

"THE MYSTERY OF SPALDING HALL!" This week's extra-special story of Tom Merry and Co. of St. Jim's.

The

GEM

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EVERY
WEDNESDAY.



IN MERCILESS HANDS!

(A dramatic incident from the grand, long, school story of Tom Merry and Co. in this issue.)

Dear Mr. Holmes,
I am writing to tell you
I have left St. Jim's for
good. I hate the place &
have run away never to
come back!
I intend to obtain work
—probably on a ship—
so it will be useless to
attempt to follow me.
Emmet Levinson

HERE'S A GRIPPING SCHOOL TALE OF MYSTERY AND THRILLS—

The Mystery of SPALDING HALL!

by Martin Clifford

Ernest Levison disappears from St. Jim's in strange circumstances. Where is he? This is what Tom Merry & Co. want to know. But they little dream of the amazing truth!

CHAPTER 1.

Arthur Augustus Causes a Delay!

"WEADY, Cardew?"
Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, asked that question.

The swell of St. Jim's had put his head in at the door of Study No. 9 in the Fourth Form passage. It was early on a bright Saturday afternoon—a half-holiday.

"Weady, Cardew?"

Arthur Augustus adjusted his celebrated eyeglass and surveyed the lounging figure in the armchair by the study fire with a disapproving eye.

For it was evident that Cardew was not ready.

Arthur Augustus frowned, and stepped into the study. He was looking very elegant indeed. The shiniest of shiny toppers surmounted his aristocratic brow, and the whitest of spats adorned his gleaming shoes. A silver-headed cane was tucked under his arm, and he was carrying a pair of gorgeous yellow gloves.

From the big armchair, Cardew shifted his feet an inch along the mantelpiece and glanced at Arthur Augustus with a lazy smile upon his handsome face.

"Hallo, Gussy!" drawled Ralph Reckness Cardew.

"We are all waitin' for you, Cardew, deah boy!" exclaimed the swell of St. Jim's severely.

Cardew appeared surprised. He raised his eyebrows slightly.

"Really?" he yawned.

Arthur Augustus breathed hard.

"Yaas! Levison asked me to look in and see if you were weady! Pway huwwy up, Cardew—"

"Oh, dear!"

Cardew glanced out of the window. It was a crisp, dry afternoon—rather cold, perhaps, but with wintry sunshine bathing the quad and the old elms. To most fellows the prospect of an invigorating walk in the open air on such a day would have been thoroughly delightful. But Cardew was not like most fellows.

He shuddered.

"Br-r-r!"

"Look heah—"

"Looks chilly out there!" said Cardew, snuggling into the armchair luxuriously, and surveying the warm fire with a very favourable eye. "I dare say this fire would feel lonely if I deserted it this afternoon."

"Pway don't be an ass, Cardew! And I wefuse to wait any longah! I—"

"Then don't wait!"

"Wats! I—"

"Chuck some more coals on the fire for me, will you, Gussy?"

"Bai Jove! Weally, Cardew! Certainly not! I pwomised Levison to make you huwwy up, and I con-sidah—"

Arthur Augustus broke off as the door swung open, and Ernest Levison himself appeared.

"Oh, gad!" murmured Cardew.

"Where's that blessed slacker?" snorted Levison.

He strode into the study, and halted by the armchair, staring down at the slacker of the Fourth with a very grim expression on his face.

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Cardew eyed him doubtfully.

"Aren't you ready?" roared Levison.

"Nummo! You see, dear man—"

"If you don't buck up, you slacker, we shall all be late at Spalding Hall for tea with the girls!" exclaimed Levison wrathfully.

Spalding Hall was the new school for girls that had been opened fairly recently near Wayland. It was presided over by a rather frightening old lady named Miss Finch—at any rate, the St. Jim's juniors found her rather frightening, though Ethel Cleveland, D'Arcy's pretty cousin, who had become a pupil at Spalding Hall, declared that Miss Finch had a heart of gold, despite her rather grim-looking exterior.

All the chums of the School House—to say nothing of Figgins & Co., of the New House—had been overjoyed when Cousin Ethel had arrived at Spalding. But now they had still further cause for delight. Doris Levison, the pretty and popular sister of the two Levison brothers at St. Jim's—Ernest Levison of the Fourth and Frank Levison of the Third—had now joined Cousin Ethel at Miss Finch's establishment.

Doris and Ethel were great chums, and Ethel had naturally been delighted to welcome Doris Levison. It had been arranged that the two girls were to share a study together at Spalding Hall. The two girls had planned to give a "housewarming" tea in their study on the first Saturday afternoon after Doris' arrival; and this was the much-looked-forward-to Saturday!

Tom Merry & Co., of the Shell, were going, and so were Blake & Co., of the Fourth. So was Figgins, the skipper of the New House Co.—Figgy had a very warm admiration for Cousin Ethel, and would not have missed the tea-party at Spalding Hall for worlds! Frank Levison of the Third was unfortunately kept indoors with a bad cold; but Levison of the Fourth was, of course, going, and he had asked his two chums, Clive and Cardew, to go too.

Clive, the South African junior, was now waiting downstairs with the rest of the party, which had decided to make the most of the glorious afternoon by walking to Spalding. But Cardew had failed to put in an appearance.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, returning to his own study for a clean handkerchief, had promised Levison to look in at Study No. 9 on his way, and hurry Cardew up. But as there had still been no sign of Cardew, Levison had come upstairs in person to rout out his slacking chum!

And from the look in his eyes as he surveyed Cardew, it was quite clear that Levison meant business.

"Oh, gad!" murmured Cardew, in dismay.

Though tea at Spalding Hall with Ethel and Doris was a very pleasant prospect, as Cardew himself would have been among the first to admit, nevertheless, that slacking youth was finding it very unpleasant to tear himself away from his cosy fire and sally forth into the cold.

"I'll give you three seconds to hop out of that chair!" snorted Levison. "One—"

"But Levison, dear man—"

"Two!"

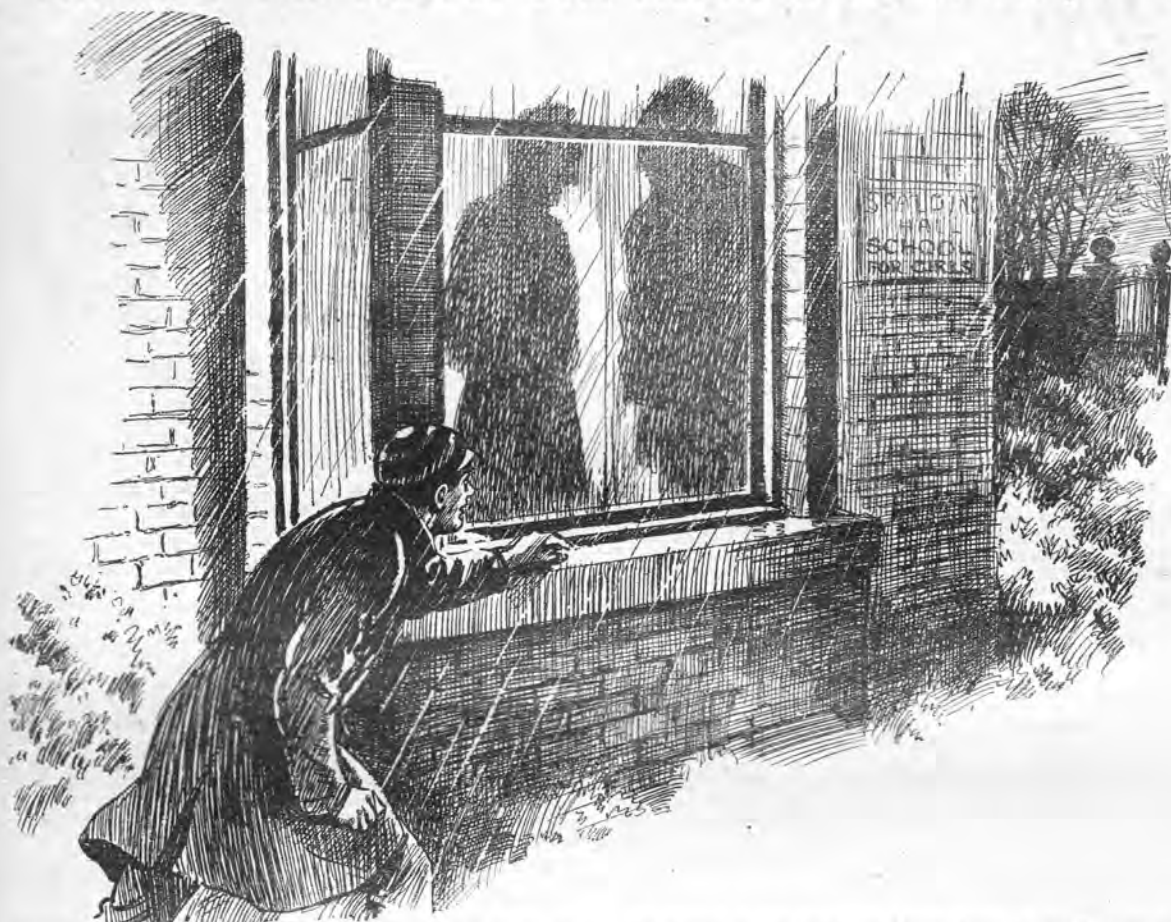
"Oh, gad! I—"

"Three!"

"I—I— Look here! Oh! Ow! Yarooooop!"

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—STARRING THE FAMOUS TOM MERRY & CO. OF ST. JIM'S!



Cardew gave a yell. Levison had seized the back of the chair, and with a powerful twist, had swung it round, sending the slacker of the Fourth spinning out on to the hearthrug.

"There!" gasped Levison.

"Ow! Oh! You silly ass!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Wippin', Levison!" chuckled Arthur Augustus. "That's the way to tweek the—Ow! Yawwooh!"

It was the turn of the swell of St. Jim's to yell. Cardew, in struggling up, red and wrathful, had cannoned into Arthur Augustus. The swell of St. Jim's, stepping back hastily, had caught his foot in the edge of the mat, and went spinning—with disastrous results.

Crash!

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The yell of laughter came from the open doorway, where a crowd of grinning faces could be seen. Tom Merry & Co. and Blake & Co. had come up to find out the reason of the delay—and had been just in time to see Arthur Augustus "doing his turn," as Monty Lowther humorously put it.

It was the coal-scuttle that received Arthur Augustus as he sat down. It was a scuttle with a wide opening, and he slid down into it till his knees were doubled up almost to his chin. His gloves and stick went flying, and his topper, looking more like a concertina than anything else, after a knock against the wall, was jammed down over one eye in a very undignified fashion.

"Oh! Owch! Wescue!" howled the swell of St. Jim's, struggling wildly, but in vain, to free himself from the loving embrace of the coal-scuttle.

But the more he struggled the farther into that useful article of furniture did Arthur Augustus sink! Soon he was jammed so tightly that further struggling was impossible.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The sight of their chum wedged in the coal-scuttle seemed to amuse the juniors immensely. They fairly clung to one another as they howled with merriment.

But, oddly enough, Arthur Augustus himself quite failed to see the joke.

He glared at his shrieking chums from the confines of his coal-scuttle with a face that was almost purple with wrath.

"There is nothin' to cackle at, you wottahs!" panted the swell of St. Jim's breathlessly. "Wescue! This is a frightfully painful position! Tom Mewwy, Blake, Hewwies—wescue!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Levison and Cardew, too, were doubled up with laughter. Then Tom Merry, weak with merriment, staggered hilariously across towards the unhappy Arthur Augustus. He held out a hand, and Arthur Augustus grasped it as a drowning man clutches a straw.

Thump!

Tom Merry pulled hard. But he did not succeed in pulling the swell of St. Jim's out of the coal-scuttle. He merely dragged Arthur Augustus and the scuttle, still inextricably mixed, for a foot along the floor. The coal-scuttle thumped down on to the carpet again, and Arthur Augustus gave a painful gasp.

"Ow! Gwooooh! This is frightfully painful!"

"Somebody catch hold of the scuttle," grinned Levison.

Blake and Figgins each took hold of it, and Levison caught hold of Arthur Augustus' other hand.

"Now!" gasped Tom Merry. "Heave!"

"Yawwoooop!"

Arthur Augustus gave a howl.

So tightly was he jammed that he and the coal-scuttle swung high into the air, still firmly wedged together. With Figgins and Blake hauling on the coal-scuttle, and Tom Merry and Levison hauling on Arthur Augustus, the result was a tug-of-war—with the swell of St. Jim's roaring and gasping in mid-air, still with the coal-scuttle lovingly attached to his person.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Study No 9 fairly echoed with the roars of laughter of the juniors, and the roars of anguish of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy!

But the best of friends must part, and with a sudden extra heave on the part of the juniors, Arthur Augustus and the coal-scuttle parted. Tom Merry and Levison fell backwards, still shaking with laughter, and the unhappy swell of St. Jim's went sprawling at their feet, utterly winded. Figgins

and Blake collapsed backwards, raining coals from the coal-scuttle.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Monty Lowther faintly, wiping his streaming eyes. "Gussy, you're a scream! Why do you do these things? Is it just because you love a lark?"

Arthur Augustus, scrambling up, covered with coal-dust, stared at the humorist of the Shell speechlessly.

"Oh dear!" chuckled Cardew. "Gussy, dear man, you certainly do provide St. Jim's with a little comic relief! It's what you're for, I suppose!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus, speechless still, jammed his eyeglass into his eye and surveyed Cardew with a freezing glance. Then he turned and hobbled painfully from the study, to go and change his ruined garments.

He could not possibly go to tea with Ethel Cleveland and Doris Levison at Spalding Hall as he was!

"What a scream!" chuckled Herries breathlessly. "Oh, my hat! What a blessed scream!"

Everyone seemed to agree with Herries—everyone, that is, except Arthur Augustus D'Arcy! And the swell of St. Jim's was still preserving an icy and indignant silence when, changed and cleaned, he sallied forth with the others—including Cardew—for the tramp through the sunlit lanes to Spalding.

CHAPTER 2.

Mellish's Little Jape!

"**N**OW then, ye cripples, put your best feet foremost!" said Tom Merry cheerfully, as the party passed out through the gates. "It's a goodish walk to Spalding Hall, and we've only just got time."

"All Gussy's fault we're late," said Cardew severely. "He would try to be funny with our coal-scuttle."

Arthur Augustus did not appear to hear that remark. He tilted his aristocratic nose a fraction higher, and kept on in an icy silence.

A chilly wind scurried across the quad as the little party tramped out into the lane, and Cardew turned up his coat-collar and thought longingly of the cosy fire he had been forced to abandon.

There were several School House juniors standing near the gates as Levison's party turned into the road. Among them was Percy Mellish, the sneak of the Fourth, with Crooke, one of the rotters' brigade, of the Shell.

"Off to Spalding Hall!" growled Crooke, with a sniff. "Spoonies idiots!"

Crooke would have given his ears to have been invited to tea at Spalding! But he would never have admitted that fact.

There was a thoughtful look on the face of Percy Mellish as he watched the backs of the juniors moving up the road.

Mellish had a little grudge against Levison of the Fourth—or thought he had. The sneak of the Fourth had been cuffing Frank Levison of the Third for what Mellish considered "cheek" one morning recently, and Ernest Levison had caught him at it. Much to Percy Mellish's indignation, Levison major had given him a taste of his own medicine on the spot.

"All dressed up to kill!" sneered Crooke, his eyes on the retreating figures in the lane.

A sudden grin overspread Mellish's pasty features. He gripped Crooke by the arm.

