My dear kid, is that necessary?" said Knox. "I'm asking you to make them, and I'm willing to pay for them. I'll also make it square in other ways," he added significantly. "When I'm in charge of you kids I'll let you off lines and all that."

"Oh, will you?" stuttered Glyn.

"Yes, kid. Well, is it a go?"

Glyn stared at Knox, and then his eyes gleamed. He could guess what the Sixth-Former wanted those bombs for. "And supposing I refuse?" he answered.

An ugly grin appeared on the Sixth-Former's face.

Walking to his desk, he took out his ashplant, and swished it through the air.

"I shouldn't advise you to refuse!" he remarked unpleasantly. "You'll oblige me in this little matter, or be licked—officially, of course—for cheek!"

Glyn breathed hard.

"Hold on!" he panted, a glimmer coming into his eyes.

"You really mean you're going to lick me?"

"Yes, for cheek, kid!" grinned Knox. "But if you feel like doing me the great favour of making some smoke-bombs, well, I'll let you off."

"But—but you said you'd pay me!" said Glyn cautiously, as if that was an important point.

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"Yes, kid!" Knox's eyes gleamed—he felt he was winning. "Yes, I'll pay you a tanner a time—six bob for a dozen!"

"Make it seven!" said Glyn.

"Six bob—not a penny more! And no lines from me for the rest of the term, kid!"

If the august headmaster of St. Jim's could only have heard that last inducement, Knox's office as prefect would have ended there and then.

Glyn's lips curled slightly, but only for an instant.

"Right!" he said. "A dozen bombs, you say?"

"Yes—to-night, or to-morrow morning at latest!"

"You shall have them!" said Glyn. "I've got some already made, as it happens. You can have them in a few minutes, if you like."

"You mean that?" snapped Knox eagerly.

"Of course!"

"Cut off, then, sharp!" said Knox, grinning. "But mind—if you let me down I'll—I'll skin the hide off you! I'll make your sweet young life hardly worth living! Got that?"

"Yes, Knox," said Glyn meekly.

"Then cut!"

Knox turned the key and opened the door and Glyn cut. Outside, a few yards along the passage, he found the Terrible Three waiting. They eyed him curiously.

"We thought we'd better hang about in case he was up to any games," said Tom Merry. "If you yelled we should have known what to do. What did the cad want?"

"Only wanted me to make something for him," said Glyn calmly. "The dear old chap is taking an interest in chemicals in his old age. He's suddenly become interested in smoke-bombs, and he wants me to make him some."

"Wha-at?"

Tom Merry & Co. nearly yelled.

"But—but what on earth for?" ejaculated Lowther. "What the dickens does that rotter want smoke-bombs for?"

"Can't you guess?" grinned Glyn. "I spotted it soon enough. The boulder's out for glory, and to make Kildare look small. He means to bomb the giddy lodge and drive old Taggy out, just as we drove those giddy New House chaps out of old Pepper's barn last term. See the idea?"

"Oh, my hat!"

"That's it, of course!"

"It is!" agreed Glyn. "Not a doubt about that! Well, I've promised him a dozen!"

"You—you have?" gasped Tom. "Well, you are an ass, Glyn! Dash it all, give poor old Taggy a fighting chance! I should have thought—"

"My dear man, I did quite a lot of thinking!" grinned Glyn. "You see, Knox locked the door and intended to thrash me until I promised to do what he wanted. What was a fellow to do? Anyway, I promised him a dozen bombs—though I didn't say what sort! If you chaps want to see some fun, go along to the Sixth passage in about fifteen minutes' time!"

And with that cryptic utterance, Bernard Glyn walked off to his own study, grinning all over his face.

Fifteen minutes later, sharp to time, Bernard Glyn mounted the stairs to the Sixth-Form passage. The schoolboy inventor was carrying a box gingerly under one arm. Behind him came his chums, Noble and Dane, and the Terrible Three, and Blake & Co., all of them wearing expectant grins, and eager for the promised "fun."

The little crowd of juniors hung about at the end of the passage while Glyn paid his expected visit to Knox of the Sixth.

Knox was at tea with three Fifth-Formers of his own kidney—Cutts, St. Leger, and Gilmore. Glyn grinned inwardly as he sighted them all. All were bitter enemies of the Lower School fellows—especially Knox and Cutts.

As the junior entered, gingerly carrying the box, Knox gave a loud chortle.

"Here he is!" he said. "Good kid, Glyn! Those the bombs, of course?"

"Yes, Knox!"

"Shove them in the corner there, and then clear!"

Glyn placed them in the corner. He knew perfectly well that Knox had no intention of paying for them, if he could help it. Knox's words told him that. But he did not immediately go—he moved to the door, and stood with his back to it.

"I—I say, Knox," he said, "what about the cash, though? You said—"

"Did I?" remarked Knox blandly. "Those are the bombs, of course?"

"Yes, Knox, please!"

"Quite sure, kid?"

"Oh, yes—quite! A dozen, Knox!"

"Good!" smiled Knox. "Awfully kind of you, and all that. Now clear before I put my boot behind you!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Cutts & Co.
 "But aren't you going to pay me?" asked Glyn.
 "Well, yes—just wait a sec!" said Knox, getting up significantly. "I said a kick a bomb, didn't I? Here—hallo, he's gone!"
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 Cutts and Co. roared, highly entertained. Knox was a fellow well known for a certain keenness for getting something for nothing. Glyn vanished hurriedly, banging the door behind him. He banged it so those inside should not hear the key click in the lock—having stood with his back to the door so Knox & Co. could not see him while he removed the key from the inside.
 Having locked the door, Glyn winked at it and, leaving the key in the lock, he walked away and joined his chums.
 "All serene?"
 "Yes. Knox thinks he's got something for nothing!" smiled Glyn. "Well, I hope he'll be satisfied!" He glanced at his watch. "The giddy time-fuse should make things move in a tick, I think! Hallo, there it goes!"

Bang!
 From behind the locked door of Knox's study came a terrific bang. It was followed by a whole series of bangs as the bombs in the box exploded.

And as they did so, a pandemonium of howls and yells came from the Sixth-Former's study. There was the sound of furniture crashing over also. Evidently Knox & Co. were startled, and had quite lost their heads.

"I bet Knoxy's discovered what sort of bombs they are by now, chaps!" said Glyn.

There was no doubting that. The smell—a most awful smell—of chemicals was in the air of the passage—obviously coming under the door and through the keyhole of Knox's apartment. The juniors held their noses and discreetly retired a little farther. They did not want to be too near the spot for other reasons beside the overpowering aroma.

For doors were opening all along the passage now—Kildara came rushing out from his room with Darrell, his chum. Other doors opened—Rushean, Baker, North, and a whole swarm of other Sixth-Formers dashed into the passage and stared about them blankly as they heard the fearful uproar coming from behind the door of Knox's room.

Knox was yelling frantically, as were Cutts & Co. Their voices were almost drowned, though, in the hammering and crashing that sounded behind the door. It fairly shook under a fierce onslaught as the imprisoned seniors struggled madly to get out.

"It's locked!" Knox was bellowing. "Help! Help! Oh, gad! Grooogh! Help!"

Behind the doors sounded yells, and coughs, and splutters,

and frantic gasps. A window was heard to go up with a terrific slam.

"What the dickens—" Kildare had his handkerchief to his nose, as had every fellow in the passage now. "What the—"

Suddenly catching sight of the key in the door of Knox's study, Kildare twisted it hastily and flung the door open.

He wished he had not done so the next moment—from the bottom of his heart—as did the others crowded round him.

From the study came a little billow of smoke—or fumes, rather—fumes that almost knocked down the seniors. They jumped backwards with horrified gasps, just in time to escape Knox & Co.'s wild rush as they blundered out, coughing, choking, gasping, with eyes streaming, and nearly starting from their heads.

"What—what—"
 "Out of the—groogh!—confounded—groogh!—way!" gurgled Knox.

He rushed away to the nearest bath-room, followed by Cutts, St. Leger, Gilmore, who were also gurgling frantically.

"What—" In the passage Kildare was beginning again, but he gave it up, for the smell was overpowering now.

Fellows rushed back into their studies, slamming the doors behind them. Kildare, amazed, and with handkerchief hugging his face, staggered along to the landing window and flung open the sash, letting in the cold, clear air. Then he also made a dive for his own study and closed the door.

Weeping with laughter, Tom Merry & Co. and Glyn & Co. staggered back to their own studies to finish their laughing there. That Knox would keep silent for his own sake—nothing was more certain. The rascally prefect would never dare to make it known that he had bargained with a junior, and that he had threatened him with a licking if he refused his requests.

None the less, Glyn took no risks, and for the rest of that evening he remained behind the locked door of his study.

Meanwhile, Knox's great plot had failed, and Ephraim Taggles still reigned supreme and unconquered at the lodge.

CHAPTER 10. Vanquished!

"MONSTROUS!" said the Head.
 "Preposterous!" said Mr. Raitlon.
 "Scandalous and abominable!" snorted Mr. Ratcliff.

The headmaster and the two Housemasters of St. Jim's were in solemn and grave conclave. And the subject of their grave deliberations was Taggles.

(Continued on next page.)

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For the grave and reverend doctor and his two scholastic colleagues to spend time—to be obliged to spend their valuable time—in discussing ways and means of dealing with a rebellious gate-porter who had been sacked and who refused to depart, was really monstrous, preposterous, scandalous, and abominable!

Something had to be done, however—and done quickly. The gates were still locked. Nobody could get in or out without climbing a ladder which had been placed against the gates. Certainly the juniors of St. Jim's knew of another way in and out much easier than climbing the gates. But they were not likely to show that way—which was by way of an old oak and the school wall—to the authorities. It was really most inconvenient, to say the least of it. Dignified masters objected to scaling gates and climbing ladders, if juniors and seniors did not. The Head had his own private entrance, of course, which was along the drive to his house. But the gate of that was also locked, and the key was, apparently, in Taggy's possession also.