"Ready for a jape against those rotters?" muttered Mellish.

Crooke glanced at him wonderingly. He grinned and nodded.

"I wish Racke was here," said Mellish regretfully. "But he's busy on lines for Railton this afternoon, isn't he? But we can do it all right! Listen!"

Mellish expounded his scheme, with many a chuckle. Crooke grinned again.

"Sounds all right!" he admitted. "No reason why it shouldn't work."

"Of course it'll work!" snorted Mellish. "They're walking to Spalding. We can get over on our bikes, and be there in heaps of time to welcome 'em!"

"What a welcome!" chortled Crooke.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The two black sheep had no doubt about the success of their scheme, and they roared at the thought of the surprise in store for Tom Merry & Co.

Shortly afterwards Mellish and Crooke wheeled their bicycles out of the cycle-shed and rode out of gates. Their pockets were bulging in an unusual manner, and their faces were still ornamented with the broadest of broad grins.

Whatever was "in the wind" it clearly boded ill for Levison's party to Spalding Hall!

Ernest Levison glanced at his watch.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "Just about right—we've done it in fine time!"

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The juniors were swinging along the road between Spalding village and Spalding Hall School. Round the next corner the gates of the school would be in sight, and they were in just nice time for tea.

It had been an invigorating walk through the crisp cold of the winter afternoon. Even Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had now forgotten his troubles, and even Cardew had ceased to regret the fireside of Study No. 9.

The gates of Spalding Hall loomed up ahead at the side of the road, set in the high old red-brick wall that skirted the road for some distance. The ancient creeper-covered gables of the school could be seen above it, among some tall trees. It was a handsome building—an old Elizabethan manor house, though small, of course, compared with St. Jim's.

"Here we are, dear boys!"

"And there's Doris, waiting to welcome us!" exclaimed Levison eagerly.

"And there's Cousin Ethel!" cried Figgins.

Two girlish figures could be seen standing by one of the tall pillars that flanked the gates. They caught sight of the juniors, and waved a welcome. The juniors quickened their steps.

Doris Levison, her dark hair gleaming in the pale sunshine, was looking very charming, and her eyes were alight with pleasure at sight of her friends from St. Jim's, accompanying her brother. Ethel Cleveland, too, was looking "as pretty as a picture!" as Arthur Augustus remarked to Tom Merry, who agreed heartily.

"Hallo, Doris, old girl!" sang out Levison, as the juniors approached, raising their caps.

"Hallo, Ernest!" replied Doris happily. "Good-afternoon everybody!"

Cousin Ethel joined in the greeting. It was noticed by Tom Merry that her eyes seemed to turn particularly to Figgins as she spoke. Figgins, red as any pillar-box, raised his cap fumblingly.

Tom Merry gripped Doris Levison's hand and shook it, with a cheery grin on his face.

"This is ripping!" he exclaimed. "We're all jolly glad to have you down here at Spalding with Ethel. It's just great, isn't it, you chaps?"

"Absolutely!" chuckled Manners.

"Heah, heah!" beamed Arthur Augustus. "Wathah!"

"Yes, it's splendid!" smiled Ethel. "Doris has only been here three days now, but she loves Spalding Hall already, don't you?"

Doris nodded happily.

"Yes, I'm going to be happy here!" she cried gaily. "And it will be almost too good to be true—being always so near you, Ernie," she added, squeezing her brother's hand. "And all the rest of you, of course," she put in quickly, laughing.

"Thanks!" grinned Blake. "I was afraid you were going to leave us out."

"Well, come along in!" cried Ethel.

She turned to lead the way into the quadrangle of Spalding Hall. The juniors made a move to follow the two girls. In the bushes across the road there was a faint, rustling sound. But the St. Jim's juniors failed to notice it.

Nor did they hear the softly-whispered "Now," in the voice of Percy Mellish that accompanied it.

But though they were unaware of all this they were very much aware of what immediately followed.

Out of the bushes opposite the gates a stream of dark liquid came shooting suddenly. It came from the nozzle of a large garden-squirt that was protruding from the dense mass of bare twigs, and it streamed across the road in a lofty curve, curling down on to the heads of the St. Jim's juniors as they turned to enter the gates of Spalding.

Swish-s-s-ssssh!

There was a sudden, violent yell from Digby. The stream of ink had rained down upon him, converting his face in a few moments into the semblance of a Christy Minstrel's. Digby danced and choked and spluttered.

"Yooosh! Grooooh! Ow! Oh crumbs! Owssssh!"

Then a second stream of ink came shooting across the road. This time it was Levison who suffered. In a couple of moments he was drenched with the inky liquid.

"What the—"

"Bai Jove!"

"Look out!"

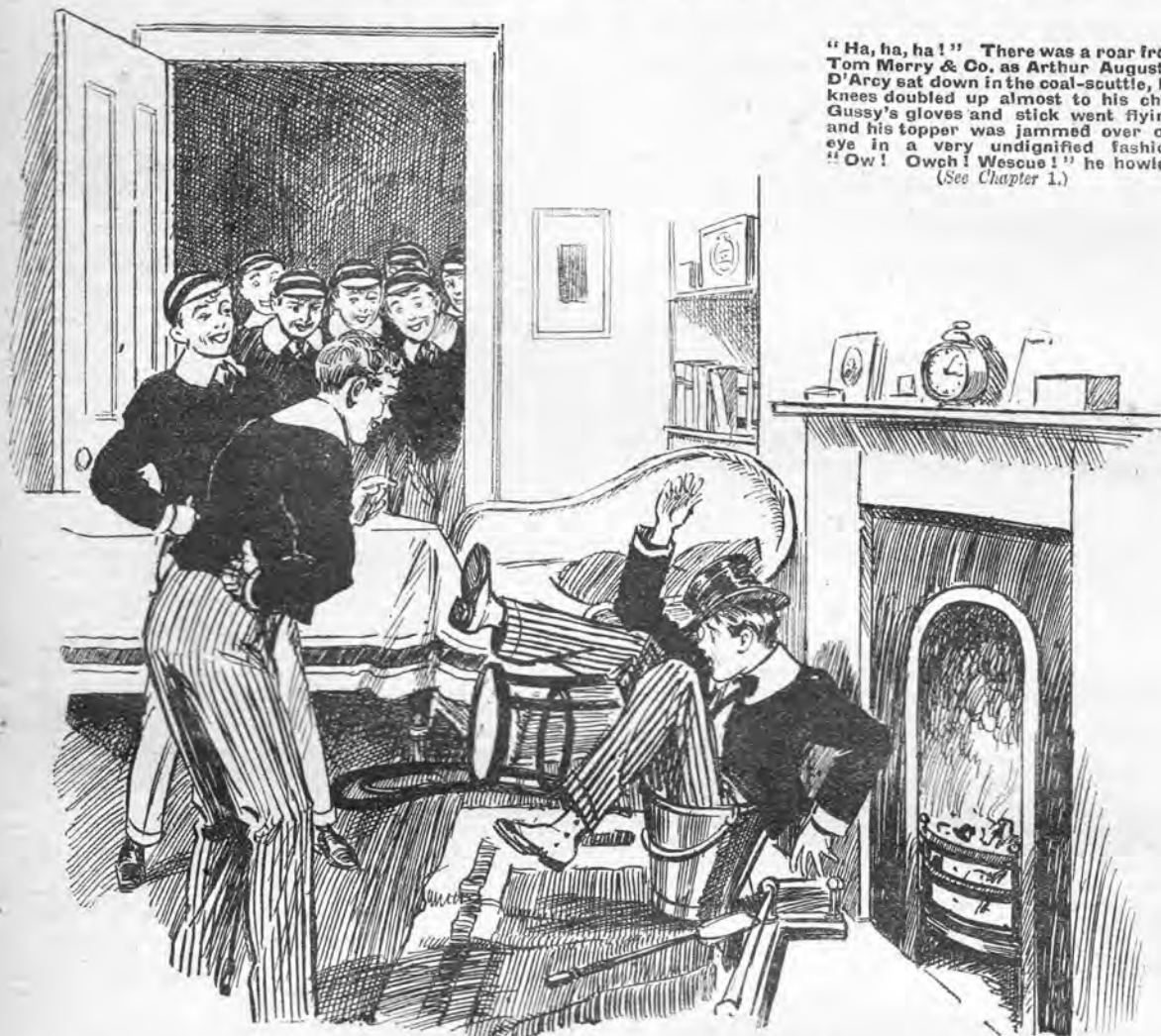
Exclamations of horrified dismay rang out from the other juniors as Digby and Levison strove wildly to wipe the streaming ink from their blackened faces. Then there was a roar of anger from Cardew as some of the ink splashed over his chest, ruining his elegant waistcoat in a moment.

"Look out!"

"Help!"

"Oh, my hat!"

The inkstream broke off, but the next moment it shot forth again with renewed energy, splashing among the dismayed juniors in all directions. Figgins, who had turned



"Ha, ha, ha!" There was a roar from Tom Merry & Co. as Arthur Augustus D'Arcy sat down in the coal-scuttle, his knees doubled up almost to his chin. Gussy's gloves and stick went flying, and his topper was jammed over one eye in a very undignified fashion. "Ow! Owch! Wescue!" he howled. (See Chapter 1.)

to stare in blank bewilderment at the hedge, received a large dose of ink in his mouth, and sat down, gurgling.

Ethel and Doris, standing within the gates and watching the extraordinary scene in horror and amazement, were the only two who escaped at least a splashing.

There was a muffled chuckle from the hedge. Mellish and Crooke were fairly shaking with laughter. But the time had come, they felt, for them to go—and quickly!

"Scat!" panted Mellish.

The two cads had left their cycles hidden in a copse some distance along the road. They intended to retreat across the grass field behind the hedge before their victims had time to pull themselves together from their surprise.

But they had waited a fraction too long in their enjoyment of the sight of the ink-splashed party of juniors. Even as Mellish and Crooke turned to scramble out of the hedge on the farther side, Levison plunged into it from the road.

Mellish gave a frantic squeal as he felt his ankle gripped in a vice-like grasp. He kicked out desperately, and fell on his face.

"Help!" panted Mellish. "Crooke—"

But Crooke was not the stuff of which heroes are made. He was not worrying about Mellish. It was his own safety that interested him. Without glancing at his chum Gerald Crooke dived out of the hedge and raced across the field like the wind, and plunged into the safety of the woods beyond, unpursued.

But Mellish, with a despairing yell, was hauled out backwards through the hedge—to the great detriment of his clothing—and grasped by Levison in a grip of steel.

"Mellish!" panted Levison.

"Hands off!" yelled Mellish. "I—I—I—"

The other juniors had come crowding up, red and furious, except where the ink concealed their crimson countenance.

"My hat! Mellish!" stuttered Blake. "Scrag him!"

"Slaughter him!"

"Yaas, bai Jove, twounce the wottah!"

Tom Merry, who had come off fairly lightly, glanced round hastily. Doris and Ethel were staring across the road in startled bewilderment.

"Keep cool, you chaps!" muttered Tom Merry warningly. "Can't have trouble before the girls, you know."

"Haven't we had it already?" howled Digby. "I'm soaked!"

Tom glanced round again, helplessly. This time he found that Ethel and Doris were smiling, in spite of themselves. The faces of some of the juniors, ink-covered as they were, were undoubtedly funny to look at.

"Oh dear!" gasped Doris Levison. "The poor boys!"

"Just look at Digby's face!" murmured Cousin Ethel, under her breath.

It was clear to the girls that the victims of the unknown japer had collared the cause of their troubles. He was too closely surrounded for them to see who it was, but they guessed that it must be some St. Jim's boy. And they sympathised with Tom Merry & Co.'s desire to scrag him. So the two Spaldingites tactfully turned away, to Tom Merry's great relief, and vanished discreetly into the quad.

"That's ripping of 'em!" grinned Tom. "They've gone. Now we can attend to the worm."

"Here, hold on!" gasped Mellish, desperately shaking with fright. It was certainly no part of Mellish's plan to have been detected and caught. He had simply intended to get his own back on Levison and vanish, leaving his identity unknown. "I—I say, don't be rotters, you know. I—I—"

"Rats!" snapped Levison angrily. "Up with him, you chaps!"

And at Levison's command the hapless sneak of the Fourth was lifted into the air by a dozen willing hands.

Bump!

A fiendish yell from Mellish rent the air as he struck the road with a thud that was particularly dull and sickening. "And again!" snapped Levison.

Bump!

"And again!"

"You bet!" drawled Cardew.

There was another bump, and a third frantic howl rang out. Then another, and another. The angry juniors meant to teach Mellish a lesson he would not forget.

"That'll do!" exclaimed Tom Merry, at last. "He's had about enough—"

Tom broke off sharply.

A sour voice had interrupted him from the gates of Spalding Hall.

"And what is the meaning of this hooliganism?"

The juniors turned, with a start, to find a tall, angular figure standing in the gateway of the school—one of the Spalding Hall mistresses, without doubt. And behind her, dismay upon their faces, were Ethel and Doris.

"Oh, my hat!" muttered Levison. "Now we're in the soup!"

CHAPTER 3.

Miss Strickland!

AT sight of the schoolmistress surveying them grimly from the gates of Spalding Hall, the St. Jim's juniors dropped Mellish as though he had been a red-hot ember, and there was another, final howl from the cad of the Fourth as he collapsed into the road, breathless and aching.

"You cads!" shrieked Mellish, beside himself with rage. "You bullying rotter, Levison—"

"Shut up, you ass!" muttered Monty Lowther.

But Mellish did not mean to shut up. He had deserved every bit of the rough handling he had received at the hands of the juniors, but he did not mean to accept his medicine. He scrambled up, dishevelled and dusty, his eyes blazing with rage.

"Beastly cads!" he shrieked again. "Yah! Ow!"

He broke off abruptly as Figgins, wiping some of the ink from his face with one hand, dug the other forcibly into Mellish's waistcoat. Mellish doubled up then, effectually silenced.

In an ominous hush, the tall figure in the gateway faced the group of dishevelled juniors.

It was not Miss Finch, the headmistress of Spalding Hall. Miss Finch was a little, tight-lipped old lady. This was, evidently, one of the under-mistresses. An unusually tall figure, for a woman, with big, bony hands, and a strong, mannish face, she was evidently a lady with whom it was unwise to argue.

"Have you any excuse for this disgraceful behaviour?" demanded the Spalding mistress again, in the same angry tones.

"Ahem!" Levison coughed, and shuffled his feet.

With his inky countenance, he did not apparently strike the lady in the gateway as being a very acceptable person. She glared at him, reducing Levison to a helpless silence.

"You see—" began Tom Merry uncomfortably. "That is—"

"Pway allow me to apologise for this unseemly bwawlin' before the gates of the school, madam," said Arthur Augustus gracefully. The fact that one of his eyes was ink-blackened, however, rather spoilt the effect. "It is simply an—ah—pivate mattah—"

"We're very sorry," mumbled Figgins.

"Pway shut up, Figgay, and leave the mattah to me! As I was wemarkin'—"

But the schoolmistress was not listening to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. She turned to the two girls.

"I understand that these boys are friends of yours?" she said icily.

"Yes," said Cousin Ethel quickly. "They—you see—"

"I want to hear no explanations or excuses!" snapped the schoolmistress, her eyes glinting. "I shall report the matter to Miss Finch. I shall see to it that you boys are forbidden to enter the school premises!"

"Oh cwumbs!"

There was dismay in the horrified ejaculation of the swell of St. Jim's, a dismay that was reflected in the inky countenances of all the others, as well as in the faces of Doris and Ethel.