Really it was very serious, and very annoying, to say the least of it. Visitors had come, and had been obliged to alight from their cars, and those who had not gone away without calling, had been obliged to squeeze through a gap in the hedge of the Head's garden.

Moreover, there was the matter of discipline. The whole school was seething with excitement—had been "set by the ears" by the unusual, unlooked-for and unprecedented happening. The various Form masters were driven frantic by the inattention at lessons, and were unanimous in their statements that "something must be done." Masters and seniors had been held up to ridicule by the antics of the wretched Taggles. Their failure to bring him to book had filled the rest of the school with joy and hilarity.

Something had to be done—quickly!

"Something must be done!" repeated the Head for the hundredth time. "Things cannot remain as they are for another night!"

"Certainly not!" said Mr. Railton.

"Such a thing is unthinkable!" said Mr. Ratcliff, with another snort.

"I am reluctant—strongly reluctant—to do any damage to the lodge unless absolutely necessary," said the Head with dignity. "But I am afraid the time has come—it is now very necessary. One of the lodge doors must be forced regardless of damage, and that—that wretched man must be evicted and escorted from the premises."

"Yes, sir!"

"Indeed, sir!"

Mr. Railton and Mr. Ratcliff both agreed, though neither of them, apparently, had any suggestions to make.

"And it must be done this evening—before dark!" resumed the Head in his deep voice. "I am particularly anxious for this regrettable and unfortunate affair to be ended before—ahem!—before Mrs. Holmes returns. She is expected back this evening. She has always had a certain amount of—er—regard for that wretched man, having known him, of course, for many, many years. It is most unfortunate—most unfortunate that it has been necessary to dismiss him. I myself regret it very much indeed. But he really has gone too far—he has exceeded all the limits of my patience!"

"He has indeed, sir!"

"Mrs. Holmes, as I have said, returns this evening. She is also bringing a young friend with her to stay at my house. I do not wish anything to happen of an unseemly and—er—riotous nature while they are here, of course. Therefore, the matter must be settled without delay. An entrance must be forced. Kindly ring the bell and ask for Kildare, Railton!"

"Very good, sir!"

Kildare was very soon on the spot, and the Head explained.

"We'll soon have him out, sir, if you don't mind damage being done to the door."

"That cannot be helped now, Kildare. Kindly get to work at once, without the loss of a moment!"

"Very good, sir!"

Kildare hurried out, looking very grim and determined. Sorry as he was for Taggles, Kildare felt, as the authorities did, that something had to be done—drastically and quickly. Moreover, Kildare had his own prestige to consider. The captain of St. Jim's was feeling none too kindly disposed towards the old porter; it would have been remarkable had he been, in the circumstances.

He soon had a goodly number of seniors together, and a general move was made towards the gates in the gathering dusk.

Naturally, the proceedings had already attracted attention, and though many of the fellows had scarcely finished tea, crowds of them were soon pouring out into the quadrangle.

The Terrible Three were amongst the first out, and they had scarcely taken up their position at the lodge when

Blake, Herries, Digby, and Arthur Augustus came hurrying along. But they had obviously not come to see the grand assault on the lodge. All of them wore their overcoats, and were evidently going out of the gates.

"Hallo! Where are you cripples off to?" exclaimed Tom. "Not stopping to see what happens? I believe the beaks mean to ship Taggy at all costs this time."

Blake nodded gloomily.

"We know that only too well!" he grunted. "But we're booked to go to the giddy station. My hat! I was forgetting you fellows didn't know. Cousin Ethel's coming this evening to stay with Mrs. Holmes. We've promised old Gussy to go with him to meet her."

"Just about do it before lock-up!" said Herries.

"I'm weally wathah surprised at Ethel!" said Gussy, shaking his head. "I only got a note this tea-time sayin' she was comin', you know. As her cousin, I weally considah she should have given me pwopah warnin', bai Jove!"

"But she's staying with Mrs. Holmes—not as your giddy guest!" grinned Blake. "Supposing the Head sends a car for her? She doesn't ask us to meet her, though she says she's coming by the five o'clock in Wayland."

"She takes that for gwanted, of course!" said Gussy witheringly. "Howevah, it is vewy unforch—or it will be if those wottahs do get poor old Taggy out before Cousin Ethel comes, at all events! I had gwreat hopes she would be able to get wound the Head or Mrs. Holmes, and persuade them to let the old chap off, you know. But we'd better be off! I do twust that Taggy will be able to hold the fort until we weturn—or, wathah, until Ethel comes!"

And Blake & Co. hurried on, and vanished, gaining the lane by way of the old leaning oak and the school wall.

As they disappeared an ironical cheer sounded behind the Terrible Three, and a dozen seniors came rushing across the quad, carrying a long length of thick timber between them.

A crowd of juniors followed on the heels of the attacking party, as Kildare led the way into the yard of the lodge once again. All the seniors were looking grimly determined this time. The laughter and ironical cheers made them more determined still.

"Stand back, you kids!" snapped Kildare angrily. "And stop that silly row! Now, you fellows—Hallo, the old fool's spotted us!"

A roar came from the side window of the lodge. Taggles had been on the look-out; in any case, he could not have failed to know something was afoot by the noise in the quadrangle. There was a buzz of excited voices in the yard now.

"Go it, you cripples!"

"Look out, Taggy! 'Ware boarders!"

"Man the guns and mind the water!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Come hon, I'm waitin' for you!" bawled Taggles, from behind the back door, which was obviously the attackers' objective. "Come hon! I'm ready when you smashes that there door down!"

"We'll jolly soon have it down!" snapped Kildare. "Come on, chaps! There are no stairs behind this for him to jam timber against. There's only a lock and bolts, at most. And it isn't as stout as the front door. Let her have it! Now!"

Crash, crash, crash!

The heavy beam crashed again and again on the stout door. Though not as strong as the front door, it was also of oak, and of massive thickness. But, obviously, something had to give way before that terrific onslaught.

Crash, crash, crash!

The heavy blows resounded across the misty quad. Dusk was falling rapidly now, and Kildare and his men redoubled their efforts, determined to accomplish their intention before darkness fell.

"Go at it! Don't lose 'art!" bawled Taggles derisively from within. "There's a pile of stuff to get past arter you've smashed the bloomin' lock, and then you'll 'ave me to deal with. Go hon—smash as much as you likes!"

But there was rather a quaver in the old man's voice now; it was nothing like so defiant and confident as it had been. As a matter of fact, Taggles himself was beginning to lose heart. The more time he had to reflect, the more he realised that his position was almost hopeless. In the end he would have to give way. Already he was regretting somewhat his defiance and impudence—to the authorities, at all events.

Something would give way soon; that terrific crashing could not go on ineffectively for long. Something soon did give way.

Crack!

Above the crashing of wood on wood sounded a sharp snap. The next moment, as the seniors charged at the door again with their heavy beam of timber, two more sharp snaps sounded.

The door moved inwards a few inches, and then stuck. The lock had snapped or given way, as had the two bolts, top and bottom of the door!

Only the barricade of furniture and boxes kept the attacking party out now—but the gallant Taggles remained unbeaten.

Crash, crash, crash!

The door moved again—a foot open this time. Knox of the Sixth jumped at the opening. He staggered back as something shot through the aperture and took him full in the face with a dull thump.

It was the mop again, and for the second time that day Gerald Knox sat down with a muffled howl of pain and wrath. He kept well clear of the aperture after that, and retired to the rear. But others were at hand, eager and willing to face the mop.

Again and again the beam of wood crashed against the yielding door.

Then the beam was dropped, and the seniors got their shoulders to the door, heedless of the whirling mop that belaboured them through the aperture.

The opening widened—the door creaked and groaned at the pressure exerted against it. Something crashed over beyond it, and the door moved another few inches.

"It's going!" yelled Kildare. "Go it, chaps! Now!"

Another crash sounded from within; the next instant the door flew back, precipitating the seniors head over heels into the scullery.

Taggles was there to receive them—a wrathful, resolute figure, with a waving mop in his brawny hands.

Whack, whack, whack!

With his back to the wall now, the gallant defender of

the lodge made his last stand—a hopeless stand now. Yells and shouts went up as his weapon whirled, sending the scrambling attackers to right and left.

"On him!" bawled Kildare furiously. "Taggles, you old idiot, chuck it! Can't you see it's no good? Chuck it, before we have to handle you!"

"Which I ain't done yet!" gasped the old porter. "Stand back! Ho, would you?"

A terrific swipe almost sent Darrell across the scullery. But it was Taggy's last blow. The next instant Kildare's hefty grasp was around him, and the terrible mop flew from the old porter's grasp. Taggles roared and bellowed with rage, but his fury availed him little now. In the little scullery a terrific struggle went on, but North and the other seniors had a grasp of the old fellow now. They swayed backwards and forwards for some moments, and at last Taggles, still roaring, was reduced to helplessness.

"Chuck it, Taggy!" panted Kildare. "My hat! You giddy old warrior! We're sorry to have to do this, but—well, you've got to go! Our orders are to shift you out, and out you go! If there's anything here belonging to you, then it will be sent on to Wayland to your friends there."

"I—I"—Taggles gasped for breath, his face crimson with his exertions—"I—I ain't a-goin', I tells you!"

Kildare bit his lip. The job he had been ordered to do was a decidedly unpleasant one for him. Still, it was his job, and he had to do it, pleasant or unpleasant.

"Now, look here, Taggy, old man!" he said gently. "This sort of thing won't do you any good at all. You're only making matters worse—disgracing yourself and bringing trouble to the old school. I'm sorry; but you've got to

(Continued on next page.)

"BRAVO, WALLY!"

A nutshell history of England's Test Match hero, Walter Hammond, the most brilliant cricketer of our time!

WHEN the England team was just about to sail to Australia to resume the struggle for the "Ashes," I asked Patsy Hendren what he thought was the real difference between the present team and that which went to Australia in 1924. Patsy turned round and pointed to a player standing near by. "That fellow is the difference," he said. And "that fellow" to whom Patsy was pointing was Wally Hammond.

Now, when the Ashes are won, and remembering that little conversation, I think we ought to call him "Prophet" Hendren. It can never be said with truth that any one player ever won the Ashes.

You must have a team of eleven, all pulling their weight; every man doing a bit. But it can certainly be said that the performances of one man may turn the scale. And it was Wally Hammond who turned the scale in England's favour, and left the Australians bemoaning the loss of the Ashes once more.

MAKING SURE OF THE ASHES!

Take a glimpse of what this Gloucestershire player has done. In the second Test match at Melbourne, after England had made a bad start, Hammond went in, stayed in one whole day and a part of two other days, and scored 251—or two short of the whole total made by the Australian eleven in their first innings.

That was a wonderful feat—an innings so big that it stands second in all Test match cricket. But in the vital third Test at Melbourne, when England had to win to make sure of the Ashes, the part played by Hammond was even more significant. He it was who saved England. Out of the first innings score of 417, Hammond made exactly 200—or



WALTER HAMMOND, one of the men who won the "Ashes" for England.

practically half. Take Hammond's innings out, and there isn't a great deal left, while the value of such a knock is important in another direction; he made it easier for the other fellows to get runs; tired out the bowlers. Yes, Hammond is the man who has made all the difference to England—the man who "did."

CRICKET UNDER DIFFICULTIES!

Wally plays for Gloucestershire, as you know, but he is acclaimed now as a man of Kent. Well, in so far as he was actually born in Kent, the hop country is justified in claiming him, but Hammond's association with the county practically began and ended with his being born there.

Hammond has shown himself a fighter. That might have been expected of him. He was actually born in the barracks at Dover when his father was serving with the Army. That was twenty-five years ago last June. As a youngster he was a wanderer, going first to China and then to Malta when his father's regiment was moved about.

He has told me vivid stories of his first cricket—against a gun-shed wall at Malta, with a "home-made" bat, and a ball which wasn't perfect in shape by any means. It was also a pitch very different from that of Melbourne or Sydney, for there were holes and knobs here and there, and the ball did queer things. But I like to think that, against that gun-shed at Malta, our hero was taught the first principle of cricket—to watch the ball all the way to the bat.

FROM CABBAGES TO CRICKET!

Coming back home to be educated, Wally was sent to the Cirencester Grammar School, and there they had a master who just loved cricket. He didn't act the part of a coach, and here, indeed, is one of the remarkable things about Hammond—he never had a day's coaching in his life. But if the school-master didn't teach the lads cricket, he knew a player when he saw one, and it was on the master's recommendation that Wally was given a trial for Gloucester. Incidentally, he went from a school of farming, where he was learning to follow a career concerned with cabbages and things, to play cricket.

A WONDERFUL ALL-ROUNDER!

Taken seriously ill when he went with an England team to the West Indies, his life was despaired of at one time. But after a season out of cricket, he came back to score a thousand runs in the month of May.

There, in brief, is the career of the greatest cricket find of our time. But Hammond is more than a great batsman. He is perhaps the most wonderful fielder in the game to-day, and in addition, is a most useful bowler of the fast-medium type. England wants more Hammonds; Australia wants Hammonds. Being English, we can thank goodness that England found a Hammond while Australia was looking for one.

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clear out! If you aren't shifted by us, the Head's going to have the police here to do it. So—well, better for you to go."

"The—the 'Ead's goin' to get the p'lice!" panted Taggles.

"Yes, if we can't make you go!"

"The—the p'lice!" Taggles seemed suddenly dazed by that bit of information. "Then the 'Ead really means as I've got to go?"

"Of course he does!" said Kildare, staring.

"He—he's really goin' to get the p'lice to shift me if I won't go?" he stammered.

"Yes. I understand so! This sort of thing can't go on, Taggy! I'm sorry, but—well, you've asked for it, haven't you? I'd advise you to go quietly—for your own sake, and Mrs. Taggles'!"

Taggles seemed suddenly to crumple up. His shoulders hunched, and he blinked round him in deep dejection, all his defiance and fight gone now.

"It—it's 'ard, young gents!" he stammered brokenly. "Ard on a man as 'as done 'is dooty all these 'ere years at this 'ere school. But if I 'as to go, then I'll go afore I'll have the p'lice brought in, makin' a scandal and doin' the school no good! I ain't afraid of no p'lice myself, mind you; but I ain't a-goin' to cause no trouble what'll do the school 'arm. I'll go, Master Kildare, and I'm sorry now as I 'andled you like I did. You're a good young gent, you are!"

The old porter, released now, began to get ready in silence, the seniors, with rather shamefaced looks, watching him as he did so. He went upstairs, and came down again a few moments later, stuffing various small articles of his own into his pockets. He took his greatcoat from a hook in the hall, and then he put on an ancient soft hat that was hanging there.

He was soon ready.

"The rest of your things will be sent on to you, of course," said Kildare. "You needn't worry about them, Taggy? Ready?"

"Yes, I'm ready, Master Kildare."

Taggles left the house, and the seniors crowded after him, Kildare taking possession of the keys. A cheer greeted the old chap as the crowd spotted him.

"My hat! He's going!" called Baggy Trimble. "He, he—Ow!" Baggy Trimble's snigger ended in a wild howl as somebody gave him a terrific kick.

"Three cheers for Taggy!" yelled Tom Merry, a trifle huskily. "Let 'em rip, and blow everybody else. Hip, hip—"

The crowd gave them with a will—even many of the seniors joining in almost involuntarily. Old Taggy was going. He had asked for the sack, and got it. But he had put up a gallant fight before going. He deserved a cheer, anyway.

And they gave him one.

"Poor old Taggy!" gasped Tom Merry. "Good-bye, and good luck, old man!"

"Good-bye, Taggy!" came a yell from a score of throats.

Taggles, escorted by Kildare and Darrell, gave one last look at the lodge, and then at the old school, shadowy now in the deepening dusk and fog of the wintry night. The next moment, without a look at the staring crowd, he was at the gates. Kildare unlocked them, and the old porter passed out, the captain of St. Jim's shaking hands with him as he did so. Another moment, and his bent form, with shoulders hunched, had vanished into the misty gloom.

Taggles was gone!

CHAPTER 11.

All in Vain!

"PUT it on!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The chums of the Fourth "put it on," and scudded towards Rylcombe Station at top speed in the dusk of the winter's evening. As they ran, Blake couldn't help wondering if they were not risking a lot in going to meet Cousin Ethel in the circumstances. As she was staying with Mrs. Holmes, it was very likely—indeed probable—that the Head would send his car to the station for her—though how the car was to be got out of the Head's drive with the gates locked, even Blake could not suggest.

Moreover, they had only just enough time to catch the train for Wayland at Rylcombe, and get one back in time for call-over. It was a big risk. Moreover, Blake felt certain that if she wanted them to meet her, Cousin Ethel would have asked them in her brief note.

Only Arthur Augustus did not see any reason why she should—he took it for granted that she would expect someone to meet her.

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So Blake & Co. had given way and gone with Gussy, none of them sure whether they wouldn't have preferred to stay behind to see the result of the latest assault on Taggy's citadel.

But they had started now, and they meant to catch the train if it were possible. They were breathless and panting when they rushed on to the little village station at last.

The train was just in—they were in the nick of time!

The chums of Study No. 6 swarmed aboard even as the train was moving, and in a few minutes were in Wayland, racing across the platform to the London express, which was just moving in as they arrived.

"Just done it!" gasped Blake, with a chuckle. "If we'd let Gussy stop to straighten his necktie we should have missed it! Anyway, here we are!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"And there's Cousin Ethel!" said Herries suddenly. "I say, who's that—Mum-my hat!"

Herries gave a gasp—a gasp echoed the next second by the others as they recognised who Cousin Ethel's companion was.

It was Mrs. Holmes, the Head's wife.

"Well, I'm blowed!" grunted Blake, in deep disgust.

"Keep out of sight now for goodness' sake!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Dry up, you footling dummy!" growled Blake. "Why did we listen to you, and why the thump didn't we anticipate this? We knew Mrs. Holmes was coming back to-day, and we might have guessed Cousin Ethel was coming with her. That's why she didn't ask us to meet her, of course."

"Of course!" snorted Herries.

"Might have guessed it!" growled Digby.

"That footling dummy Gussy ought to have guessed it, anyway!"

"Yes, rather! Here, come back, Gussy, you ass!"

Blake grabbed hold of Arthur Augustus and dragged him, protesting indignantly, behind the shelter of a pile of trunks.

"Weally—Bai Jove, are you pottay, Blake?" snorted Gussy. "Why can't we meet them—"

"They won't go on to Rylcombe by the local!" said Digby witheringly. "The Head always sends his car to Wayland to meet anyone from the giddy London express—you know that! If the Head can't get his car out, I bet he'll telephone for a taxi to meet them here."

"Phew! That's it!"

"No good letting 'em see us, then!" said Herries. "It'll only make 'em feel rather uncomfortable, our coming all this way to meet Cousin Ethel. Let them pass, I vote; we'll see Ethel to-morrow."

It was certainly the best plan in the circumstances. Mrs. Holmes was a kind, gracious lady, and she would certainly feel rather disturbed to know she had deprived the four juniors of the pleasure of escorting Miss Cleveland to St. Jim's. Cousin Ethel herself would be disturbed also at their disappointment, for there certainly wasn't room for all of them in a car, or a taxi.

Moreover, gracious as was Mrs. Holmes, the juniors—excepting Arthur Augustus—were rather in awe of the dignified old lady. But Gussy wasn't.

"Wot!" he gasped wrathfully. "Welease me at once, you feahful asses! I am goin' to speak to them, of course!"

"But—"

"Wats!"

"Collar him—quick!"

Mrs. Holmes and Cousin Ethel were walking down the platform. Alongside them a porter was wheeling a trolley with their luggage. Without hesitation, Blake, Herries, and Digby collared the stubborn Arthur Augustus and dragged him down low behind the pile of trunks and boxes. They held him tight, and Blake just stifled his yell of anger by clapping a hand abruptly over his mouth.