"Oh, but Miss Strickland!" pleaded Doris. "We—"

"Silence!" Miss Strickland glanced over her shoulder, and called to somebody out of sight: "Thrupp!"

"Yes, miss?"

Thrupp—evidently the school porter—came into sight from his little lodge. He was a red-faced tubby little man, with something of a seaman's roll in his walk—the St. Jim's juniors learnt later from Cousin Ethel that Thrupp was

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late of the Royal Navy. His face looked as though it was usually crinkled into a jolly smile. But under Miss Strickland's glare, the ex-sailor assumed a very solemn expression indeed.

"Thrupp, see that none of these boys enter the premises!"

"Very good, miss!"

The porter touched his cap. Miss Strickland turned to Doris and Ethel.

"You will both accompany me at once!"

"Oh cwumbs!" repeated Arthur Augustus dismally.

Miss Strickland's tall figure vanished from sight, accompanied by Ethel and Doris. Both girls were looking very troubled.

With faces the picture of dejection, the St. Jim's juniors stood and stared through the gateway into the quad, where several Spalding Hall girls had appeared.

"Shiver me timbers!" exclaimed Mr. Thrupp, staring at the inky faces of the juniors. "You young gents seem to 'ave bin 'aving a reg'lar lark wif your faces!"

The juniors looked at one another. Their expressions were the last word in dismalness. Percy Mellish had already made himself scarce through the hedge, or he could have consoled himself for his rough handling with a sight of their faces. Thanks to Mellish's little jape, the visitors to Spalding Hall were certainly "up against it!"

"Miss Strickland's a terror," added Mr. Thrupp, with a sympathetic grin. "She's only bee- at the school a couple of days, but she's already showing she's got a 'eavy 'and."

"I'll say she is!" nodded Cardew. "Well, it's no good hangin' round here, dear me. I'm goin' into Wayland for a wash and brush-up! Anybody comin'?"

"Oh deah! Yaas, I suppose so!"

With glum looks upon their piebald features, Levison & Co., Tom Merry & Co., Blake & Co., and George Figgins turned and tramped off up the lane.

"It's rough on the girls," said Blake gloomily. "I'll bet Doris was lookin' forward to her housewarming tea!"

"Rather!" nodded Levison.

"Have to have it later on, that's all," said Clive.

"Just wait till I get hold of that toad, Mellish, again!" growled Herries vengefully. "I'll make him wish he hadn't been so funny!"

"Same here!" said Levison, very gringly. "That cad needs a lesson he won't forget in a hurry!"

"Of course, we were rather asking for it," said Tom Merry, frowning. "It wasn't the thing, scrapping in front of the school gates like that. We'd found out it was Mellish, and we should have waited till we got him at St. Jim's."

"Hark to the virtuous Thomas!" murmured Cardew.

Tom Merry flushed.

"Rats!" growled Levison. "Tom Merry's quite right. But I know I lost my temper for once. Still, we ought not to have been such asses."

"Well, the damage is done now," said Manners quietly. "The only thing to do is to wait and see what the result will be!"

"You mean?" queried Digby.

"Miss Finch may write to the Head about it," said Manners.

"Bai Jove! I hadn't thought of that!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, with clouded brow.

"Hang Mellish!" growled Herries. "It's all his fault!"

"We'll scrag him!" grunted Blake.

Even that consoling prospect, however, did not have a very cheering effect, and it was with gloomy countenances that the dishevelled band of juniors trudged towards Wayland.

CHAPTER 4.

The Head Comes Down Heavy!

"SEEN the notice?"

Baggy Trimble, the fat junior of the Fourth, scuttling along the Fourth Form passage two days later, almost collided with Levison at the top of the stairs.

"What notice, fat turnip?" inquired Levison.

"He, he, he!" Baggy sniggered, and when Baggy was amused, it usually meant that trouble was in store for someone—that being his pleasant idea of humour. "A notice from the Head, it is, calling an assembly in Big Hall after last lesson this afternoon! Somebody's in for it!"

And again Baggy chuckled gleefully.

"Oh, stop sniggering, you fat frog!"

Levison swung on his heel, and hurried downstairs again. A group of fellows was gathered round the board, and Levison had some difficulty in elbowing his way near enough to see the notice. It was as Baggy had stated, and was signed by the well-known hand of Dr. Holmes, the headmaster of St. Jim's.

"Wonder what it means?" remarked Wildrake of the Fourth.

"Somebody's done something, I suppose," grinned Gore of the Shell. "Perhaps there's going to be a Hall flogging!"

But there was no time for further speculation. The bell rang for afternoon classes, and the juniors dispersed hurriedly to their various Form-rooms.

There was a rather noticeable lack of concentration in the Shell and Fourth Form rooms that afternoon. The fellows were wondering with eager interest what the Head had to say to the school. No one seemed to know. Lines for whispering in class fell very thickly from the hands of Mr. Lathom.

But at last classes were over, and the fellows eagerly hurried off in the direction of Big Hall. Tom Merry, meeting Figgins in the crowd, glanced at him with an unspoken question in his eyes. Figgins shrugged his shoulders gloomily in equally silent answer. Each knew well enough what the other was thinking.

"Silence!"

It was the voice of Kildare, the captain of the school, and the murmur of talk in Big Hall died to an instant hush.

And then, with rustling gown, the dignified figure of the Head of St. Jim's appeared on the platform.

Dr. Holmes' face was grave; in fact, rather stern. He glanced over the assembled school, with pursed lips.

"I have to speak to you all about rather a serious matter,"

found speaking to St. Jim's boys in any place at all, the girls in question will be severely punished. I need scarcely say that in the circumstances I shall myself punish any boy reported to me as having been seen speaking with any of Miss Finch's pupils."

"Oh cwumps!" gasped Arthur Augustus D'Arcy in the ensuing silence.

Dr. Holmes frowned.

"The boy who spoke, stand forward!"

The swell of St. Jim's jumped, and gave an exclamation. Then, crimson-faced, he stood forward from the line of Fourth-Formers.

"You spoke just now, D'Arcy?"

"Yaas, sir!" gasped Arthur Augustus unhappily.

"And what did you find it so necessary to say?" demanded the Head icily.

Arthur Augustus jammed his eyeglass into his eye and blinked across at the Head nervously.

"I—I said 'Oh cwumps!', sir."

The Head seemed a trifle taken aback. Then the faintest of faint smiles flickered for a moment at the corner of his lips. He instantly suppressed it.

"Kindly do not make such senseless interjections again, D'Arcy. You may return to your place!"

Arthur Augustus obeyed, with a beetroot-like countenance.

"I repeat," continued the Head, "that in future Spalding

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said the Head quietly. "It concerns Spalding Hall School, of which most of you have no doubt heard."

There was a quick rustle of excited interest for a moment. In the Shell rows Tom Merry glanced along at Manners and Lowther meaningly. Evidently their fears were to be realised.

"I have to-day received a letter from the—ah!—head-mistress of Spalding Hall," continued the Head. "She informs me that a number of St. Jim's boys were concerned in a vulgar brawl by the gates of her premises."

There was no mistaking the sternness of the Head's voice now.

"Such a thing is, I need hardly say, utterly disgraceful!" the Head went on. "I am surprised and shocked to hear it! Of course, it is still possible that there is some mistake. But I can scarcely hope that Miss Finch has made such an error as that. I ask that if any boys were concerned in such an affair, they will visit me in my study in a quarter of an hour's time."

There was a breathless hush in Big Hall.

"Decent of the Head, that!" breathed Figgins to Fatty Wynn, though his face was long and rueful. "He might have asked us to own up now, in front of all the chaps."

"Those boys will, of course, be punished," said the Head; "but I am sure that I can trust to their honour to come to me. But that is not all."

"What's up now?" grunted Blake to Digby.

"Miss Finch, the headmistress of the school in question, is, naturally, extremely annoyed that this has taken place. She, therefore, tells me that in future no boys from this school may visit her girls on any pretext whatever. Neither may her girls visit St. Jim's. And if any of them are

Hall School is out-of-bounds for boys at St. Jim's. The only reservation that Miss Finch allows is that brothers of her pupils may visit their sisters at the school, but they may do so only on Sunday afternoons."

A murmur of dismay arose from the ranks of the Shell and Fourth, to die away instantly under the Head's stern glance.

"That, I think, is all," said the Head. "Remember that in a quarter of an hour I shall expect to see the boys concerned in the affair by the gates of Spalding Hall in my study."

And the Head rustled from the platform.

"Dismiss!" called out Kildare, and with an excited babel of talk the St. Jim's fellows crowded out of Big Hall.

In the Hall the Terrible Three encountered Levison.

"This is rotten!" muttered Levison.

Tom nodded, with clouded brow.

"Yes, it's worse than I thought it was going to be. Spalding out of bounds! It's the giddy limit!"

"Come upstairs," said Levison gloomily. "We've got fifteen minutes' grace before seeing the Beak, anyway."

On their way up the stairs, Blake & Co. joined them, as did Clive and Cardew. They repaired in a body to Study No. 9, where Figgins, the only New House man among the culprits, joined them after some minutes.

"I'm frightfully sorry about this, you chaps!" said Levison, looking thoroughly worried. "I feel in a way responsible. It was my sister we were going to see, and I feel pretty sure it was because I smacked his head the other day that Mellish was out to carry out that rotten jape of his. I—"

"Rats!" broke in Monty Lowther warmly. "It's no more your fault than anyone else's!"

"Heah, heah!"

"Anyway, it's not quite so bad for me as for you chaps," went on Levison gloomily. "I can visit the girls on Sundays, anyhow; but you chaps are utterly barred!"

"Perhaps Miss Finch will relent after a bit," suggested Blake hopefully. "She's not a bad sort, you know."

"I expect that new mistress—Miss Strickland—fairly laid it on when she told Miss Finch what happened, too," put in Digby.

"I hope Doris and Ethel didn't get into a row," went on Levison. "Oh, it's rotten!"

Figgins glanced at his watch.

"Time we went along to the Head, you chaps."

And in an extremely dejected procession the eleven juniors wended their way in the direction of Dr. Holmes' study.

CHAPTER 5.

Licked!

"HERE they come!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What a giddy procession!"

The crowd of School House juniors waiting by the end of the passage that led to the Head's study grinned as one man.

The crowd had been waiting there ten minutes—ever since the door had closed on the last of Dr. Holmes' unwilling visitors. Listening breathlessly, the waiting crowd had heard a certain curious swishing noise from the closed study, and broad grins had appeared on every face.

And now the door had at last opened.

Herries was the first to appear. His hands were twisted under his armpits, and his face was changing from one extraordinary expression to another at every moment. Herries, as Racke heartlessly remarked, might have been practising for a funny-face competition.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Herries was followed by Blake, and then came Levison, and Clive and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy appeared behind them. Tom Merry & Co. and Figgins and Cardew and Digby all appeared in due course, the last of them closing the door behind him. Then, in single file, the unlucky juniors went squirming down the passage.

"Oh! Ow! Ooooooh!"

"Wow!"

"Bai Jove! Oh cwumbs! Yow!"

"Grooooooh! Oooooosh! Yoooop!"

Exclamations were many and varied. Each with his hands tucked tightly under his arms, the procession passed through the grinning ranks of the onlookers, who did not seem particularly sympathetic for the most part. In fact, they seemed to find the sight of the squirming procession from the Head's study a particularly humorous one.

"Licked?" inquired Kerruish blandly.

"Ow! Yes!" gasped Digby.

"Hurt?" asked Kangaroo.

"Of course not!" growled Monty Lowther. "It was lovely!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The Head's a giddy Sandow!" gasped Clive. "Yow!" He wriggled his hands and wriggled his features at the same time. Clive clearly was hurt.

"My hat! Mellish!"

It was Levison who gave that exclamation.

Mellish had been conspicuous by his absence in the Head's study. Though he was the fellow actually responsible for the whole trouble, he had certainly had no intention of owning up with the rest. Instead, he had turned up to gloat over the sufferings of the others as they emerged after their interview with the Head.

Levison had suddenly caught sight of Mellish's grinning face at the back of the crowd.

"Mellish!" In a moment Levison had dived through the crowd and collared the sneak of the Fourth by the back of the neck as he turned to bolt.

"Hands off!" yelled Mellish wildly, struggling in vain in Levison's hefty grip.

"You sneaking worm!" growled Levison. "Why didn't you own up you were in that business at Spalding?"

The fellows near crowded round, looking interested.

"It's a lie!" howled Mellish, going rather pale. "I—I wasn't!"

"There are pretty near a dozen witnesses to say that you were," said Levison contemptuously. "You were too yellow to go to the Head and take your medicine, though!"

He shook Mellish as a terrier shakes a rat. Mellish wriggled free at last and jumped away.

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"Well, what if I was in that row at Spalding?" he said, with a sneer. "I didn't see why I should own up—"

A sudden step behind him caused the sneak of the Fourth to turn with a start. His jaw dropped.

The tall figure of Mr. Railton, the popular young Housemaster of the School House, had turned the corner and had been standing close behind Mellish as he had made his last remark.

"So you were in the brawl at Spalding Hall, Mellish—but did not see why you should own up, eh?" said the Housemaster quietly.

Mellish made no reply. He licked his lips.

"In that case, I think you had better accompany me to the headmaster's study at once, Mellish," said Mr. Railton bitingly. "Come!"

In a deathly silence the crowd of juniors parted to make way for the Housemaster as he strode towards the headmaster's door, with Mellish trailing at his heels. Mr. Railton knocked on the door and vanished inside, followed by the sneak of the Fourth.

"Oh, wippin'!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, rubbing his hands together painfully, forgot his own troubles long enough to beam down the passage through his monocle at the closed door of the Head's sanctum. "The wottah is in for it!"

"He'll get it twice as hot, too, for not owning up!" chuckled Figgins.

And it was quite clear from the sounds that issued through that closed door a minute or so later that Figgins was right. Mellish was getting it twice as hot!

But even that pleasing fact could not dispel the gloom that filled the minds of Tom Merry and Levison and their chums. Mellish had got his deserts; but Spalding Hall was still forbidden ground. Their girl chums, to whose presence near St. Jim's they had looked forward so keenly, might well have been as far away as ever as a result of the Head's ban.

"So near and yet so far!" as Monty Lowther remarked glumly.

"It's uttally wotten!" declared Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

And, for once, Gussy's chums were in complete and unanimous agreement with him.

CHAPTER 6.

The Schemer!

PERCY MELLISH sat in his study in the Fourth Form passage and stared sullenly at the smoky fire.

Mellish was not looking pleased.

It was two days after his licking in the Head's study. But the sneak of the Fourth was still feeling decidedly sore—in mind, if not in body.

Mellish could never learn that it might be safest to let sleeping dogs lie. He had started being "up against" Levison, and he meant to carry on the feud until Levison had been made thoroughly to "sit up"—as Mellish expressed it.

At present Mellish felt that Levison had had the best of things. True, Levison had been licked by the Head. But so had he—and he had got it twice as hot as Levison had! It was true, too, that Levison was forbidden to go to Spalding Hall in future, except on Sunday afternoons. But that did not seem to Mellish to be a very important matter. And the memory of his own licking at the hands of Levison and his friends in the road before the very gates of Spalding Hall rankled very bitterly in Mellish's tortuous mind.

And Mellish was determined to be revenged on the fellow he persuaded himself he had a grudge against.

But how was he to cry quits?