Gussy struggled and kicked in vain. His chums held him fast until the two ladies, the trolley, and the porter had vanished out of the station exit. Then they released him.

"Gwoooogh! Ow! Oh, you feahful wuffians!" spluttered Arthur Augustus in great wrath and indignation. "I have a verry good mind to give all of you a feahful thwashin', you uttah wottahs!"

"Well, don't do it now, anyway," said Blake. "Let the giddy thrashings keep until to-morrow, old top. They'll improve with keeping, p'raps! Let's—Oh, my only aunt! We've missed it!"

"What! Missed what? Oh!"

"The blessed train!" hooted Blake. "We knew we'd only have a bare two minutes to get Cousin Ethel across to it in any case. Now—Oh, my hat!"

All of them had forgotten that fact. The local to Rylcombe left the junction three minutes at most after the London express came in. The excitement of keeping Gussy from "butting in" had driven that little fact entirely out of their minds.



As Kildare flung open the door of Knox's study a little billow of fumes was wafted out, and the crowd of seniors jumped back, with horrified gasps. Next moment Knox & Co. came blundering out, coughing, choking and gasping. "What—what—?" "Grooooooh!" gasped Knox. "Oh, help!" (See Chapter 9.)

But it came back now, and with one accord they all started off with a wild rush for the departure platform.

They found it empty, with a solitary porter sweeping it.

"Which it's bin gone more'n a minute!" he grunted.

"And there isn't another to Rylcombe for two dashed hours, is there?" groaned Blake.

"No, there ain't, young gent—two hourly arter six, this 'ere service is!"

"Oh, gweat Scott!"

"Done in the eye!"

"And all through Gussy!"

It wasn't really all through D'Arey, but his exasperated chums pretended it was—to the swell's seething indignation.

"We'll have to hoof it all the way!" almost wept Blake.

"This comes of backing up Gussy. We can't wait two thumping hours. We're booked for trouble whatever we do for missing call-over."

"Bai Jove! I am not walkin'," snorted Gussy. "I will take a taxi."

But Gussy was an optimist. As they reached the road outside the last taxi was just departing. A loafer standing by informed them cheerfully that there were no more to be had at that hour.

"Which two women—leastways a lady and a gal 'ave just gone off in the last!" he grinned.

"That's Mrs. Holmes and Ethel!" grunted Blake. "Well, sooner we start the better. We'll keep to the road until we get to the stile, and then we'll hoof it across the heath. It isn't such a long tramp really—"

"Oh, isn't it?" growled Herries. "It's nearly pitch dark now, and the thumping mist's getting thicker!"

"Rot! It's not too dark to see the path, and the mist will clear soon—you see if it doesn't."

Unfortunately Blake's optimistic forecast came unstuck, so to speak. The mist did not lift or clear. After ten

minutes' walking it was thicker than ever. After another five minutes it was a thick fog, damp and clammy, and the juniors could scarcely see a yard before them.

Suddenly a light glimmered through the fog, and Blake gave a startled gasp as he saw what it was.

It was a taxi, with two wheels buried deep in the ditch at the side of the road. A dismal-looking, shivering driver was standing by it, eyeing it wearily. He blinked at Blake through the fog.

"Oh, my hat!" panted Blake in great alarm. "It—it's the one—" He dared not finish for the moment. "Look here!" he gasped, grabbing the driver by the arm. "What's happened? Have you—"

"Which the bloomin' old bus skidded!" grunted the man.

"No, it were before this durned fog came on. Now I got to tramp back inter Wayland to get 'elp, blow it! As for—"

"But those ladies—your passengers?" snapped Blake.

"Oh, bai Jove! Yaas, wathah! What—"

"Oh, they've gone on—walkin' it!" grunted the man, jerking a thumb towards Rylcombe. "No, they weren't 'urt, o' course! The old lady said as 'ow they might as well walk on 'ome as walk back inter Wayland, or hang on 'ere for an hour. Well, it weren't my fault, and they won't get their bloomin' luggage over at St. Jim's until morning—no bloomin' fear!"

"Oh, thank goodness!" breathed Blake, while the others echoed his relief.

They had feared a bad accident—that Mrs. Holmes and Cousin Ethel had possibly been injured. But all was well, apparently. The two ladies were walking on, and there was nothing to worry about. The juniors left the man and tramped on into the fog which swept round them in drenching, blinding eddies. Unfortunately the grumpy driver had

omitted to tell them one thing—that Mrs. Holmes had announced her intention to her companion of taking the path across the heath. Had they known that, Blake & Co. would certainly have done the same—in alarm for the ladies' safety. But when they reached the stile they ignored it.

"No jolly fear!" said Blake emphatically. "Not in this fog, my pippins! We're sticking to the road!"

And they stuck to the road—which was just as well, perhaps.

CHAPTER 12.

Lost!

"**E**THEL—my dear girl—"

Mrs. Holmes' voice faltered a little and stopped. Cousin Ethel caught her breath sharply.

Around them the mist was thick—it whirled and eddied round them in a blinding cloud. Over the desolate heath all was still and silent. Not a sound reached their ears—not even the solitary note of a night-bird. The silence was deathly—eerie in its loneliness. The headmaster's wife and her young companion stared round them, striving to pierce the fog. Despite their warm clothing, they shivered in the icy, chilly air of the desolate, open heath.

Mrs. Holmes was blaming herself bitterly for having taken the path across the heath, well as she knew it. The walk itself was nothing to her—she was an open-air old

Here and there patches of snow still lay, though it had cleared from the roads days ago. The rest of the ground was sodden and treacherous, slippery in some parts and boggy in others.

Slipping and stumbling, they trudged on and on into the wall of fog that surrounded them on all sides.

"Does—does the heath extend far?" faltered Cousin Ethel at last.

"It—it goes for some miles beyond Wayland," was the hesitating reply. "But that need not worry us, dear; we are only on one little corner of it here. The path we started on cuts across it to Rylcombe, coming out into Rylcombe Lane quite close to the school."

"Yes, I've been across it often enough, of course!" said Cousin Ethel, her teeth chattering. "But—"

Mrs. Holmes knew only too well what she was about to say—the nameless dread that was worrying her. It was worrying Mrs. Holmes herself far more—for she knew the danger better than did Cousin Ethel. In this blinding, swirling fog they might stumble on for miles, or, more likely still, stumble on and on in a circle—until their strength gave out and they dropped from exhaustion.

Moreover, there was another danger—a danger the old lady dare not even mention to her companion. On the wild heath were unguarded quarry pits; stone and gravel pits—chasms that were deathtraps in darkness and fog to unwary travellers.

"THE MYSTERY OF SPALDING HALL!"



What is the mystery that surrounds Spalding Hall—the girls' school near St. Jim's? And in what startling fashion does Ernest Levison meet with the most amazing adventure of his life? In the answers to those questions you have the plot of next week's story of the Chums of St. Jim's—a story of thrills and mystery that will grip from start to finish.

Take a look at the cover alongside, chums! It will give you a foretaste of the treat in store for you in—

"THE MYSTERY OF SPALDING HALL!"

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lady, and was used to taking long walks over the Wayland Heath with her dogs. But when she and Cousin Ethel had left the stranded taxi, and, even on reaching the stile, the mist had not been bad—nothing to give alarm at all events.

But it had thickened abruptly, and with a startling suddenness. And as they were some distance from the stile when it did so—it seemed foolish to turn back. But now Mrs. Holmes was wondering if it would not have been wiser to have regained the safety of the road while it was possible.

She stopped suddenly, and Cousin Ethel stopped also. There was a fear in Mrs. Holmes' voice as she spoke—a fear she strove to hide from the girl at her side. But Cousin Ethel detected it at once, and caught her breath.

"Are we—are we lost?" she asked quietly.

"I—I fear I am all at sea in this fog, Ethel!" stammered the old lady. "It seems so different in the daytime. Can you see the path, dear—your eyes are better than mine?"

"I'm afraid not, aunt," said Ethel quietly. "I've been trying to make it out for several minutes now. We must have missed it somehow—lost it. It's so very difficult to see in this dreadful darkness and fog."

"I ought never to have brought you—how foolish of me to have brought you this way!" said Mrs. Holmes, a trifle shakily. "But I did not anticipate this—the mist seemed slight and nothing to worry about."

"Of course, dear—please do not blame yourself," said Cousin Ethel, trying to speak lightly. "It will clear soon, and then we shall know where we are. We must keep moving, though, mustn't we, or we shall catch a chill."

"Y—yes, dear!"

Mrs. Holmes' voice was none too firm and reassuring. They started on again, staring hard about them in the swirling, drenching fog, praying that it would rise and show them where they were.

For they were undoubtedly lost—Mrs. Holmes had known that fact for some little time now—and Cousin Ethel had guessed it. There was no sign of the path. They trudged on and on, tripping over tangled roots and stumbling into holes in the rough ground.

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How bitterly did Mrs. Holmes blame herself for taking the risk at night, made trebly dangerous by the blinding fog.

But it was too late for regrets now. The step had been taken—they were in the icy, drenching, blinding fog—lost!

It was truly a terrible position—it brought a chill to their hearts as icy as the swirling fog about them.

And then, quite suddenly, a fresh disaster overcame the hapless travellers.

Cousin Ethel suddenly, unexpectedly stumbled and fell, giving a faint, stifled cry as she did so—a cry of pain.

"Ethel, my dear!"

With a cry of alarm, Mrs. Holmes stopped, and stooped over Cousin Ethel, who was kneeling now on the sodden ground. The girl was gasping for breath; another half-stifled cry escaped her.

"It's my ankle—a wrench, that is all!" panted Ethel, striving to speak calmly. "My foot dropped into a hole—a rabbit hole, I suppose. It—it isn't serious. Please don't upset yourself!"