It was a problem. It was the cause, too, of the deep furrows in Mellish's brow as he sat huddled by the cheerless fire in Study No. 2 that afternoon—a half-holiday—and stared at the carpet.

"Confound Levison!"

There was a bitter hatred in the muttered words.

From below the window Mellish could hear the cheery shouts of some fags punting a footer about in the Close. It was a dry, pleasant afternoon, and nearly everyone but Mellish was out of doors.

Suddenly the sneak of the Fourth gave a low exclamation.

An idea had entered his mind—an idea which caused his eyes to gleam. He sat up, staring at the smoking coals, the furrows cleared from his brow.

"That's the idea!" Mellish told himself.

There was a cunning gleam in his eyes as he stood up. For some moments he stood deep in thought. Then he crossed softly to the door, opened it, and looked out.

The passage was deserted.

Levison and his study-mate, Clive, were both playing football that afternoon, Mellish knew. Whether, however,



"Look out!" "Help!" "Oh, my hat!" Yells of wrath and dismay came from Tom Merry & Co. as, from out of the bushes opposite the gates of Spalding Hall, two streams of ink came shooting suddenly. In a few moments most of the juniors were looking like Christy Minstrels, while Ethel Cleveland and Doris Levison stared at the scene in startled bewilderment.

(See Chapter 2.)

Ralph Reckness Cardew, Levison's other chum, would be out of doors was far less certain.

After a moment's hesitation, Mellish closed the door of his study behind him and tiptoed swiftly along the passage towards Study No. 9.

He halted outside the door, listening. Not a sound was to be heard. The School House seemed utterly deserted.

Very softly Mellish tapped on the door of Levison's study. There was no answer from within. Unless he were asleep, Cardew was evidently not at home!

Mellish opened the door, without a sound, and peered in. The room was empty right enough. With a final hasty glance up and down the deserted passage, Mellish slipped into the room and closed the door.

For a moment or two he stood within the closed study, his heart thumping a little. He glanced round. Levison's desk, over by the fireplace, caused his eyes to gleam oddly. After a second's cautious listening at the door Mellish turned and tiptoed towards the desk.

He opened it quickly. The contents were neatly arranged in their pigeon-holes—notepaper and envelopes, old letters and other papers.

Mellish, breathing a trifle quickly, did not take very long to find what he sought. A bundle of Doris Levison's old letters to her brother were brought to light, and he selected one at random, replacing the others where he had found them.

"That's that!" muttered Mellish.

He slipped the letter into his pocket and closed the desk. He licked his lips, which seemed oddly dry. Then, turning, he stole back towards the door.

Then he stiffened.

Footsteps were coming along the passage, in the direction of the study. For a moment Mellish's heart seemed to stop beating.

His face whitened, and he made a movement as if to slip behind a screen by the window. But the footsteps passed

by the door and died away down the stairs. Mellish breathed again.

Opening the door, without a sound, he peered out. The coast was clear. Stealthily Mellish stepped out into the passage and shut the door of Levison's study behind him. Then, his heart thumping with painful heaviness, the sneak of the Fourth hurried along to his own room. It was with a sigh of relief that he found himself back in Study No. 2.

Mellish drew up a chair to the table, and picked up a sheet of notepaper—it was Wildrake's notepaper, but that did not worry Mellish. Then he took from his pocket Doris Levison's letter to her brother.

Mellish did not hesitate to read the contents, of course, and he proceeded to do so at once. The letter contained nothing of any interest to Mellish, however—he had not expected it to. It was the writing he wanted to study!

Half an hour later Baggy Trimble, who shared Study No. 2 with Mellish and Kit Wildrake, entered the study, and was surprised to see Mellish whip several sheets of paper off the table and thrust them into his pocket. The sneak of the Fourth scowled at Baggy.

Baggy was vaguely suspicious, and he stayed in the study half an hour, hoping for a clue to the mystery. Throughout that time Mellish got more and more visibly irritated. At last he turned on the fat Fourth-Former savagely.

"For goodness' sake clear out of here, you fat toad! I'm busy!"

"Oh, really, Mellish!"

Baggy blinked at his study-mate indignantly, and with more suspicion than ever.

"Look here"—Mellish thrust a hand into his pocket and brought out half-a-crown—"you tried to borrow a couple of bob off me this morning! Here's half-a-crown! Go and stuff yourself in the tuckshop—and leave me alone!"

Though his curiosity was now thoroughly aroused by Mellish's evident anxiety to be alone, Baggy Trimble could

not withstand the temptation of that half-crown. He pocketed it eagerly, and scuttled off down the passage. In Study No. 2 Percy Mellish snapped the key in the lock, with a sour grin.

He had important work on hand, and he did not mean to be disturbed again.

CHAPTER 7.

A Letter for Levison!

THE following evening, Levison of the Fourth walked into Rylcombe with his minor, to help Franky choose a pair of football-boots at the sports outfitters—Levison minor would never have dreamed of purchasing them without advice from his beloved major.

That job done, the two brothers returned through the dusk to St. Jim's. They crossed the quad together, and mounted the steps of the School House. In the Hall Levison of the Fourth nodded to his brother and turned to go up the stairs, while Frank Levison hurried off towards the fags' quarters, there to display his new footer boots to Wally & Co. "Cheerio, Ernie, and thanks awfully!"

"So long, kid!"

Levison minor vanished. Ernest Levison, about to go up the stairs, glanced across at the letter-rack and paused. There was a letter for him.

He saw as he took it down that it was addressed in his sister's handwriting, and it had been posted in Wayland.

Levison felt sure that it must be about the ban upon the St. Jim's fellows with regard to Spalding Hall that Doris had written to him. With a faintly clouded brow, for it was a subject that worried him deeply, Levison slit open the envelope and drew out the contents.

He noticed that the letter was written on a type of newspaper that he had never known Doris to use before. But since this was the first letter she had written to him from Spalding it was not surprising. No doubt that was the kind of paper supplied at the school.

"Good heavens!"

The junior's face went suddenly startled as he read the words of the brief note, written in his sister's handwriting.

"Dear Ernest," he read,—"I am in terrible trouble! I must see you. Will you visit me here, at Spalding Hall, to-night? I cannot wait till Sunday to see you! I know St. Jim's boys are not supposed to come here now, but you must take the risk, for my sake. Please burn this letter. I will tell you why later."

"DORIS."

Levison stared down at the letter as if he could not believe his eyes.

"Good heavens!"

That something was wrong—seriously wrong—seemed very evident! But what could it be? Into what trouble could Doris have possibly got herself that was so grave as to call for his defying of the Head's strict orders regarding Spalding Hall? And a trouble so peculiar that he had to destroy the letter she had written to him! It was all past comprehension.

The Fourth-Former read the letter again. His hand was trembling a little.

He could not dream what the matter was. But Doris was in trouble—she needed him!

A step on the stairs caused him to thrust the letter hastily into his pocket. Glancing round, he saw Tom Merry descending the stairs. Tom looked at him in surprise.

"Hallo, old man! Nothing wrong?"

"No," said Levison thickly. "Why, what makes you say that?"

"You look a bit pale," said Tom. "You can't be fit!"

"Oh, I'm fit enough!" said Levison abruptly. And he swung on his heel and hurried up the stairs, leaving Tom Merry staring curiously after him.

Levison went straight to his study. Cardew and Clive were not there, and he was thankful of it. He dropped into the chair by the fire, and took out again the mysterious letter that had come as such a shock to him.

Again he read it through. There was no mistaking the urgency of it! But it bewildered him utterly, as did that last injunction—"Burn this letter!"

But if Doris wanted the letter burnt for some reason, the letter had better be burnt, Levison told himself. Anyway, he knew it by heart now.

Leaning forward, he held the sheet and envelope to the flames. In a moment they were blazing. He tossed them among the coals, and watched them turn to crumpled black leaves.

Doris was in trouble—terrible trouble!

The thought drummed in Levison's brain like a nightmare. What could it mean? What could have happened? What was wrong at Spalding Hall?

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But there was no time to waste! He jumped up. He could not wait or wonder any longer! His sister needed him—he must go to her!

It was a terrible risk, to go to Spalding Hall after the stern edict. But Levison did not weigh the possible consequences. If they entered his mind at all he dismissed them at once.

Swiftly pulling on his overcoat, he grabbed his cap and hurried downstairs on his way to the quad. In the hall Mellish was lounging. He watched Levison's set face with an odd expression—and gave a queer grin as Levison vanished into the quad.

Across to the cycle-shed Levison hurried, and took out his cycle. Taggles, the school porter, eyed him curiously as he approached the gates.

"What I says is this 'ere—it's late to be agoin' hout, Master Levison!" remarked Ephraim Taggles.

Levison took no notice of him. He jumped on to his machine, and pedalled hard out of the gateway.

Across the quad cosy lights were glowing, speaking of warmth and comfort within. But outside a keen wind was whipping through the dark trees, whining over the countryside with a promise of a stormy night to come.

But Ernest Levison, his coat collar buttoned against the wind, cared nothing for the elements. Head down, he drove furiously at the pedals.

At a reckless speed the junior raced through the dark, wind-swept lanes on his way to Spalding—in answer to that mysterious, pleading letter for help from his sister Doris.

CHAPTER 8.

Mystery!

A LIGHT, driving rain had begun to fall by the time Levison arrived by the gates of Spalding Hall.

He jumped off his cycle and stood peering through the ironwork of the tall gates.

Lights were gleaming in the school building, but the quadrangle was dark and deserted. Levison propped his machine against one of the pillars and rang the bell.

He had come to the conclusion that the best thing he could do was to put on a bold front, despite the recent order against St. Jim's boys visiting Spalding Hall. Five shillings pressed into the palm of Thrupp, the porter, would probably get him safely through the gates, he told himself—and after that he must fend for himself.

But Levison had been wrong in his estimate of Mr. Thrupp.

"Sorry, sir!" said the porter, when he had rolled out in answer to the bell. "More than my job's worth to let you in! Can't be done, sir!"

And from the man's tone Levison saw that argument was useless.

"But I want to see my sister, Miss Levison!" he said desperately.

"Very sorry, sir! Nothin' doing! And that's flat!"

"Won't you take her a message, at least—telling her I am here, asking her to come out and speak to me at the gates?"

"Daren't do it, sir!" said Mr. Thrupp dolefully. He hated having to refuse Levison's five shillings, but he lived in too great a fear of Miss Finch, the little headmistress of Spalding Hall, to dare help Levison. "I couldn't take such a message as that, sir, without first informing Miss Finch. It's no good, I'm afraid, sir! I'd help you if I could—shiver my timbers, I would!"

Levison turned away.

His face was very grim. Mr. Thrupp had proved to be inflexible. But there were other ways!

Jumping on to his cycle, Levison pedalled slowly along by the high wall skirting the school grounds. A hundred yards or so farther on he jumped off his machine again. Hiding his cycle among the bushes across the road, he took a running jump at the wall, hauled himself up, and dropped noiselessly down upon the farther side.

Levison was not standing on ceremony!

He found himself knee-deep in gooseberry bushes. It was the kitchen-garden, evidently, into which he had won his way. A little farther on another wall could be seen.

"Let's see what's on the other side of that!" muttered Levison.

It was very dark, but there was just enough light for him to make his way. The wind was creaking the old fruit-trees and dashing the scurrying rain against his face. Heavy black clouds were streaking darkly across the sky, but every now and then the moon would appear from among them, shining down mistily.

The next wall was not so high as that which divided the school premises from the road, and it was easy for Levison to swing himself on to the top of it. He jumped down on the other side, and landed on gravel. But the

noise of his feet on the loose gravel must have been drowned, he told himself, by the wind.

Crouching in the black shadow of the wall, the St. Jim's junior stared round him.

On more than one occasion Levison had accompanied Tom Merry & Co. and Blake & Co. on a visit to Ethel Cleveland at Spalding Hall, and he knew whereabouts Ethel's study was situated. It was a ground-floor room in the west wing, looking out over the school playing-fields. If he could find it in the dark, the chances were, he told himself, that Ethel and Doris would be busy upon their prep at that time of the evening. By tapping at the window, and so drawing his sister's attention, he would have no difficulty in bringing about his object—the learning of the truth from Doris concerning the mysterious trouble that she was in.

But it was not easy, in the darkness, for Levison to get his bearings. The moon had been swallowed up again by the heavy black clouds, and with the night growing darker it was impossible for him to see more than a few yards ahead.

Dim outlines of walls and buttresses faced him, but they were no part of the school that he knew. There was nothing else for it but exploration. Levison rose to his feet and crept across the gravel towards the nearest buttress. Then he crept along the wall in what seemed to him to be the right direction. At the corner of the gable he halted abruptly, listening.

He was not alone among the shadows!

Low voices had come to his ears—men's voices. Peering round the jutting buttress, he made out very dimly the dark figures which stood concealed in the shadow of the wall ahead.

"Great Scott!" muttered Levison, in startled bewilderment. "What the thump—"

"Say, it's late enough now!"

The voice of one of the men came to his ears very distinctly—a voice with an unmistakable American accent. Levison caught sight of the luminous dial of a watch as the other man glanced at it.

"Sure!" came the terse answer. "I guess it's safe now!"

The two shadowy figures vanished along the wall, noiselessly as cats.

By the tall buttress, Levison peered after them into the darkness, with quickened heart-beats. His face was set in startled lines.

Who were they? What were they up to? He felt sure that they were, at any rate, up to no good!

And then a thought flashed into his mind which caused him to draw a quick, hissing breath.

Could it be that these two mysterious night-birds had some connection with Doris' unknown danger?

With thudding heart and a whirl of confused thoughts in his brain, Ernest Levison stood staring wide-eyed into the shadows, where those two mysterious figures had vanished.

CHAPTER 9.

An Amazing Discovery !

"MY hat!" Levison gave another bewildered exclamation below his breath. Then he woke to action. Silently he slipped past the buttress and along the wall in pursuit of those two marauding figures.

Something strange was afoot—and Levison meant to find out what it was.

It was not long before he caught sight of the two men again. They were moving across a dark flagged yard, and went out through a door in a wall on the farther side. The misty light from a window shone out over the yard, and Levison, skirting it, keeping to the shadows as he hurried to follow his quarry, guessed that these were the kitchen quarters of Spalding Hall. If so, he was far away from the west wing, where his sister Doris and Ethel Cleveland had their study. But in the excitement of his new discovery Levison had set aside for the time being all thoughts of getting into immediate touch with Doris.

He opened the door in the wall cautiously. Beyond, a row of dark trees could be seen at the edge of a stretch of grass, as the moon beamed out

for a moment through the clouds; but of the two men—the Americans, as he thought them to be, there was no sign at all.

And then a faint sound came to Levison's ears. It sounded like the soft closing of a door, but a gust of wind came, drowning the sound in a moment.

"Queer!" muttered Levison.

He slipped through the doorway, and closed the door behind him. In the shadow of the wall he stood staring round. A lighted window near at hand was heavily curtained, but a chink of light streaming through on to the grass showed that the curtains were not quite drawn. A shadow crossed the chink of light, blotting it out for a moment. Then Levison noticed a door leading into the building, not far from the lighted window. Was that the door he had heard click? Had the two men entered the building?

It seemed highly probable, for Levison felt sure he must have seen them otherwise.

For a moment Levison wondered whether he ought to raise the alarm. Then he dismissed the thought. After all, he had no definite knowledge that the two men were scoundrels. It was only their curious, furtive manner that had aroused his suspicions, and the fact that they were not English, which seemed to make it unlikely that they were school servants.

Again the shadow blotted out for a passing moment the narrow shaft of light that fell on the grass from between the curtains of the lighted window near Levison. It occurred to the junior that he might learn something more if he could see what was going on within that room.

He stole across the grass towards it.

The rain, falling more heavily now, was pattering noisily against the window as he approached. He stole along by the wall; then, when he reached it, stooped and crept under the sill. Cautiously he raised his head.

Narrow though the opening between the curtains was, it was sufficient for the St. Jim's junior to see into the room.

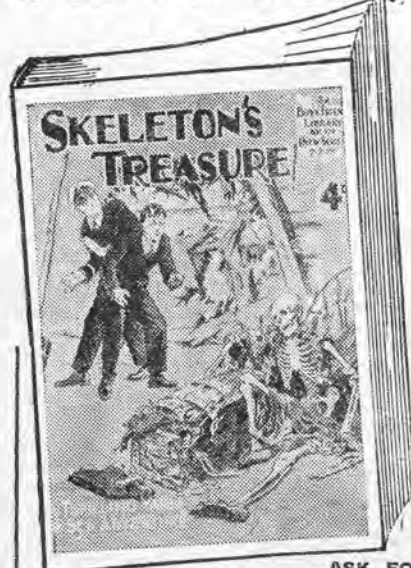
It was furnished as a study—one of the schoolmistress' studies, Levison supposed, since it was too large to have belonged to one of the girls. At first it seemed to be empty. Then a man stepped into the junior's range of vision. Levison drew a sharp breath.

He recognised that squat, broad-shouldered figure in a moment. He felt convinced that this was one of the two men he had seen and followed.

He was not a pleasant-looking individual by any means. A thin, unscrupulous mouth was ornamented with a bristly growth of unshaved beard. His eyes were keen and hard. He seemed to be talking to someone, though to whom

(Continued on next page.)

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Levison could not see. The other person was as yet standing in a part of the room hidden from Levison's view.

But a few seconds later the other occupant of the room moved across into the junior's range of vision.

Levison's teeth clicked together. He stared into the room between the narrowly parted curtains as though he could not believe his eyes. His face had gone incredibly startled and amazed.

"Good heavens!" breathed Levison thickly.

It was the tall figure of Miss Strickland, the new mistress at Spalding Hall, that had stepped into view. Levison remembered that hard face well from the previous Saturday afternoon, when, at the gates of Spalding Hall, Miss Strickland had surprised the St. Jim's party in the act of bumping Mellish in the road. Miss Strickland, who had reported the affair to Miss Finch, had been the cause of the ban upon Spalding Hall as far as St. Jim's was concerned.

And it was little wonder that the sight of Miss Strickland brought a gasp of amazement and consternation to the lips of Ernest Levison.

For Miss Strickland's long hair had gone—her hair was cropped short, like a man's. A wig! It had been a wig that she had worn. And Levison, staring in with an almost dazed expression on his face, realised that staggering truth as he saw her now, with the wig gone.

Miss Strickland was a man!

Levison gripped the window-sill. The rain, beating against the window, drowned any faint sounds he might have otherwise heard of the voices within the room. The American and "Miss Strickland" were talking eagerly together.

Miss Strickland, the new schoolmistress of Spalding, was really a man in disguise!

No wonder she had appeared tall for a woman! No wonder her hard face and big hands had seemed extraordinarily mannish. For she—or rather, he—actually was a man.

What could it mean?

It was a baffling mystery to Ernest Levison. He stared in wonderingly. But one thing, at least he realised well enough—it could be for no good purpose that this man in feminine disguise had come to Spalding Hall, and was now meeting stealthily, secret visitors under the cover of darkness.

The headmistress of Spalding must know the truth about "Miss Strickland" at once! She might want to know how Levison had found out—in which case he would tell her. Miss Finch could not be angry with him, under the circumstances.

And with that resolve, Levison gave a last glance into the room at that strange figure, and turned to hurry away.

But at that moment a heavy hand fell upon his shoulder. He started, with a breathless cry of surprise, and turned his head.

A tall man was standing beside him, and Levison knew instinctively that this was the second of the two mysterious Americans.

There was a queer gleam in the glittering eyes that were bent down towards his own. The man knew that the secret of the bogus schoolmistress was discovered. Levison tried to wrench himself free, but that grasp on his shoulder was like steel.

"Say, kid, you're mighty inquisitive!" snapped the stranger grimly.

"Let me go!" panted Levison.

"I don't think, sonny!"

The man glanced round swiftly, uneasily. And in that moment Levison acted.

He hit out for all he was worth, and his right fist crashed home on the man's chin, jerking back his head. The man staggered, and his grip on the St. Jim's junior relaxed. Levison turned to bolt, but a small elm branch, wrenched off by the wind, was lying on the grass, and he caught his foot in it, stumbling forward on to his hands and knees.

He leapt up, but the delay had been fatal!

The next moment he felt his arm seized. He swung round, tense-faced, to struggle with his powerful adversary. But the man drove a clenched fist into his face, and, with a groan, Levison crumpled up and collapsed on to the grass, a motionless heap.

When Levison of the Fourth opened his eyes again, and stared round dazedly, it was to find himself lying bound in a shadowy cellar, with a gas-jet flickering dimly on the wall. A packing-case and a chair was all the cellar contained.

Levison's head was aching horribly, and he gave a little groan. He tried to move his arms, but they were fastened behind him, with cruel tightness. His ankles, too, were bound with thick cord.

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Opposite him, a heavy door showed in what a secure place his captors had imprisoned him.

A prisoner in the cellars of Spalding Hall! For that was where he was, without a doubt!

And the junior knew, from what Cousin Ethel had told him, that the old building was honeycombed beneath the level of the ground with old passages and cellars, unused and unvisited for the most part.

Not even a gag in his mouth! That, alone, proved how far from help he was, in the opinion of his captors. Deep under the old school buildings, Levison was a helpless captive.

The junior moistened his lips, and sent a shaking cry for help ringing round his place of imprisonment. Mocking echoes were his only reply.

His head reeled dizzily. That terrible blow in the face had left him weak and dazed.

Then, with a faint groan, Ernest Levison again lapsed into the darkness of unconsciousness.

CHAPTER 10.

Missing!

"LEE!"

"Adsum!"

Kildare of the Sixth was taking call-over in the School House that evening.

"Lefevre!"

"Adsum!" answered the captain of the Fifth.

"Lennox!" called Kildare.

"Adsum!"

"Levison major!"

There was no answer. Kildare glanced up from the roll, and looked across to where the Fourth Form was lined up.

"Levison major!" he repeated.

Still there was no answer. Fellows turned their heads in mild interest. It was not like Levison of the Fourth to miss roll-call, calling down upon his head the consequent punishment for that offence.

Kildare marked Levison major absent, and went on with the roll-call.

"Where's old Levison?" Blake asked Ralph Reckness as he left the Hall, when at last call-over was finished.

"Don't ask me, dear man," drawled Cardew. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

But Cardew, despite his careless answer, was puzzled.

It was certainly very unusual for Levison to "cut" call-over. Cardew knew that Levison had no pass that evening. What could have kept him away?

Cardew strolled up the stairs. In Study No. 9 Clive joined him.

"Where's Levison?" queried Clive.

"Not the faintest," replied Ralph Reckness Cardew.

"Have a cigarette?"

"Fathead!"

Cardew, who had thoughtfully taken out a cigarette-case and dropped into a chair by the fire, caught Clive's grim look and returned the case to his pocket, with a sigh.

"How nice it is to share a study with good boys!" complained Cardew, and yawned.

Clive, who had not finished his prep, sat down to complete some French translation for Monsieur Morny, the little French master. Cardew picked up a magazine and began to read. After twenty minutes Clive closed his books with a snap.

"That's finished that!" he exclaimed. "I say, I wonder where old Ernie is? He's not back yet."

Cardew shrugged his shoulders. He seemed about to speak, but at that moment there was a tap at the door, and Kildare put his head in. The school captain was frowning.

"Levison back yet?" he asked sharply.

"Not seen him," answered Clive glumly.

"When you see him, tell him Mr. Railton wants him."

"All right."

Kildare closed the door. Clive grunted.

"What's the ass up to, staying out as late as this?" he exclaimed. "He'll get a licking, as sure as eggs."

"Of course, dear man," agreed Cardew carelessly.

In his heart Cardew was just as sorry for his chum's coming troubles, as a consequence of missing roll-call, as was Sidney Clive. But it was not Cardew's way to show the fact.

He lounged from the study, and turned towards the stairs. He sauntered down to the Hall, and across to the doorway leading to the quad. Kangaroo and Glyn of the Shell were talking by the doorway.

"Levison come in yet?" asked Cardew.

Bernard Glyn shook his head.

"Not seen him," he said.

"Oh, gad!" murmured Cardew, in comical dismay. "I fear that poor old Levison will need some exercise-books."

in his bags when he does get in—and Railton chats with him."

"You're right there," nodded Kangaroo. "Poor old Levison! What's the ass up to, I wonder?"

"He, he, he!" Baggy Trimble had rolled up and had overheard their talk. "I know what it is. Levison must have gone on the giddy ran-dan. He's down at the Green Man, if you ask me."

Cardew turned a calm glance towards Baggy Trimble. There had, as Baggy said, been a time when Levison had not been the straight-forward, true-blue fellow he was now; but Cardew did not allow people like Baggy to mention the fact in his hearing.

"You really think that, Baggy?" drawled Cardew.

"He, he! Yes, Playing cards with Banks, I dare say, and smoo—Ow! Yaroooooh!"

Baggy Trimble's chuckles came to an abrupt end. He howled, and hopped frantically on one foot as Cardew shot out a hand and gripped the fat Fourth-Former by the ear.

"Ow! You beast, Cardew! Leggo! I—I didn't mean that about Levison. I—Yaroooooh!"

Baggy gave another fiendish yell as Cardew's boot landed hard on the seat of his trousers. Baggy Trimble shot down the passage like a rocket, and landed on the floor with a bump and a final yell.

"Ow! roared Baggy. "Ow! Yow! I'm hurt! You beast, Cardew! You've broken my spine! I'm dying—"

Cardew made a move towards Baggy, but Baggy was not waiting. Showing an astonishing turn of speed, considering his fatal injuries, he scrambled to his feet and scuttled away along the passage, followed by a roar of laughter from Kangaroo and Glyn.

There was a step on the stairs. The elegant figure of Arthur Augustus D'Aroy hove into view. At sight of Cardew he adjusted his monocle and approached the slacker of the Fourth.

"I say, Cardew, deah boy, I am afraid Levison is in for trouble when he awakes back this evenin'. It is weally most extraordinary his stayin' out so wemarkably late."

"Not so extraordinary as something else, Gussy," said Cardew blandly.

"Weally? What is the othah extraordinary thing, deah boy?" inquired the swell of St. Jim's innocently.

"Your face," answered Cardew critically. "That's the most extraordinary thing at St. Jim's."

"Bai Jove! I uttaly refuse to allow you to pass such wude wemarks about my personal appeawance!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, with great wrath. "I considah it my duty to administah a most fwrightful thwashin' unless you apologise at once, Cardew!"

Arthur Augustus began to roll up his sleeves in a very business-like manner. Cardew, grinning, watched him without apparent terror.

"Pax!" said Cardew. "Anything for a quiet life. I'll apologise, (assy, on bended knees, if you like. But I can't exert myself to scrap with you. Besides, you'd only get hurt."

"Bai Jove! I considah—"

The swell of St. Jim's broke off hastily as the tall figure of Mr. Railton appeared along the passage, approaching them. The Housemaster turned to ascend the stairs, but, catching sight of the group of juniors, he paused.

"Have any of you seen Levison major?" he asked sternly. "No, sir," said Cardew slowly. "None of us."

Mr. Railton went up the stairs, and Cardew turned to go up, too, when Mellish strolled up.

"Levison back yet?" inquired Mellish, with a grin. "Everyone seems to be asking about Levison," said Kangaroo. "No, he's not back yet, if you must know."

Cardew watched Mellish's face curiously. There was something in the expression of Mellish's eyes that caused Cardew to turn back from the foot of the stairs and rejoin the group.

"Why, what do you know about Levison?" asked Cardew, staring at Mellish.

Mellish jumped. His face went a trifle red.

"Nothing!" he answered hastily. "What should I know about Levison's movements, eh?"

"That's what I was wondering," said Cardew.

Mellish seemed to be about to speak, but he turned abruptly and vanished up the stairs. Cardew stood watching him curiously as he went. Then the slacker of the Fourth turned and went slowly up the stairs himself.

"Funny," he muttered, very thoughtfully. "Surely Mellish can't know anything about it."

It seemed highly unlikely. And yet, somehow, the thought would not be dismissed from Cardew's mind.

CHAPTER 11.

Cardew on the Trail!

WHEN the time came for the juniors to go to bed, with still no sign of Levison, excitement rose high.

That junior's empty bed in the dormitory seemed to chill the spirits of the Fourth-Formers as they went to bed.

Something had happened—something must have happened! No fellow would be so mad as to stay out so late, in addition to missing call-over, unless something had prevented his returning to the school.

"Poor old Levison!" said Blake, as he climbed into bed. "What the dickens can have happened?"

It was the question everybody was asking.

But when next morning it was found that Ernest Levison had been away from St. Jim's all night, excitement and alarm rose to fever-pitch.

Even the mysterious disappearance of Levison, however, could not hold up the routine of St. Jim's! Classes had to be gone through, however hard the juniors found it to keep their minds on their work. And at dinner-time there was still no news of the missing junior.

Tom Merry, joining Clive and Cardew in the hall after dinner, saw that Clive was looking worried and glum, and that even Cardew's face was very grave.

"Yes, it's a rotten business," agreed Tom, with feeling, in answer to a remark of Clive's. "I saw young Frank Levison just now. The kid's been crying."

"Anything may have happened!" muttered Clive miserably. "He must have had an accident; Taggles saw him go out on his bike. A car smash; why, he may be—be—"

Clive broke off without voicing the terrible thought in his mind.

"Oh, rot!" said Tom sympathetically. "Mustn't think that, Clive! He'll turn up all right!"

"It's so thunderin' queer, though!" broke in Cardew. "Taggles said Ernie was lookin' strange when he left the school last evening. What can have made him go out at that time of day, anyhow? He'd only just got back from the village with his minor, then he suddenly went out again, without sayin' a word to anyone!"

"It is queer," agreed Tom Merry, frowning. "Awfully queer!"

A sudden shadow fell across the floor from the doorway.

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Someone had entered from the quad. The three glanced round. It was Mellish.

Mellish went past towards the stairs. Cardew followed the sneak of the Fourth with his eyes.

"Oh, I rather want a word with Mellish!" murmured Cardew suddenly.

With a nod to Tom and Clive, he turned and strolled after Mellish. Once out of sight of the two in the hall he hastened his steps, and caught up with Mellish at the top of the stairs.

Mellish glanced round quickly as he heard footsteps behind him. A look of alarm flashed into his eyes at sight of Cardew.

"Half a moment! I want a word with you!" smiled Cardew.

"Well?" said Mellish, with faint defiance.

Cardew took hold of Mellish's arm and began to hurry him along the passage, despite Mellish's protests and frantic wriggles.

"Don't get excited, dear man," said Cardew blandly. "I only want a little chat!"

"Hands off, hang you!" snarled Mellish, struggling to get free.

They had reached Study No. 9, and Cardew with his free hand swung open the door. He gave Mellish a slight push and sent him staggering, against his will, into the study. Cardew stepped in after him, closing the door behind him and locking it. He slipped the key into his pocket.