"Ethel, my poor girl—"

"Oh dear!" Cousin Ethel laughed almost hysterically. "I'm going to be an awful bother to you now. I've twisted my ankle; I—I don't think I can walk on it."

"Ethel, my poor girl!" gasped Mrs. Holmes. "Try to raise yourself—lean on me, dear. You mustn't rest on this soaking ground. Oh, this is all my stupid fault! I shall never—"

"Please don't say that! I—I'll be able to hop along presently!" gasped the plucky girl. "I know—leave me here, and you may go on and try to find a house or someone. At any moment you may see a light. Go; I shall be all right!"

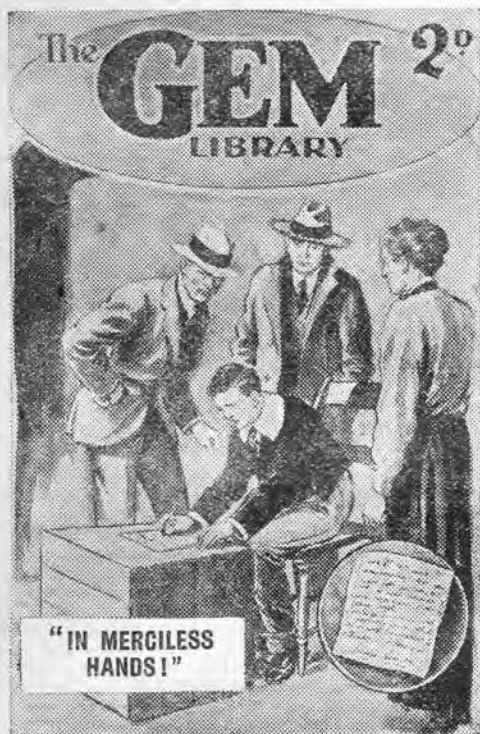
"I shall do nothing of the kind, you dear, silly girl!" said Mrs. Holmes indignantly. But her voice was firm and steady now. In that terrible moment, with the hopelessness of their position only too clear before her, the old lady steeled herself to control, forgetting her own fears in her concern and deep anxiety for her charge. She raised Cousin Ethel gently, and held her firmly. "Rest a little, Ethel dear! You will feel better in a minute, and there is nothing really to fear yet! We will try to hobble along presently. Meanwhile, we can call for aid—it is possible someone will hear us."

And Mrs. Holmes began to call for help—though in her heart she had no hope. Who would dare to cross the heath on a night like this? And where were they—possibly a mile or more from the path by this time? Yet she called firmly, not allowing her voice to betray to her companion the nameless fears that filled her mind.

The voice echoed eerily through the fog, which seemed like a blanket wall about them. In the deathly silence it sounded unreal and weird in the extreme. Again and again the old lady called, and Cousin Ethel added her voice pluckily.

Then, quite suddenly, a new sound came—a sound like the sharp rattle of a displaced stone. The next moment they heard something else—something that sent a thrill of joy through them.

It was undoubtedly an answering voice—a deep, husky cry.



"Allo! 'Old 'ard there, I'm comin'!" And the next moment a lumbering form loomed above them in the gloom. It was that of an old man; and as Mrs. Holmes glimpsed it she gave a cry of joy.

It was Ephraim Taggles on his way to Wayland. Taggles was a very thrifty old fellow, who never rode when he could walk. In Taggy's view, he could be half-way to Wayland by the time he reached Rylcombe Station, and he often enough walked across the heath when off duty. Moreover, he knew every inch of the wide expanse of heath, and it was his boast that he could find his way across it blindfolded.

He had started across it to-night before the fog had thickened. But the coming of the fog had made no difference to Taggles. He had lumbered on his way regardless of fog, brooding bitterly over his dismissal from the place where he had spent nearly all his life.

It was a dismal walk indeed for the old fellow. He scarcely noticed the fog or the cold. The fact that he was sacked—had left St. Jim's for ever—filled the whole of the old fellow's mental horizon just then.

Like a man in a dream, he had plunged on across the fog-enshrouded heath, finding his way with an instinct as strange as it was certain. He was still plodding along the path when that faint cry for help had arrested his attention and aroused him from his bitter reflections.

He made for it at once, and his own troubles fled on the instant as he sighted the vague forms in the mist. But as he recognised who they were he gave a deep, husky cry.

"Mrs. 'Olmes! My heye! Good 'eavens! What you doin' 'ere, ma'am? 'Ere, I'll see to the poor gal! Lean on me, Miss Cleveland!"

"Oh, thank Heaven!" gasped Mrs. Holmes, her voice trembling with thankfulness. "Be careful, Taggles! She has twisted her ankle. Be careful!"

"My heye!" grunted Taggles. "Wot I says is this 'ere—you leave this 'ere young lady to me, ma'am! I'll soon 'ave her outer this."

Taggles was astounded—as well he might be! But he did not stop to ask questions, or to wonder. Without another word he stooped and raised Cousin Ethel in his strong arms, and staggered on, calling on Mrs. Holmes to follow.

"I can manage the gal all right, ma'am!" he gasped. "You leave this 'ere to me. Lost, was you? Why, you ain't more'n fifty yards from that there path. Poor gal! I'll soon 'ave her in good 'ands, though. You leave this 'ere to old Taggles, ma'am!"

He staggered on, though he obviously found Miss Cleveland no light weight. Again and again Cousin Ethel begged him to lower her to give himself a rest. But the old man was stubborn as ever—dogged and indomitable. Cousin Ethel vowed she felt better now, that the pain was lessened, and that she believed she could even hop along. But Taggles would have none of it.

Gasping and wheezing hoarsely now, he lumbered and staggered on. Mrs. Holmes could see no path, though the ground certainly seemed smoother, less boggy and treacherous, also. Stumbling drunkenly at times, until Cousin Ethel believed he must fall, the gallant old fellow stuck to his trail, his breath coming in great gasps. But he did not fail. On, on he plunged, until Mrs. Holmes and Cousin Ethel began to feel it was all a terrible dream—that it could not be real.

Would the path never end? Would they never get clear of that terrible, fog-shrouded heath?

CHAPTER 13.

Taggles Wins Through!

"ALL your silly fault, Gussy—no good saying it isn't!" "Wats! I uttably wefuse to speak to you fellows again!" snorted Arthur Augustus indignantly.

"But it is your fault—if you hadn't insisted we shouldn't have come!"

"That's it!" said Herries. "It's all Gussy's fault, of course. I vote we give the fathead a jolly sound bumping when we get him in."

"I vote we call a halt and do it now!" said Digby. "There's another beastly half-mile to go, and I'm just about fagged out! And this beastly fog—Groooogh! Let's duck Gussy in the ditch, chaps!"

"Good wheeze! Let's!"

"Oh, wats!" sniffed Gussy. "I know quite well that you are weally only twyin' to pull my leg."

"Go hon!"

"Gussy's getting quite bright!" chuckled Blake. "It's taken him more than an hour to discover that."

"Oh, wats!"

"Wonder how poor old Taggy's getting on?" said Digby. "Let's hope they haven't bowled him out this time. I didn't quite like the gleam in Kildare's giddy optics; he—Hullo, look out! Here's a giddy car!"

The juniors moved hurriedly to the side of Rylcombe Lane as a big, softly-gliding car loomed up through the mist. The next moment the blazing light showed them up, and as it did so there sounded an exclamation and the car pulled up with a sound of rapidly-applied brakes.

"Boys!"

"Oh, my hat! Railton!"

It was. The startled juniors hurried to the car, and the Housemaster eyed them sternly.

"You have missed call-over!" he snapped. "Where have you been? I was getting concerned about you."

"We—we've been to Wayland, sir!" stammered Blake.

He explained the sad facts of their vain trip. Mr. Railton gave a start as he mentioned Mrs. Holmes and Cousin Ethel.

"What?" he said in some alarm. "You say they left the station and the taxi broke down—"

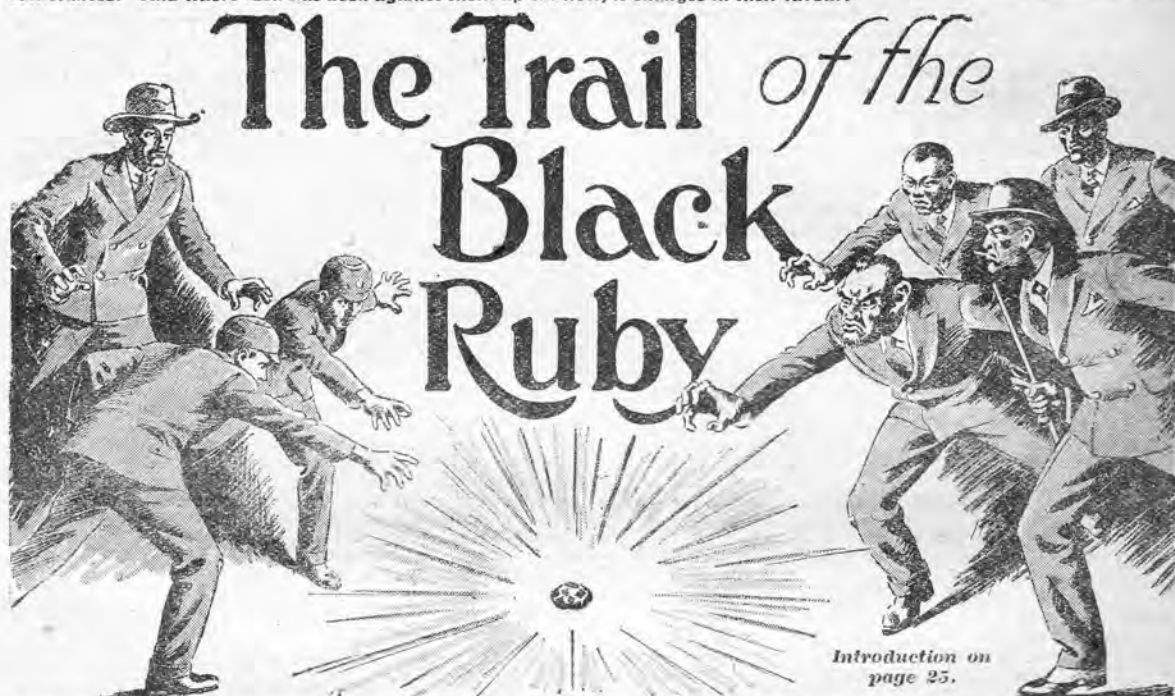
"It skidded into the ditch, sir. But they're both all right, sir!" Blake hastened to explain. "They should be in the Head's house long ago."