"What do you want?" muttered Mellish thickly, breathing hard. "Let me go, hang you! Unlock that door!"

"Oh, heaps of time!" smiled Cardew. "Take a chair! No? Then I will!"

He dropped into a chair by the fire, his eyes on the furious sneak of the Fourth. Mellish twisted the door-handle furiously, although he knew he could not open the door.

"Unlock this door, I tell you!"

"Don't I tell you there's heaps of time," said Cardew laconically. He watched Mellish with keen eyes. "Now, let's get to the point right away. No beating about the giddy bush! What do you know about Levison?"

Cardew spoke in cool, level tones. Mellish dropped his eyes. He had clearly expected the question. But he tried to affect surprise. He smiled a sickly smile.

"Chuck rotting!" he muttered uneasily. "What should I know about Levison? Nothing, of course!"

"I suppose," said Cardew calmly, "you wouldn't recognise the truth if it was handed to you on a plate, Percy?"

Mellish shifted from one foot to another.

"Look here! Let me go, hang you!" he snarled. "Give me the key of this door!"

"Don't get impatient, Percy!" smiled Cardew. "I know that you know something about Levison——"

"That's a lie!"

"And I'm going to get it out of you before you leave this room," went on Cardew coolly, unheeding. "See? Your face has given you away, Percy. Last night, when Levison's name was mentioned, you looked fishy. Now I've tackled you with it, you look fishier still! Yes, you know something about Levison. Out with it—and sharp's the word!"

Mellish faced him sullen-faced. He was frightened, but still he tried to bluster.

"I tell you——"

Cardew jumped suddenly to his feet. His eyes held a deadly gleam. He flung out a pointing hand.

"You know something about Levison!" he said, in tones of cold fury. "Tell me, or you'll be sorry for it!"

He stepped forward swiftly and grasped the sneak of the Fourth by the shoulder. Mellish gave a frightened gasp.

"I—I don't know anything! It's a rotten lie——"

"Tell me, or——"

Cardew broke off. His fingers tightened on the sneak's shoulder. Mellish could not face those burning eyes. He began to whimper.

"I—I'll tell you," he muttered, in a scared voice, "if you'll let me alone!"

Cardew stepped back.

"Well?" he demanded harshly.

Mellish hesitated. His courage was coming back a little now that the painful grip had been removed from his shoulder. A cunning smile crept into his face.

"I'll tell you," he repeated, "on condition!"

Cardew made an impatient gesture. But all he wanted was to learn about Levison—if Mellish had anything worth telling. He was not worrying about Mellish personally.

"Very well," he snapped. "What condition, you cur?"

"That you don't breathe a word to anyone! And you must swear not to lay a hand on me——"

"I promise! Now, then, out with it, hang you! What do you know about Levison?"

Mellish grinned triumphantly. With Cardew's promise,

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he felt safe now. He could tell everything, without fear of any unpleasant consequences. It was an arrangement that appealed to Mellish, who had no shame for what he had done. Now he could crow over his mean triumph!

"I'll tell you," he sneered. "I owed Levison one—and I meant to get my own back! So I took a letter of his sister's from that desk there; I copied her handwriting! I managed it pretty well! He, he!" He sniggered boastfully. "I wrote a letter in his sister's handwriting, telling him that she was in deadly danger—wanted him to go to Spalding at once! See the idea? I guessed he'd go, and get caught, and then he'd be reported to the Head, and that would mean a flogging, at least!"

Cardew said nothing. There was a strange look in his face as he stared at Mellish.

"Well, I fancy it worked!" went on Mellish boastfully. "He left the school pretty soon after that letter arrived,

ANYBODY CAN

The big, athletic-looking fellow is not necessarily the best cricketer. The small, muscular, thin—yet they are all great cricketers. So do

AS we watch the masters of this or that sport we are sometimes almost compelled to remark: "What a perfect athlete he is!" The same sort of thing happens even in the street. You pass a fine figure of a man, six feet or so in height, broad of shoulder, obviously strong of muscle; big, but obviously without an ounce of superfluous flesh on his bones. And you say: "I'll bet that fellow is great at sport!" And if you don't happen to have been particularly blessed by Nature you sigh, and wish you were like him.

Well, I am not going to say that the fellows on whom Nature has smiled in the physical sense don't start with a decided advantage. They do. But, certainly, so far as the game of cricket is concerned, there is no need for a lad to despair because he doesn't threaten to grow into a "giant" physically. If you run the rule over the cricketers out in Australia—those playing for England, and those playing for Australia—the thought must come home—practically anybody can be a cricketer. Height, weight, strength; these may be useful, but the will to win through has seen many a cricketer rise to the top of the tree, in spite of physical handicaps.

Big Tate and Small Freeman!

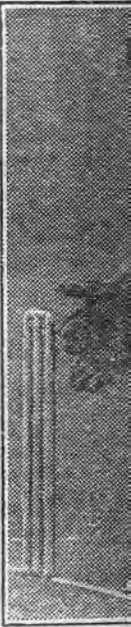
Let us for a few minutes run the "tape" over the great cricketers, and then see if we are justified in concluding that, from the cricket point of view, at any rate, there is no such thing as a cricket type of figure.

Nobody is the slightest surprised, of course, to find that Maurice Tate is a fine bowler. You would guess it if you had never previously set eyes on him in your life. He is just the type. In all there are seventy-two inches of him from sole of foot to top of head. His shoulders were made for a Rugby scrum; the muscles of his arms are like iron bands.

See Maurice standing beside "Tich" Freeman, and you would have to laugh at the picture of two great England bowlers. Freeman is five-feet-four—the figure of a mere boy. His hand is literally no more than half the size of Tate's, and yet they both get batsmen out bowling with the same size of ball.

It's the Spirit that Counts!

Between these two bowlers there is another, Harold Larwood, and he, indeed, provides an instance of a lad who has triumphed over difficulties. How often have we said in the past that to be successful in top cricket a fast bowler must be big, tremendously strong, even tall? We have pointed to Jack Gregory of Australia as the ideal, and Gregory is almost a foot taller than Lar-



Little George
feet, but a "g

wood. But Larwood is as fast as ever Jack is!

I like what I spirit which, will make a success of cricket replied:

Of the really Wally Hammond Chapman, but And then as a Duckworth, En he walks to the dering whether over the wicket upright.

Duckworth has laughed at him tion of becoming "You'll have to get at a boy But little George handicap, and keeper before! "Ah," but you matter so much in the other de

and he must have gone over to Spalding! Goodness knows why he hasn't come back! I dare say the fact is he got caught, right enough, and daren't come back to St. Jim's to face the flogging! He, he, he! I fancy I cry quits with Levison now!"

Cardew seemed incapable of speech. But a cold flame was flickering in his eyes that struck sudden terror into Mellish's heart. He stepped back sharply.

"Mind, you promised to tell no one of this!" he blustered. "And that you wouldn't lay a hand on me—"

"You unspeakable cur!" Cardew seemed to be struggling to get control of his white-hot anger. His teeth were clenched, his eyes flaming.

Mellish, fear written plainly on his pasty face, moved uneasily towards the locked door.

"I've told you all I know!" he said, making an effort to look unconcerned. "Let me out!"

Slowly Cardew took the key from his pocket.

"If I hadn't given my promise to tell no one, I'd make St. Jim's too hot to hold you," he said; his voice was quiet, but it shook a little.

Mellish laughed scoffingly.

"But you gave your promise!" he sneered.

"Yes," agreed Cardew. He inserted the key in the lock and turned it with a click, flinging open the door. "Get out of here! The air's not fit to breathe with you about!" "Remember you promised!" muttered Mellish again, with faint uneasiness.

"I did," nodded Cardew. "And I promised, too, not to lay a finger on you, didn't I? Well, nothing was said about feet!"

And the next moment Mellish gave a howl as Cardew's boot landed on his person.

"Oh!" roared Mellish. "You cad—"

"Nothing"—kick!—"was said"—kick!—"about feet!" repeated Cardew breathlessly, punctuating the sentence with his boot.

Mellish, yelling and panting, bolted out through the door, and Cardew's boot landed twice more as he went. With a final yell, Mellish fled down the passage, and Cardew, with a faint glimmer of grim satisfaction in his eyes, slammed the study door.

For a while he stood motionless, staring at the carpet. Then he crossed to the fireplace and dropped into the chair, and sat thinking, with darkened brows.

"So he went to Spalding Hall last night!" he muttered. "Well, that's something to go on. Not much—"

The slacker of the Fourth sat deep in thought, staring into the fire, for a very long time. A dozen cross-questions and answers filled his mind. Surely Levison was not staying away from St. Jim's simply to avoid a Head's flogging, after being caught visiting Spalding Hall?

Cardew knew Levison far too well to think that.

"No," breathed Cardew. "It's not that. Something's happened."

The bell for afternoon classes came faintly to his ears. He started, and jumped from his chair, and began to collect his books. As he crossed towards the door, he paused suddenly. There was grim resolve in his handsome face.

"I know the Head's forbidden it; but to-night I'm going over to Spalding, to see if there's anything—"

He hurried from the study. As he passed down the stairs, he saw through a tall window that heavy clouds were racing across the sky—giving every promise of a stormy night.

But storm or no storm, one thing was certain! Cardew was going to Spalding Hall that evening, in search of traces of his vanished chum!

CHAPTER 12.

The Prisoner of Spalding Hall!

ERNEST LEVISON turned his head, listening.

A faint sound had come to his ears from beyond the heavy bolted door of his prison. Someone was coming down the passage leading to the cellar.

He did not know how long he had been a captive there. Many hours, he knew. When he had recovered from his fainting-fit—a result of the sickening blow in the face that had been dealt him—he had slept for possibly, a long time. He did not know. But his sleep had been Nature's remedy for his dazed brain, and he had awakened again refreshed and alert.

He had tried desperately to free himself from his bonds. But that had proved impossible. He had shouted for help again and again. But he was evidently in some utterly remote portion of the old building's underground ramifications—perhaps, even, in a secret cellar, for all that he knew. At any rate, there had been no answer to his shouts—neither had his captors come to make him quiet. They clearly had no cause for alarm in his shouting, even if they themselves heard it.

Levison, who had managed to crawl to the chair and seat himself was beginning to feel faint again, faint with hunger and thirst. The hours had gone by on leaden wings; but his hunger told him that he was not mistaken in thinking that he had been a prisoner for a great many hours. Outside, it must be daylight again, he believed.

The footsteps outside the door came nearer, and halted. He heard the grating of rusty bolts, and then the door swung back.

Outlined in the doorway was the sinister figure of "Miss Strickland," as the man masquerading as a schoolmistress called himself. Behind him, the figures of the two Americans could be seen.

A CRICKETER!

There are all sorts of men playing for England in Australia—big, if you are small, or frail-looking. You can still be a cricket star.



...th, just over five
the wicket all the

send them down as
did. Funny, isn't

Larwood spirit—the
that he would never
over in first-class
w you!"

athlete stamp is
so big as Tate or
fully proportioned.
t we have George
cricket-keeper. As

you feel like won-
of his head will be
then he is standing

me how his pals
declared his inten-
professional cricketer.
a couple of bricks
ll," they told him.
ere, in spite of his
England's wicket-
Strudwick.

say, "size doesn't
cricket-keeper! It is
a of the game that

it matters." That sounds all right, but remember that little George Duckworth, the lad who only stood "as high as sixpenny-worth of coppers," is becoming a most useful batsman. He will never lift them out of the field for sixes like Chapman, Hammond, or Tate do. But it isn't sheer strength alone which gets runs. It is timing the ball.

Quaint, little Patsy Hendren, with his short legs. He can hit 'em all over the field, because he times them. And in the field he can run as fast as the longest-legged of the players, and a little bit faster than most. The reason is that he is on his toes all the time; ready for the flying start, and he anticipates the stroke the batsman is likely to make.

Cricket Contrasts:

Perhaps we could not get a better example of variety in the players who rise to the top of the cricket tree than by looking at the last three men who have captained Australia. Warwick Armstrong was well named. He was the big type, weighing fully fifteen stone when he last captained Australia, and round almost to the extent of having what is known as a "corporation."

His successor, Herbert Collins, was the exact opposite—a mere slip of a fellow, almost strikingly thin, and looking anything but strong. And to follow these two extremes is Jack Ryder, the real athlete to look at—very much of the Wally Hammond type.

Just as it is impossible to lay down hard and fast rules governing the size of the men who make good in cricket, so it is hopeless to attempt to be dogmatic about the proper age of a player.

In the fourth Test Australia introduced Jackson, a boy of twenty, and two others in A-Beckett and Bradman, both about the same age. Jack Hearne and others have played for England at twenty, too.

And Jack Hobbs is still playing for England at the age of forty-six. Even more remarkable, in its way, is the history of Blackie. He only came into the Australian team for the first time during the present season, and he was then forty-six years of age. Fancy waiting all that time for a Test Match cap! Once he even retired from first-class cricket, but came back to have another try.

And so we could go on pointing to the contrasts, and showing that there was no such thing as a Test match type. But enough has been said to give every lad courage, no matter whether he be big or small, fat or lean. It takes all sorts to make the world we live in, and of all sorts great cricketers can be made.

The three entered the collar, closing the door behind them. Levison, sore and aching from the confinement of his bonds, stared up at the three with burning eyes.

"Waal, sonny!" drawled one of the Americans, with a mocking gleam in his eyes—"not feelin' so mighty fresh now, I guess?"

The other man—the taller one—rubbed his jaw, with a muttered exclamation, at the point where Levison's fist, on the night before, had struck it.

"What do you want with me?" muttered Levison defiantly.

"Nothing with you!" exclaimed the bogus schoolmistress harshly. "But you know too much! It's your own fault that you're mixed up in this affair, you young fool! But knowing what you do, you've got to be kept out of the way for a while!"

"You scoundrels!" breathed Levison. "I don't understand what your game is here, but—"

"Aw! Cut out the rough talk!" grinned the burly American. "See here, kiddo—we've brought you some eats!"

He placed on the packing-case a paper bundle that he had been carrying.

"Will you promise not to try any funny business if we unfasten your arms?" asked the man. "No trying to escape?"

Levison hesitated. But the thought of food had already made his mouth water, hungry as he was—terribly hungry! He nodded.

"I promise."

The man stooped and cut his bonds with a knife.

"Good for you!"

It was not easy for the junior to move his arms at all at first, and almost at once the blood rushed back, causing agony to his cramped limbs. But at last he was able to turn hungrily to the bundle of food. Meat and bread he found—and began to eat ravenously. His three captors stood watching him.

The taller of the two Americans had taken pencil and paper from his pocket. When Levison had eaten for a little while, the man stooped over him, thrusting out the paper.

"Now then, sonny," he growled, "you've got to do as you're told—get that?" He scowled ferociously. "Take this paper and pencil—and write what we tell you."

"What—what do you want me to write?" demanded Levison hoarsely. He took the paper with mechanical fingers.

"A line to your headmaster at St. Jim's."

"To the Head?" muttered Levison, in utter bewilderment.

"Yep! Telling him you've run away from the school—telling him you are sick of the place, and have made a get-away!" drawled the man laconically.

Levison stared at him. But there was a grim resolve in the youngster's set face.

"I won't!"

"Sure you won't!" snarled the man in woman's garb. "You will, you little cub!"

He caught hold of Levison's left wrist, twisting his arm behind him. Despite himself, the junior gave a gasp of pain.

"You brute!"

"Write then!"

"I won't!"