"Bless my soul!" Mr. Railton's face showed great alarm in the fog. "But they are not at St. Jim's," he said sharply. "They have not arrived yet, and Dr. Holmes has sent me now in the car. We thought that possibly they had missed the train, but I decided to run over to make quite sure—especially as there is a later train yet. This is very alarming indeed. I— Jump in quickly," he added. "You had better come with me, and we will make inquiries in the village. Possibly they have called there."

(Concluded on page 28.)

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Speeding across the Continent on the trail of the Black Ruby, our adventurous trio encounter their enemies in amazing circumstances. And where luck has been against them up till now, it changes in their favour.



Introduction on
page 25.

A STIRRING AND DRAMATIC NEW SERIAL STORY OF ADVENTURE, FEATURING BOB AND SYD, TWO PLUCKY SCHOOLBOYS and their AMAZING EXPERIENCE IN A DASH ACROSS THE WORLD, for a FORTUNE!

By PERCY A. CLARKE.

Checkmate!

AS motionless as a statue Syd squatted on his haunches beside the unconscious form of Karl Sweetman. He still gripped the Black Ruby in his hand, and it seemed to burn into his flesh. But his blood ran cold. He was conscious of a prickly sensation up his spine. Beneath his hat his hair was bristling.

He was motionless, numb, awed, as a rabbit is awed when gazing at the venomous eyes of the cobra, for Mahon, Baker, and Ah Wong were glaring, staring at him. There was not a shadow of doubt what they meant to do. Ah Wong was reaching for his knife. Bully Mahon was reaching for his gun! Twisty Baker's wire-like hands were stretched out towards him, the fingers curled significantly!

It seemed to Syd that he faced them for hours, but in reality he faced the crooks for just a split second. And he realised he would have to live up to his reputation for quick thinking and quicker acting if he could hope to get clear with the Ruby. He took rapid stock of his position. He was on the top of the embankment. Before him lay the unconscious Karl Sweetman. Ah Wong, Twisty Baker, and Bully Mahon glared at him.

Behind them was the debris of the wrecked train and the flares of the breakdown gang.

And behind Syd was the slope of the embankment, a sheer, steep drop of twenty to thirty feet. At the bottom was a thicket, and beyond that a dense copse. Maybe the darkness down there would help. It was his only chance.

He stirred as if to leap forward. Twisty Baker half started to his feet, his strangling hands clawing out. But Syd grinned. He let himself go. He flung himself backwards, recklessly. Head over heels he fell down the embankment, and the crooks yelped with baffled rage.

The world was going round and round, for Syd. It was dark, and yet at intervals he saw brilliant lights. His head crashed on a stone. A root, or something, hit him in the back. He bumped and scratched through the long grass and tangled briars of the embankment, as he went over and over, like a catherine-wheel. His clothes ripped like paper. His flesh was torn and bleeding. But he was making his getaway!

He crashed at the bottom into a bush. The swinging branches swept across his face like a knout. But he was up on his feet in an instant and plunging away—away from the railway—away into the maze of the copse, in and out between the moss-grown tree-trunks, bursting through the

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hawthorns and blackthorns, and, it seemed, every other thorn it was possible to find. He was a mass of smarts and lacerated flesh.

At last Syd paused, panting, leaning against the gnarled trunk of a big elm. He could hear the pandemonium up on the embankment, where the breakdown gang were hard at work. But more especially he could hear the three crooks close on his trail, crashing through the undergrowth after him. The boy was bruised, bleeding, sore, exhausted, the breath well-nigh knocked from his body. But he had to get away! He still gripped the Black Ruby!

Syd turned, grabbed low branches of the elm, and swung himself up amongst the dense foliage. Higher and higher he climbed, until he came to a stout branch overhanging a tiny clearing. There he stretched himself full length and rested.

Far away in the east the first grey light of dawn was tinting the sky. Below Syd heard the crooks, and, peering down through the mass of leaves, he saw them in the clearing—Ah Wong, Bully Mahon, and Twisty Baker.

The wily Chinaman was evidently in command. He ordered Mahon off to the left. He sent Twisty Baker to the right, and he plunged straight forward himself into the heart of the copse. As he disappeared into the thicket Syd saw the gleam of cold steel in his hand.

This was Syd's chance. He slithered down to the ground from his perch, and was away, back towards the railway, running madly, frantically. He heard a shrill whistle and a shout. Ah Wong had seen him and was bringing the crooks back after him!

Syd came to the foot of the embankment. He went up the slope on all fours, like a squirrel. He saw nothing of Karl Sweetman, nor had time to search for him, and hardly wanted to do so. He plunged recklessly into the debris of the wrecked train, crossing the line and mingling with the dense crowd of confused workers, until, by the flickering light of a flare, he came face to face with Barrett and Bob.

Steve grabbed his sleeve.

"Been looking for you!" he hissed. "Where you been? I saw—"

"Never mind!" rasped Syd. "Quick! I've got it—the Ruby! To the car! Quick! They're after me! We've got to get away and—"

The trio were not slow to size up the situation. They were running to the road, helter-skelter, the next moment. Bob was first at the car, and he took the wheel. The electric

starter whirled as the others jumped into the tonneau. The clutch was slipped in, and with a furious honk-honking, to clear the road, swarming as it was with stranded travellers, they sped off, heading south.

But behind them an angry cry went up:

"A bas! Looters! Apaches!"

A revolver cracked spitefully. The bullet smashed through the windscreen. A splinter of glass gashed Bob's cheek, but he held on his way, crouching over the wheel.

The angry cries, the confused medley of noise, escaping steam, and general racket at the train wreck was lost far in the rear. It was peace—nothing but the low, steady, rhythmical hum of the engine as Bob drove southwards.

For ten miles or more they sped on. Then Steve Barrett leant over and spoke to Bob.

"Pull up, sonny," he said. "Guess you two boys had better see to your scratches. I'll take the wheel."

Nothing loth, Bob obeyed, clambering over into the tonneau, while Steve went to the wheel, started the car again, and stamped on the accelerator.

The sun was rising now above the ridge of poplars in the east, and by its light the pals tended their many wounds. Syd had the most, but seeing that the Black Ruby reposed in his pocket, he wasn't worrying a lot. As for Bob, what worried him most was the aching void under his waistcoat.

"Gosh!" he exclaimed. "I could eat a donkey!"

"Start on yourself," grinned Syd. "But—Look out!"

He hauled a little parcel from his jacket pocket and tossed it on to Bob's lap. Bob tore the paper and gaped at the neat pile of sandwiches thus exposed.

"Corn in Egypt!" he exclaimed. "Where did you get these from?"

"Hotel Generale, Paris," replied Syd. "I happened to remember that one eats at times, and that a motor drive to Marseilles is not over in five minutes. I got these at the buffet. If I trusted to some people I'd be starving now, and—"

"And pack up the trumpet-blowing!" grinned Bob. "If I wasn't so hungry I'd punch your fat head for you. As it is—"

He demolished nearly half a sandwich at one great bite, and his jaws worked contentedly. Steve spoke over his shoulder.

"What are you boys up to there?" he wanted to know.

"Chewing sandwiches," said Bob in a muffled voice.

"By George!" cried Steve. "There's a lot of blank space to fill up inside me, too. Don't forget I've got a look-in on the grub stakes. Leave some for me."

"Drive on, Ben Hur!" called Syd. "Your grub's booked for you, all serene!"

"Good enough!" replied Steve.

He turned the car round a sharp corner. In the brilliant light of the rising sun he saw a village nestled on the hillside. He sounded his horn warningly as he approached the first cabaret and swung the car round the bend in the village street.

"Dingoes!" he exclaimed suddenly.

The two boys looked up sharply and frowned. A stout rope was drawn across the road. Gendarmes were grouped on the footpath, their drawn swords gleaming in their hands, and one stood ready with a carbine. In the centre of the road a magnificently-dressed individual was waving his podgy arms frantically and screaming shrilly.

"Arretez! Stop!"

It was the "sergent de ville," aided by all the local police force, calling on them to stop.

"Jumping wallabies!" rasped Steve Barrett. "That crowd of Froggies can't stop this child! I'm going to charge 'em! Hold tight!"

But Steve had his foot on the accelerator, and the car was speeding forward.

"Arretez!" screamed the sergent de ville. "Stop, or I fire!"

As a matter of fact, he had no gun; but the gendarme by the edge of the cobbles was already raising his carbine. The stout rope looked suggestive. Syd scowled, then leant over and bawled in Steve's ear.

"Stop her!" he shouted. "You'll have to stop!"

"And lose the sparkler!" hissed Steve. "Likely thing! By George, we'll see whether a pack of Froggies and a bit of string can stop Steve Barrett!"

"You'll have to stop! Pull up and let 'em search us!" cried Syd. "Leave it to me. You'll only make a mess of things if you go on! Stop her, and leave it to me!"

The gendarme had the carbine to his shoulder. He bent his head and squinted along the barrel. Steve scowled and slammed on the foot brake. The car came to a standstill with a jerk that nearly sent the pals over the smashed windscreen. Immediately the gendarmes were crowding round, and the magnificent sergent de ville was striding forward.

"Arretez!" he cried pompously.

"Well, I am 'arretting,' aren't I?" growled Steve. "What's biting you? Are you doing this for the pictures?"

"A bas les apaches!" someone shouted.

"Nous avons, vous avez, ils ont, and the same to you!" said Bob, who had always been weak on French. "Wait till they're all round us and interested, then charge through the lot when they're not looking."

"Don't rot!" hissed Syd. "Leave this to me. If you can't be more helpful than that, close your gate! I'm the interpreter."

Languages was Syd's strong suit, and it stood him in good stead now.

"Mais pardon, m'sieur," he said fluently. "But we are not robbers. Mais non. We are honest travellers on our way to the Riviera, n'est ce pas?"

"Nom d'un nom!" cried the sergent de ville, waving his fat arms in the air. "But listen! You come from the wreck of the train."

"That is true," Syd admitted, munching a huge sandwich as he spoke. "As you know, m'sieur, the road from Paris runs beside the railway embankment at that point. We saw the wreck, we stayed to help in the rescue of the poor unfortunates; then we continued on our way. We heard that looters were at work, but we are not the robbers, m'sieur."

"Mais non. It cannot be. The message on the telephone spoke of the car with the smashed windscreen. They fired at you, is it not?"

Syd grinned and shook his head.

"The looters were escaping ahead of us," he explained. "They fired at the crow and hit the pigeon—I mean they fired at the apaches, but the bullet struck our car, as you see. That is all. We are in a hurry, m'sieur, having lost time at the wreck."

"But listen! Nom d'un nom! One said that a big jewel had been stolen—a rare and valuable gem."

"Well, we haven't got it!" said Syd, showing signs of impatience. "You can search us and the car if you like. That will settle things."

He stepped from the car, taking a bite at his sandwich as he did so, and offered himself to be searched. For a moment the sergent de ville chatted with the gendarmes. Steve was scowling; Bob was stroking his chin in anxious thought.

"What's happening?" he asked. "I couldn't follow all you said."

"If you want to know," grinned Syd, "we are freely offering ourselves and the car for a thorough search. There have been looters at the train wreck, who have got away with a rare and valuable gem."

"Jumping wallabies!" cried Steve. "And they're going to search us?"

"Certainly!" said Syd. "If they don't find anything they'll have to let us go."

"But, by George—" Steve began defiantly.

"Do as I say. It's the best way," said Syd.

Steve and Bob stared at their chum. And then Syd's eyelid fluttered significantly. They couldn't understand, but they realised that Syd had some move up his sleeve.

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On the Quay!

IT seemed like checkmate. The pals saw through the move in a flash.

Back at the scene of the train wreck the crooks had spread the rumour that there had been looters present, and someone had phoned the local police to stop the car.

Syd had visions of arrest, of search, of the Black Ruby being taken from them, and maybe Karl Sweetman turning up to claim the jewel as stolen from him as he lay unconscious. Which ever way he looked at it, Syd reckoned the crooks—wily and astute as they were—stood to gain.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED.

Trailed from the backblocks of Australia across two continents by a gang of cunning crooks under the leadership of Karl Sweetman, Steve Barrett, in possession of the most wonderful of precious stones—A BLACK RUBY—eventually reaches the residence of Sir Charles Crompton, a wealthy business man. With the aid of the Black Ruby Steve has hopes of making his fortune, for the ruby is the key to a claim of land in Queensland rich in precious stones. The crooks, however, succeed in gaining possession of the Black Ruby and make good their escape. Steve enlists the services of Sir Charles' nephew, Bob Crompton, and his school chum, Syd Dyson—two plucky athletic fellows. The thieves are tracked to their lair at the Hotel Generale, in Paris, where Bob, in a daring attempt to grab the ruby, is grabbed himself and made prisoner by the crooks, who make all haste to catch the Marseilles express. Bob is eventually rescued, and too late now to catch the express, the three chums board a powerful motor-car and set off in a wild dash south on the trail of the Black Ruby. The Marseilles express is wrecked, and Syd discovers the unconscious form of Sweetman lying on the permanent way. A search of the rascal's pockets reveals the treasured ruby. Syd is clutching it tightly when a gang of suppressed rage from behind prompts him to wheel round sharply to discover three more members of the gang glaring at him and poised ready to spring. Syd realises only too well that he is cornered, outnumbered, alone—with the gang against him!

(Now read on.)

The sergent de ville was evidently satisfied. "Very well, m'sieur," he said politely. "We search the car and you three as well."

Syd munched his sandwich and nodded. He raised his arms, the sandwich—or what was left of it—raised in the air in one hand, and allowed a gendarme to go through his pockets and pat his body.

Steve was searched; Bob was searched. Those gendarmes knew the art of searching; they missed nothing.

And when they had finished with the three pals the gendarmes searched the car. They swarmed all over the vehicle; they lifted the seats, they emptied the contents of the toolbox, they opened the bonnet and pried about amongst the cylinders. One of them thrust a stick in the petrol-tank. They poked and patted the upholstery. But they found nothing.

The sergent de ville was annoyed and apologetic. "A thousand pardons, messieurs!" he said. "We are sorry to have troubled you. But it had to be done. One has one's duty to do, is it not?"

The gendarmes, scowling suspiciously, moved off. One of them unfasted one end of the rope cordon, so that the rope lay on the ground. The pals clambered back into the car. Bob was at the wheel. The electric starter whirled.

But the sergent de ville was scratching his head. "Of course," he said hesitatingly, "we found nothing; but the car answers the descriptions, and the occupants also. Perhaps, messieurs, you had better delay one, two minutes and—"

"I'll see you somewhere first!" snapped Syd. "You've searched, and now you can whistle! Step on it, Bob! He wants to delay us."

Bob was nothing if not quick on the up-take. The car leapt forward. The gendarmes raced to the rope cordon. But they were a split second too late. Their quarry was gone, speeding southward at top speed; and the sergent de ville, speechless, brandished his fat fist in the air.

The pals sat in the speeding car, worried, anxious. But Steve was worried the most. He rounded on Syd.

"But you said you had the Black Ruby!" he cried. Syd grinned. He still clutched the remains of that sandwich in his hand.

"I did have it," he said. "As a matter of fact, I still have it. Look!"

He opened his hand. Steve stared at the piece of sandwich. It was bulky; there was something between the bread besides meat!

"By gravy!" gasped Steve, in wonderment.

Syd raised the top piece of bread and showed him the ruby.

"I had to keep that part of the sandwich in my hand," he explained, his eyes twinkling. "And I was scared stiff in case they stopped me eating. If I had put that sandwich down anywhere they would have seen the bulge. They were pretty smart."

"Dingoes! So are you!" burst out Steve impulsively. "Your uncle, Charles Crompton, knew what he was doing when he sent you two boys with me. Mascots, you are—the pair of you! I should never have got away with that sparkler without you!"

"Well, we've got away with it!" grinned Syd. "We can take it easy now—at least, once we get clear of France."

"Like Lucifer, you won't!" snapped Steve. "Take it easy! With the Black Ruby in your pocket and Karl Sweetman after it! Jumping wallabies, we're not through yet by a long chalk! Even if we get out of Marseilles our troubles won't end! This game won't be finished, boys, till we're down under—in Australia! You get me?"

"We know that," agreed Syd. "But Sweetman's gang is long way behind us, and if we're lucky enough to get aboard a ship and get clear of Marseilles quickly, they'll never catch up with us again, and we can take it easy."

"Perhaps!" drawled Steve. "And then again, perhaps not!"

Syd settled back against the upholstery.

"I'm not worrying, anyway—not just now," he said. Steve shook his head.

"Sonny," he said, "you don't know them crooks like I do, or you wouldn't talk that way!"

He lapsed into moody thought, and remained thus, until, later in the day, they drove into Marseilles.

Their luck was well in. No sooner had the pals got rid of the car at a garage than Steve Barrett came rushing with the news that a fast boat was leaving within the hour for Alexandria, which was lucky, as that sergent de ville might have instituted a hunt for them.

They booked their passage, and got aboard the Rossignol without delay. It was a French packet-boat, fast and comfortable, and the pals reckoned they were "sitting

pretty." Not so Steve Barrett; he roamed the decks, his hands thrust in his pockets, scowling, and studying every member of the crew and every passenger he met.

But, to his satisfaction, nobody caused him a moment's anxiety. He returned to Bob and Syd.

"As far as I can tell, it's all clear," he announced. "Of course it is!" said Bob. "Why worry?"

The liner's siren blared. The ropes were cast off, and the handsome craft moved slowly from the quays.

"I'm not exactly worrying," said Steve. "But if you knew them crooks like I do you'd never— By George!" he finished up, with a start.

The two boys followed the direction of his gaze. The quays were strewn with hogsheads, barrels, packing-cases, enormous crates. And a man stood behind a crate. Only his head was visible, but there was no mistaking that fact. It was the ape-man—the ugly, gorilla-like face of Bully Mahon!

He was watching the liner. He remained where he was as the liner slowly moved out of the docks. He grew smaller and smaller as the pals watched, and then, in the distance, they saw him move out from behind the crate and disappear among the warehouses.

Syd and Bob had nothing to say. But Steve spoke—grimly, hoarsely.

"I told you so!" he said. "They're close on our trail again!"

The Apple!

SLOWLY the S.S. Rossignol moved out into the channel, and hove-to off Monte Cristo Island. Bob and Syd were on the boat-deck, staring with unconcealed curiosity at that rocky island, surmounted by the impregnable fortress which figures so prominently in Dumas' immortal story.

"And if anybody had told me last term," said Bob, "that I should ever see that place, I'd have called him—well, I shouldn't have believed it! Yet, here we are!"

"I believe so," said Syd.

The tug from the docks came alongside, and several people came aboard, and, although the pals never saw them, Karl Sweetman and his gang were amongst them! The mails were taken in, and then the liner moved off. It was the last the pals saw of Marseilles.

As the liner gathered speed and headed for the Mediterranean, the two boys were still staring at that fortress on the rock-bound island, and a husky voice sounded behind:

"Ach, you look at dat place—vos? Hein?"

They turned and surveyed the stranger. He was a big, fat, round-shouldered person. His hair was fair, almost golden. His eyes were of the palest blue, and twinkled through the thickest spectacles ever seen. A felt hat, rather too small, was perched on his head. His suit fitted him like a glove, and was in a loud, check pattern.