Levison gritted his teeth. The sweat stood out on his forehead, but he was determined not to cry out again. He endured for a moment or two—then a shaking cry was wrung from his lips as the man twisted his arm further.

"Will you write?" hissed his tormentor.

Levison nodded blindly. It was humanly impossible to stand that torture. He was in their hands, and he had to do as he was bid.

At the dictation of his captor, he began to write with an unsteady hand:

"Dear Mr. Holmes,—I am writing to tell you I have left St. Jim's for good. I hate the place, and have run away, never to come back! I intend to obtain work—probably on a ship; so it will be useless to attempt to follow me."

"Now sign your name, sonny!" grinned the tall American, evilly. "Your right name, mind! We'll soon find out if it's not, by looking in your pockets!"

As Levison knew, he had letters on him which would show his real name, should he try to deceive them with a false one. There was no help for it. He signed his name—"E. Levison."

There was a sudden startled exclamation from one of the three men. He had snatched the scribbled note from Levison's hand, and was staring down at it in amazement.

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"Levison!" he muttered. "Say, if that isn't the queerest thing!"

The men looked at one another in a way that puzzled the helpless junior. One of them gripped him by the shoulder.

"Have you got a sister at this school—at Spalding Hall?" he demanded.

"Yes," said Levison, after a moment's hesitation. "You scoundrels! What—"

"Of all the luck!" chuckled the stocky man huskily. "It's her brother! Ernest Levison, who we knew was at St. Jim's."

Levison felt a coldness grip his heart. What did these men know about Doris? Remembrance of Doris' mysterious letter came to him with a rush.

"What do you know of my sister?" he muttered hoarsely.

"Quite a lot, sonny!" grinned the stocky American.

"Oh, quite a lot! Yep!"

He glanced at the others. The man known as "Miss Strickland" shrugged his shoulders.

"Might as well tell him, I suppose!" he muttered. "He'll know soon, anyway."

Levison felt a growing fear numbing him. What was he about to learn? Something about Doris—

"It's this way," said the tall American harshly. "We're here to kidnap your sister. Get that? We want her, and we're taking her away from this school to-night. A long way away! There's a tight little island in the Mediterranean where she'll be landed soon—and you with her. That's where we're goin' to keep her safe until our job's done. You've learnt too much, and since we draw the line at killing, you've got to come, too. That's the size of it."

Levison stared up at the three grim faces dumbly.

His brain was in a whirl.

These men were kidnappers. And it was none other than his own sister, Doris, whom they had schemed to carry away from Spalding! So that was why this man had come to the school in the guise of a new mistress—to watch his sister and discover the best means of effecting the scoundrelly scheme planned by the gang.

Forgetting that his ankles were still bound, Levison tried to rise to his feet. He sank back, breathless.

"You—you villains!" he panted hoarsely. "What are you doing this for?"

"If you want to know," grinned the stocky American, "it's all over the little matter of a will! Ever heard of a guy named Marchant? He was a friend of your father, and he's dying in San Francisco. He's got a pile o' money tucked away, and in his will he's left it all to the daughter of his old friend Levison—your pop. But he's lost touch with your family so long that he doesn't even know for sure that your sister is still alive. He took a fancy to her when she was a little kid. I reckon, for he ain't clapped eyes on her or any of you for more than ten years. So the will says that the money is hers—if she claims it within a year of his death. She's got to claim it, you see; but she can't if she's bein' kept prisoner on our little island in the Mediterranean! Get the idea? A bright little scheme, ain't it?"

The scoundrel broke into a triumphant guffaw.

"So now you've got the hang of things, kid!" he finished. "As soon as our time is ripe we collar her."

Levison was breathing fast.

Now he understood everything. His mind was clear at last. A fortune was at stake—a fortune that would rightly belong to his sister! And these scoundrels were meaning to cheat her of it!

"And if the money isn't claimed?" said Levison quietly.

"Why, it all goes to his next of kin, Marchant's cousin," answered the man.

"And you are doing this for that cousin, eh?"

Levison's lip curled scornfully.

"Sure!" growled the tall man. "But that's enough jaw for now. Tie his hands again and come along. Got that letter he wrote, Bennett?"

"Sure," said the stocky American, grinning. "It'll clear up the mystery of this young 'un's disappearance all right—and it'll make 'em all think his sister's gone off with him when she vanishes, too!"

He chuckled hoarsely, mockingly.

"You hounds!" Levison broke out fiercely. "But you can never keep my sister and myself prisoners for a year. We shall be found traced—"

"Don't you believe it!" grinned the man named Bennett. "They'll never trace you. The sea don't leave no tracks. And on this little island I've told you of you'll be as safe as if you were at the North Pole—safe until it's too late for your sister to put in her claim for that fortune."

"Come on, Bennett!" repeated the tall man harshly.

Levison, in a sudden fit of wild desperation, flung himself forward, despite his bound legs, and caught the tall man round the knees. The scoundrel gave a hoarse

shout and fell, toppling over backwards with a crash that winded him. But the next moment Levison was seized. Cord was wound round his struggling arms, and he was flung savagely back on to the chair, panting and bruised.

"If you hurt my sister—" he began, in a choking voice. "Don't worry!" grinned Bennett. "We wouldn't hurt a hair of her pretty head. Bye-bye, sonny!"

And with his mocking chuckle ringing in Levison's ears, the three scoundrels hurried from the cellar, leaving the St. Jim's junior writhing madly in his bonds. The door slammed.

Levison, panting heavily, heard the rusty bolts shot back into their sockets. Retreating footsteps came to his ears, growing fainter, dying away.

He was alone again in his prison.

But now he knew the staggering, ghastly truth! He and his sister were to be kidnapped, taken out of England, kept prisoners for many months in the hands of these scoundrels, for the sake of a vast fortune belonging to a dying man in San Francisco!

And Levison was helpless to help either himself or his sister!

That letter that had brought him to Spalding—could it be that Doris had some suspicion of what was being planned? If so, she might be on her guard, and might yet save herself.

But in that Levison was clutching at a straw that did not exist. He did not dream that the letter had not come from Doris at all, had been a forgery, sent by Mellish for his own reasons.

He knew nothing of that—any more than Mellish knew into what wild adventure his forged letter, intended merely to bring Levison a flogging, had plunged the missing schoolboy!

CHAPTER 13.

Cardew Investigates!

"GOIN' out, Cardew, deah boy?"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy put that question to the dancer of the Fourth. It was some time after tea, and darkness was falling in the old quad at St. Jim's.

Since Cardew had on his overcoat and cap, the question seemed a little superfluous. He paused at the head of the School House steps, where Arthur Augustus was standing elegantly, and shook his head.

"No, Gussy," said Cardew gravely, "I'm staying indoors. That's why I've put on my cap and coat."

He passed down the steps, leaving the swell of St. Jim's staring after him through his eyeglass with rather a blank look.

Cardew hurried across the quad towards the cycle shed, and a minute later he was pedalling along the Wayland Road through the chilly dusk.

A regular gale was howling through the trees, and though it had not yet begun to rain it looked as though it might start at any minute. The roads were pitch-black, and the glimmer of the junior's cycle lamp was the only light to help him on his way.

With no sign of Levison throughout the day, St. Jim's was fairly buzzing with excitement. The missing Fourth-Former's name was on all lips.

It was known that a telegram to Levison's home had been despatched, and the answering wire had made it clear that the missing junior had not gone home, at any rate.

Where was Levison?

Cardew was Levison's chum, yet his face had been one of the least worried at St. Jim's. That was Cardew's way—he never cared to betray his feelings. But now that he was alone, cycling swiftly through the dark lanes towards distant Spalding, the face of the slacker of the Fourth was lined and anxious.

The lights of Wayland came into view, misty through the swaying trees. Cardew cycled down the old High Street, and on towards Spalding village.

"Thrupp!" he muttered suddenly.

Thrupp, the school porter at Spalding Hall, might know something!

Mr. Thrupp was enjoying an evening pipe in the parlour of his little lodge when he heard the gateway bell ring. He slipped on a coat and hat, for it was raining now, and went outside. The figure of a schoolboy with a cycle could be seen standing in the downpour on the farther side of the gates, in the light of the lamp above. The St. Jim's cap was unmistakable.

"Shiver me timbers!" exclaimed Mr. Thrupp. "You young gents! As if you didn't know well enough as how you've all bin forbidden to come here!"

"I know that," said Cardew impatiently. "I only want to see you—"

(Continued on next page.)

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"Me?" exclaimed Mr. Thrupp in great surprise. "Well, here I am and you're very welcome."

"I want to know if a St. Jim's fellow came here last night?" said Cardew.

Mr. Thrupp nodded.

"Yes," he admitted. "There was a young gent from St. Jim's. Wanted to see his sister, Miss Levison—"

Cardew caught his breath.

"But I had to send him away," continued Mr. Thrupp severely. "It wouldn't have done to take no risks, after Miss Finch's strict horders."

"He went away again?" echoed Cardew. "You're sure?"

"Certain," chuckled Thrupp. "The gates was locked, as you see 'em now. He couldn't have got in without me knowing. Besides, he rode off on his bike. I saw him go."

"Which way?" asked Cardew.

Thrupp nodded up the road.

Cardew stared up the dark road, through the pelting rain. That was the way his chum had gone—to vanish as if into thin air, from all knowledge of his friends!

"Thanks!" said Cardew.

He nodded, and turned away. Mr. Thrupp scuttled back into the warm cosiness of his little lodge. Cardew jumped on his cycle and rode a few yards up the road. Then, on an impulse, he dismounted.

Heedless of the rain, he stood there, deep in thought.

So Levison had visited Spalding truly enough. And he had been eager to see his sister—amazingly eager, he must have been, or he would never have ventured to visit Spalding Hall in face of the Head's order.

If he had been as anxious to see Doris as that, would he have ridden away so tamely because Thrupp had refused him entry at the gates? Cardew shook his head.

"That's not likely," he muttered. "If I know Levison, he wouldn't give in so easily if his mind was made up."

His eyes went to the dark wall by the roadside.

With admission at the gates refused to him, that, surely, would be the route Levison would take! So it seemed to Cardew.

"I wonder!" he muttered.

He wheeled his cycle farther along the road, well out of sight of the gates, where the lamp glowed. Then he propped his cycle against the wall, standing it on the ridge of grass that ran along the foot of the wall lining the road.

A sudden exclamation escaped Cardew.

Something lying in the wet grass had caught his eye, revealed in the light of his cycle lamp. He picked it up quickly and gave a gasp.

It was a fountain-pen. And Cardew recognised it instantly as his chum's pen by the initials scratched at one end of it. He remembered Levison scratching those initials one day in Study No. 9.

"Great Scott!" muttered Cardew excitedly. "Then I'm right! He did climb the wall—and at this very point!"

Thrusting the pen into his pocket, Cardew blew out the cycle lamp. He measured the distance to the top of the wall with his eye, and jumped.

He tore the knee of his trousers as he scrambled up. But Cardew, dandy though he was, did not mind. He was far too intent upon his quest to worry about that.

At the top of the wall he hesitated.

"After all, he must have come back again," he told himself. "His bike isn't here—he must have come back!"

Unless, of course, someone had found it there and stolen it. There was that possibility Cardew thought.

"But, of course, he came back, anyhow," muttered Cardew. "It's not likely he is still at Spalding Hall! That's impossible. But I've found one clue—I might find another!"

And with that Cardew dropped from the wall into the dark garden on the other side.

Everything about him was pitch-black. Cardew gave a muttered exclamation of impatience.

"I ought to have brought that lamp!"

He could do very little without it. So Cardew swung back over the wall again, and returned to the garden a minute later with the lamp in his hand.

He lit it, and by its light he could make out faint, puddled footmarks on the rain-soaked ground. Levison's footsteps!

He followed them across the garden to the other wall without difficulty. He swung over the second wall, having first put out his lamp, and was chagrined to find that on the other side the gravel made further tracking of his missing chum impossible.

"Stumped!" grunted Cardew.

He stared round. One corner of the school buildings loomed up above him in the rain. Round the corner on his left, in what sounded like the kitchen quarters, judging by a rattle of plates that came to his ears, were lighted windows. Cardew turned in the other direction, not quite knowing where he was going or what he meant to do.

Along the wall he crept, under an arch, and found himself

in the school quadrangle. Lights glowed out into the rainy night, and he heard distant girlish laughter.

"This isn't any good!" muttered Cardew.

He stood close to the wall, by an unlighted window, frowning and thoughtful. Was there anything to be gained by staying any longer at Spalding?

"Perhaps if I could get a word with Doris—"

He broke off sharply, with a sharp exclamation.

A sudden light had flashed brilliantly on to his face.

It came from the windows of the room by which he was standing—a flood of bright light streaming out into the darkness, revealing him to anyone within the room. Someone had entered it, he realised, and switched on the electric lamps.

Instinctively Cardew swung round. He found himself staring into a large room, lined with books—evidently a library. The figure of a girl was standing in the centre of the room, staring across at the window, where Cardew's white face showed outside the rain-washed glass. Her eyes were on him, very startled.

"Gad!" breathed Cardew.

For the girl in the lighted room was none other than Ethel Cleveland.

CHAPTER 14.

Discovered!

"ETHEL!" ejaculated Cardew softly.

The girl in the room was staring out at him as though she could not believe her eyes.

Cardew took a step forward, close to the window, and raised a beckoning hand.

Ethel Cleveland quickly glanced at the door of the library, which she had closed behind her on entering. Then she moved hastily across to the window. She lifted the lower sash a foot or so.

"What are you doing here?" the girl whispered tensely.

"If you are found—"

"Oh, I know all about that!" Cardew answered easily.

"I thought I was found, too, when you turned the light on. Thank goodness it was only you!"

Ethel Cleveland stared at Cardew curiously. She knew Cardew well; he was, in fact, a relation of hers—a distant cousin—both of them being cousins of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of St. Jim's.

"You must be mad to come here!" she said, half impatient, half anxious. "You must know that Miss Finch has forbidden the St. Jim's boys to—"

"Don't you worry!" said Cardew dryly. "I know the risks all right, as I say. But I have rather a special reason for coming over here to-night. You know Levison?"

"Of course."

"He's vanished."

Cousin Ethel gave a little startled cry.

"Vanished?" she echoed, as if scarcely understanding.

"That's it!" nodded Cardew, with affected carelessness. "Funny, ain't it? Nobody knows what's happened to him."

Cousin Ethel stared at him in horror.

"But—but this is terrible!" she gasped. "Oughtn't Doris to know?"

"Better keep it from her. I should think, as long as possible," said Cardew quietly. "Levison's father knows—he will tell Doris, if necessary. Levison may turn up at any time, you see," he said, with an appearance of hopefulness that somehow he did not really feel.

"Poor Levison!" the girl breathed. "What can have happened?"

"That's the problem!" nodded Cardew. "I happened to know, though, that he came over here last night. That's why I've come over—to see if I could find any trace of him. I've found traces all right. Thrupp refused him admission, apparently, but I found old Ernest's fountain-pen lying under the wall, by the road, and footprints in the kitchen-garden that must have been his. Yes, he came here all right."

"But how extraordinary!" cried Cousin Ethel quickly. "What can have brought him here—knowing as he did that it has been forbidden?"