"German!" guessed Syd hurriedly.

"Wrong," whispered Bob. "A Swede! Bet you!"

Then Syd grinned.

"Of course we were looking at that place. How did you guess it?"

The newcomer shrugged his shoulders hopelessly.

"Lots of places like dot dere vos," he said. "Ach, dey dere monuments vos to der cruelty of man. I der world go round. I talk and preach, ain't it? Vy der man so cruel bane—hein? You young vos, and you listen and you learn. Man so cruel vas. Vy? I you tell, meine young friend. Because man der meat eats! Dot vos make him so like der wild beast. Poot you vos read meine leetle book."

He thrust a pamphlet into Syd's hand, and indicated the title with a fat finger. Syd read, and his eyes bulged:

"Meat for Misery! If you want to be happy stick to fruit and vegetables! Pears for Peace! Currants for Character! Apples for Ability! Cherries for Charm! Bananas for Beauty! Meat-eaters are savages! Meat is the menace of the world! Join the Anti-Meat Association!"

"Hurrah!" cried Bob, reading over Syd's shoulder. "Think of that now! Parsnips for the plump! Carrots for carbuncles! And potatoes for mash!"

"Poot you read," interposed the stranger.

"President, Professor Johan Svenskhem, of Stockholm," read Syd.

"Dot vos me, ain't it?" said the Swede, bowing low. "I vos talk all round der world, and I teach t'em—hein? You vos young, and you learn. I bane gif you dot baber."

He raised his funny little hat and shuffled off. Syd stared at Bob, and Bob stared at Syd.

"Well, I'm hanged!" exclaimed Syd.



"Step on it, Bob!" snapped Syd. "He wants to delay us." Bob leaned over the wheel, and the next moment the car jerked forward and raced down the road. The gendarmes ran to pull up the rope cordon, but—too late! The chums were gone! (See page 26.)

"Serves you right!" grinned Bob. "What else could you expect after steak and onions?"

"Idiot!" hissed Syd. "But that reminds me. I'm peckish. Come and find Steve!"

They went. On the way they passed Professor Johan. He was leaning on the rail, chewing at one of the largest bananas the chums had ever seen. His pockets bulged as if he carried an orchard about with him. He saw them, and grinned.

"You bane read, and you bane learn," he said. "Meat, der curse of der world ist. Ja!"

"Down with sausages!" cried Bob, as they passed him. They found Steve Barrett on the boat deck.

"What have you been up to?" asked Syd.

"Something useful," said Steve. "Been searching the boat for Sweetman's crowd, but haven't set eyes on them. I hope we left them behind, but even now I wouldn't be too sure. Let's eat!"

"Not meat!" said a husky voice behind them. "Dot vatal vos! Spinach for strength, meine freundt."

"By George!" cried Steve.

"Hush!" put in Bob, grinning. "Don't say things like that! This is the learned vegetarian, Professor Johan Sneezer, or something."

"Svenskhem, of Stockholm," said the Swede, bowing. "I teach der world vos. Vegetables for der virtues. Hein?"

"Get out of it!" sneered Steve impatiently. "You can't stuff me with that rot. All my life I've enjoyed my steak and chops, and do I look any the worse for it? Hang it, think I'm a pesky rabbit, to chew cabbages all day long? Here, come on, boys, and sink your molars in a sirloin and let that maniac nibble his carrot by himself!"

Syd and Bob laughed, and turned away towards the dining-saloon. But Johan Svenskhem was angry. His fat face flushed.

"Head of der pig!" he cried shrilly. "Dot you vos! Head of der pig! I der jungen converts bake, and you t'em take der blood and der meat to eat! Donnervetter! Der head of der pig, dot you vos!"

Steve's eyes narrowed. Always touchy, and a trifle thin-skinned, nobody called him names and got away with it! He sprang forward, his fist flashed out, and thudded on the Swede's big nose.

Plomp!

"You woody turnip!" he roared. "Sauce me, would you, you bloated onion-eater! Jumping wallabies, I'll chop you up fine for salad, I will! Take that! And here's another!"

Smack! Flop!

The big Swede went down with a crash before that fierce onslaught. Steve's temper, worn to a frazzle by his long contest with the Sweetman gang, now had him in its grip, and he was going for the helpless vegetarian as if he were a footpad.

Svenskhem rolled into the scuppers and covered his huge face with his podgy hands. He screamed with fear.

"Py Thor, der red meat mad him bakes! Blitzen! Help! He murder me dead vos! Help!"

Syd ran to the rescue. He grabbed Steve's arm and hauled him off.

"You idiot!" he hissed. "When will you learn to keep your temper?"

Steve looked sheepish as he drew back.

"I do keep it," he said. "I've always got it, anyway. That's my trouble. But it was his fault. He called me names. Think I'm going to let him insult me?"

Professor Johan Svenskhem was scrambling to his feet and trembling like a jelly all over his huge, podgy body.

"I to der kapitan go! I der shoostice get vos!" he declared half nervously, half defiantly.

Syd saw trouble very close. He thrust Steve over to Bob, who gripped his arm to keep him in check. Then Syd spoke confidentially to the Swede.

"Don't make a scene, there's a good chap!" he pleaded. "You see, he's had a nervous breakdown. Not quite right in the upper storey yet. You know—wet—batchy—bats in the belfry, and all that."

He tapped his forehead significantly.

"So?" queried Svenskhem.

"Yes. We're sort of looking after him," said Syd.

"You der keepers vos?" suggested Svenskhem.

"That's it!" agreed Syd.

"Ach, und you me saved from der raving lunatic, meine prave freundt. I you dis abble gif. You eat him. I not him gif to anyone else. Nein. Poot you my life safed. I gif him—to you."

He held in his hand an enormous apple, gleaming red. It was easily as big as Syd's two fists put together. Syd accepted the fruit graciously.

"Thanks, awfully!" he said. "Come on, Bob. Better get our patient down below."

"Dingoes!" hissed Steve, his temper bubbling up again. Svenskhem shot one scared look at him and hastened off.

(So the Black Ruby is in safe hands again at last! Yes—but for how long? There's a big surprise awaiting someone! Make sure you read all about it in next week's gripping instalment, chums!)

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"TAGGLES' BARRING-OUT!"

(Continued from page 23.)

Blake & Co. jumped aboard the car instantly, and it slid on again through the fog. But not for long. Scarcely had it travelled a hundred yards, when once again Mr. Railton, with an exclamation of amazement, pulled the car up with a jerk.

And no wonder! For in full view of the headlights a figure appeared from a stile by the side of the road—a staggering figure carrying another person—obviously a girl. Behind was an old lady, who also appeared to be exhausted and spent.

"Good heavens!" gasped Mr. Railton.

He was out of the car in a flash, and the juniors tumbled pell-mell after him. In a moment the startled Housemaster had taken the shivering girl from the dogged clasp of the old porter.

"Gwreat Scott!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "It's Cousin Ethel! And—and—"

"Oh, thank Heaven!" Mrs. Holmes was up to them now. "It is Mr. Railton! Oh, how splendid! Thank Heaven indeed!"

It was not a time for formalities. Mr. Railton lifted Cousin Ethel into the car and tucked the rugs round her. Then he helped Mrs. Holmes in and made her comfortable. He had just done so when he sighted a bent figure just disappearing drunkenly into the fog.

"Taggles—Taggles, come back!" he called. "Boys, go after Taggles at once and bring him back. He must not go; he must not be allowed to after this! Taggles—"

Taggles had vanished, but he was not allowed to go far. In a flash, Blake and the other juniors were rushing after him. They reached him, and as they did so, he lurched and fell in the road.

Mr. Railton must have heard, for he came running along from the car. When he saw what had happened he ran back at once, and the next moment the car came humming backwards to the spot.

The Housemaster leaped out from the driving seat.

"Help me, boys!" he snapped. "The poor fellow is exhausted—he is unconscious, I think! Quick!"

Carefully the old man was lifted into the car. It was not an easy task, but Mr. Railton and the juniors managed it at last, and Taggles was made comfortable by the master's side in the driving seat.

"You boys hurry back to school now! I will speak to you in the morning!"

"Yes, sir."

There was no chance of farewells with Mrs. Holmes and Cousin Ethel, for the next moment the car had leaped ahead, and in a matter of seconds was swallowed up in the swirling fog.

"Well, my hat!" gasped Blake.

It was all he could say as they continued their weary trudge towards the school. The others could not even say that much for some minutes. But they all felt curiously

relieved and light-hearted despite the tragic and unlooked-for happening. As Arthur Augustus—quite forgetting that he was not on speaking terms with his study-mates—remarked as they passed through the gates at last:

"It is vewy remarkable indeed, deah boys! And it is wathah distwessin'. But I weally do feel that things are goin' to turn out quite all wight, aftah all! Taggy has appawently played up, and I am quite sure that the Head will play up, too. Yaas, wathah!"

And somehow his chums felt so also!

They proved to be right, as it turned out. Taggles had played up undoubtedly—the story of his dogged heroism was soon on every tongue, buzzing throughout the length and breadth of St. Jim's.

And the Head played up also—and secretly, he was very glad indeed to have the opportunity of doing so. Sacking old Taggles had been far from a pleasant task to Dr. Holmes, the kindly old Head of St. Jim's. Taggles' dismissal was cancelled forthwith, even Mr. Ratcliff grudgingly admitting that he had amply made amends.

Cousin Ethel spent several days in her bed-room in the Head's house, but the sprain, fortunately, was not serious, and she was soon up and about—to the joy of her chums in the School House and New House and everyone else. But Taggles was longer in recovering. He spent nearly a fortnight in the sanary; the exhaustion and the strain had brought on a chill, which he found difficult to shake off. But shake it off he did, and one bright day his rugged features were seen once more at the lodge—Ephraim was himself again. And soon Taggles' Barring-out was a thing of the past!

THE END.

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