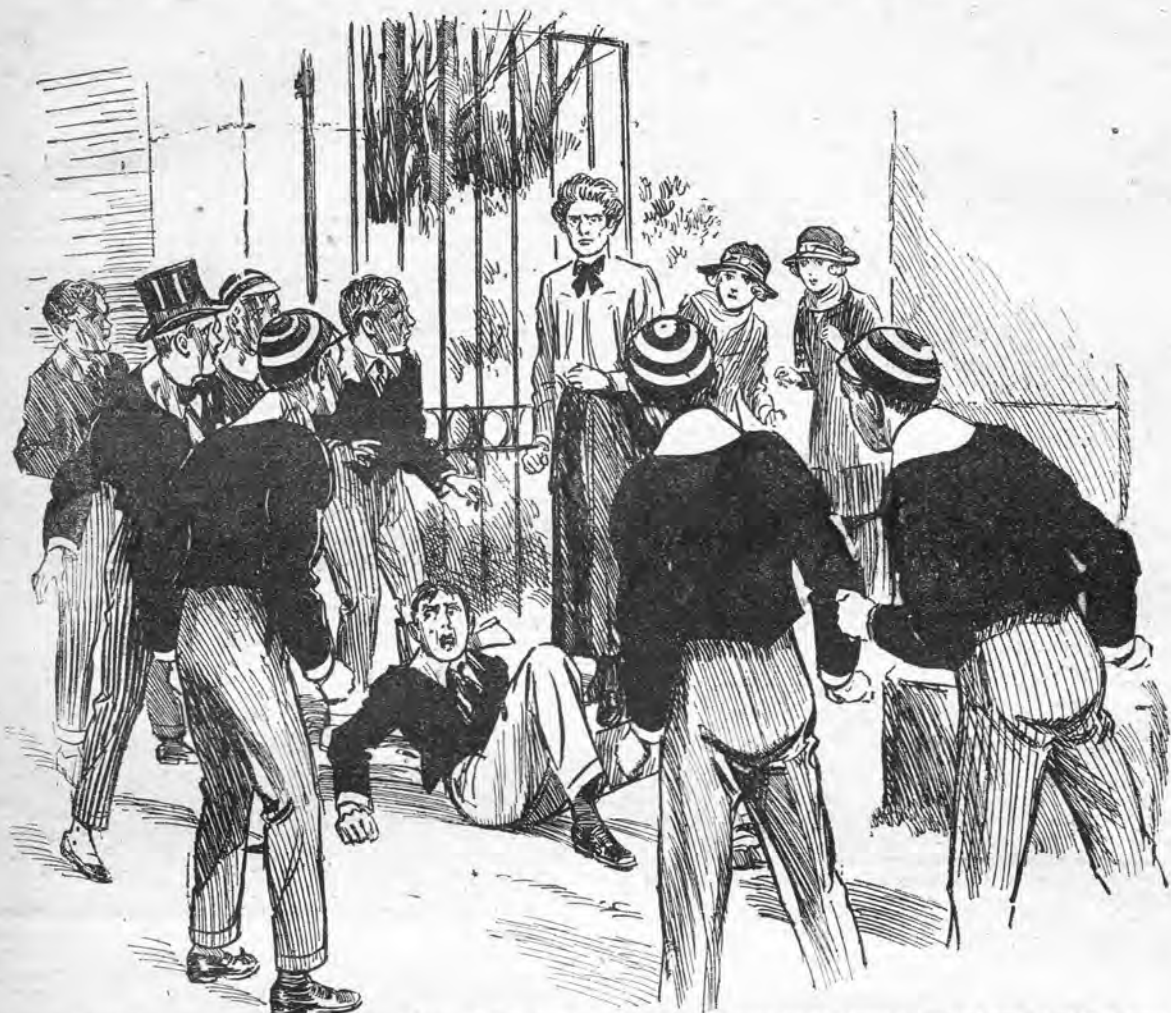
"I rather think he wanted to see Doris," ventured Cardew.

Cousin Ethel shook her head.

"I know he never saw her last night. I was with her all the time between tea and going to bed. We were doing our prep most of the time—she wasn't alone once."

"Then Doris can't help us!" said Cardew, with a shrug.

He felt his heart go a little heavier. At the back of his mind had always been the faint hope that Doris Levison might perhaps be able to throw some light on her brother's mysterious disappearance.



"Wh-what is the meaning of this?" Tom Merry & Co. dropped Mellish as though he had been a red-hot ember as that sour voice came from the gateway of Spalding Hall. They turned to find a tall, angular figure surveying them grimly. "Oh, my hat!" muttered Levison. "Now we're in the soup!" (See Chapter 3.)

Cousin Ethel was looking very worried and unhappy. She liked Levison, and the news of his strange disappearance was a shock to her.

"He must have decided to go away again, finding it impossible to see Doris last night!" she said suddenly. "He was not caught, I know—I should have been bound to hear of it if he had been. So he must have gone away again."

"But why didn't he come back to St. Jim's?" asked Cardew, half-impatiently.

He stared round. The lighted windows of Spalding Hall all looked very cosy and pleasant—as happy a girls' school as could have been found! Surely there was no dark mystery here, no connection with Levison's strange disappearance?

And yet—

There had been no returning tracks across the kitchen-garden!

And surely Levison would have returned by the way he had come?

But Cardew shook that thought from his mind. It was too utterly wild and absurd, he told himself, to imagine for a moment that Levison's disappearance was in any way connected with Spalding High School. It couldn't be that! And the sooner he went away, the better.

"Well, I'm going!" he muttered to Ethel. "Good-bye! I shouldn't tell Doris about this. I only thought I'd have a look round and see if I could find out something about Ernest's movements last night."

"Good-bye!"

She put her hand out, and Cardew gripped it for a moment. At that same moment a sudden voice rang out behind the girl in the lighted library.

Unheard by either Ethel or Cardew, the door of the room had opened, and a tall figure was standing watching them, with a sour smile.

"Ethel Cleveland! What are you doing at that window?" Ethel turned her head, with a quick, startled intake of breath.

"Miss Strickland!" she gasped.

CHAPTER 15.

Breakers Ahead!

"O H, gad!" breathed Cardew.

It was too late for him to vanish, as he would have done had he been able, for the sake of Cousin Ethel. Too late—they were caught.

Miss Strickland came into the room with gleaming, angry eyes. Ethel faced her calmly enough. Cardew raised his cap politely.

"Good-evening, ma'am!" he murmured.

"A St. Jim's boy!" rasped Miss Strickland.

"Rather!" nodded Cardew.

The woman—for a woman it seemed to be to Ethel and Cardew—breathed hard with anger. Perhaps Miss Strickland had her own reasons for not wishing St. Jim's boys—or anyone else for that matter—to be wandering about at Spalding Hall!

"How dare you?" exclaimed Miss Strickland harshly. "Both of you! How dare you! You know perfectly well that it has been forbidden for St. Jim's boys to come here. Yet I find you, Ethel Cleveland, in conversation with one of them at the library window! This is disgraceful!"

"It's really all my fault, ma'am!" put in Cardew quickly. "I—I came to the school to-night for another reason altogether than to see Miss Cleveland. On my honour! But she happened to see me at the window, and she merely raised the sash to warn me to go."

Miss Strickland glared from Ethel to Cardew.

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"I don't believe a word of that!" she rasped.

Cardew flushed.

"I am sorry you should doubt my word of honour!" he said quietly, with gleaming eyes.

There was a sudden step in the doorway of the library. A little upright figure had appeared there, staring across at the window in great surprise. Cardew recognised that grim-faced little old lady at once. It was Miss Finch, the headmistress of Spalding.

Cousin Ethel drew a breath of relief. It was bad enough to be caught at all with Cardew at the window. But from Miss Finch she could at any rate expect justice, whereas Miss Strickland, during her few days at the school, had already succeeded in making herself the most disliked mistress at Spalding Hall.

"Goodness gracious!" exclaimed Miss Finch. "A—a St. Jim's boy!"

With tight lips and a very warlike sparkle in her bright eyes, Miss Finch crossed the library and stood surveying the group.

"And what," began Miss Finch, in her iciest tones, "is the meaning of—"

Cardew raised his cap.

"Good-evening, ma'am!" said Cardew politely.

"Who are you?" demanded Miss Finch, frowning at the St. Jim's junior with frightening severity.

Cardew smiled faintly.

"I am a St. Jim's boy," he admitted.

"I found him talking to this girl at the window!" cut in Miss Strickland. "Obviously they had met by arrangement—"

"That is not correct," said Ethel quietly.

"Silence!" rapped out Miss Strickland.

Miss Finch frowned. She knew Ethel well enough to know that she always spoke the truth; and Miss Strickland was not an addition to her staff whom she appreciated. In fact, the little headmistress of Spalding had already decided to give Miss Strickland notice before very long.

"I think you can safely leave this affair to me, Miss Strickland," said Miss Finch coldly.

Miss Strickland bit her lip. She seemed about to speak; but turned away, instead, and strode from the room. Cardew gave a sigh of relief. But even Miss Finch did not look very sympathetic towards him, he noticed.

There was trouble ahead for Cardew.

"Now, if you will kindly explain!" said Miss Finch bitingly.

Cardew's brain had been working very fast. At all costs, he must make it clear that Ethel was not to blame. But he felt that it was impossible for him to explain the real cause of his visit to Spalding Hall.

"You see, ma'am," said Cardew coolly, "I rather want to see the porter—"

"The—the porter?" echoed Miss Finch, in great bewilderment. "Thrupp?"

"Is that his name?" murmured Cardew. "Yes, I want to see Thrupp." It was true enough; he did want to see Thrupp, in the present circumstances. "Fact is, the man did me rather a good turn some time ago, and I'm rather wantin' to tip him, you see. Do you mind?"

Miss Finch stared at Cardew very keenly. He seemed to be telling the truth, judging by his candid expression; and she was right—he was telling the truth. Cardew wanted to tip Thrupp now, if only as an excuse for his presence at Spalding Hall. Thrupp had obliged him by telling him about Levison.

"This is a very extraordinary story!"

"Life is extraordinary," agreed Cardew.

"If it is true, why did you not go to the porter's lodge?"

"Well, I did," said Cardew. "I rang the bell, an' all that. But perhaps he wasn't there at the moment. Any—"

He broke off and shrugged his shoulders.

"Thrupp wasn't there?" exclaimed Miss Finch. "I see."

"So I—er—came in at—well, came in a kind of back way," went on Cardew, still with truth. But Miss Finch imagined—as he wanted her to imagine—that he had come in by the tradesmen's entrance, and she made a mental note to tell the servants to see that the tradesmen's entrance was kept locked in the evening.

"But I got a bit lost," went on Cardew. "And—and Ethel happened to spot me through the window. She told me I ought to clear out, you know."

"Is that true?" Miss Finch asked Ethel.

Ethel nodded.

"Very well!" said Miss Finch decidedly. "I believe your story; and I shall not punish you, therefore, Ethel. But I cannot allow St. Jim's boys to defy my order against their visiting the school so flagrantly as this. Whatever your reason, however harmless it was, you had no right to come on to the school premises without my permission!"

Cardew's heart sank a trifle. Without doubt, though he had succeeded in saving Ethel from the consequences of his rash act, there were breakers ahead for himself.

"I shall write to your headmaster, of course," went on the grim little old lady sternly. "What is your name?"

"Cardew, ma'am—Ralph Reckness Cardew."

"Very well. Now you had better go. You seem to be getting wet; you had better hurry back to your school," continued Miss Finch severely.

Cardew raised his cap and went. Glancing back as he crossed the quad, he saw that Cousin Ethel and Miss Finch were watching his departure from the lighted window of the library.

"Oh gad!" muttered Cardew bitterly.

"Shiver me timbers!" gasped Mr. Thrupp, emerging from his lodge door in answer to Cardew's knock. "You!"

"Little me," nodded Cardew. "I say, Thrupp, I think you were right, not to let me in. I'm for 't!"

"But—" began the bewildered Thrupp; but Cardew cut him short.

"Open the gate for me, will you? And here's half-a-crown for luck!"

Mr. Thrupp pocketed the half-crown with great satisfaction. It flashed through his mind what a pity it was that Miss Finch had seen fit to forbid the young gentlemen from St. Jim's to visit Spalding Hall, for they seemed generous young limbs.

"Thanking you kindly, sir!" beamed Samuel Thrupp. "But how, by all that's wonderful, did you get in 'ere—if I may make so bold as to ask?"

"That," said Cardew gravely, "is a mystery that only Sherlock Holmes could solve. Good-night!"

And, with a nod to the bewildered Mr. Samuel Thrupp, he strode out into the road.

Once out in the road, he turned along the wall to where his bicycle was leaning against the wall. It was not raining hard now, but the saddle was soaked. Cardew took out the lamp from under his coat, where he had hidden it during his conversation at the library window, and replaced it on the bracket. Then he jumped into the saddle and turned in the direction of St. Jim's.

His brow was clouded.

There would be trouble for him next day at St. Jim's when Dr. Holmes received Miss Finch's letter! But that was not what Cardew was worrying about. That was but a small matter compared with his anxiety for Ernest Levison. Where was his missing chum?

Cardew had proved to his own satisfaction that Levison had not only visited Spalding Hall on the previous night, as a result of Mellish's forged letter, but had entered the school premises after being refused admission at the gates. But that knowledge did not help him very much. Presumably, Levison had left Spalding Hall again—without having succeeded in seeing his sister.

What had happened after that? For the life of him, Cardew could not imagine.

It was with a very heavy heart that Ralph Reckness Cardew rode into the quad at St. Jim's, with only a couple of minutes to spare for call-over.

He hurriedly put away his cycle, and broke into a run towards the School House—and squeezed into Hall just in time to hear his name called.

"Adsum!" he answered coolly.

"Narrow shave!" muttered Talbot of the Shell.

Cardew did not hear Talbot. He was waiting for Levison's name. He could not see his chum in Hall—felt sure that Levison had not returned to St. Jim's during his

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Despite his desperate struggles, Ernest Levison was seized by his scoundrelly captors. Cord was wound round his arms and waist, and he was flung savagely on to the chair, panting and bruised. "If you hurt my sister—" began the junior in a choking voice. "Don't worry!" grinned one of the men. "We wouldn't hurt a hair of her pretty head!" (See Chapter 12.)

absence. But it was with a sickening ache in his heart that he heard Levison's name called out—to be again unanswered. Ernest Levison had not returned.

CHAPTER 16.

Cardew's Promise!

"**H** EARD the news?"

Baggy Trimble asked that question, in great excitement and eagerness.

During break on the following morning Tom Merry had strolled along to Little Side to inspect the football field on which the St. Jim's junior eleven was to play a match against Gordon Gay & Co. of Rylcombe Grammar School in the afternoon. He was returning to the School House with his chums, when Baggy Trimble accosted him in the quad.

The fat Fourth-Former was clearly brimming over with excitement about something.

Monty Lowther gripped Baggy's arm. He saw that he had some news to unfold.

"What is it?" demanded Lowther. "Has Levison come back?"

"Or is there some news of him?" breathed Tom.

Baggy—very important in his role of information bureau—shook his head and grinned.

"No, he's not come back," he said. "But there's news of him."

"What is it?" roared Manners excitedly. "Don't stand there puffing! Tell us what's happened!"

"Oh, really, Manners! There's been a letter from Levison to the Head."

"Great Scott!"

"Levison says he hates St. Jim's, and he's run away!" went on Baggy. "It was just a rough sort of note, scribbled in pencil, and—"

"How do you know all this?" interrupted Tom Merry quickly.

"Ahem!" Baggy coughed. "I happened to be sent to the Head's study after breakfast this morning with a note from old Lathom, and Railton was with the Head, and they were talking about it. I couldn't help hearing, although they shut up as soon as they saw me—"

"More likely you had a good listen at the keyhole before you went in!" said Manners contemptuously.

"Oh, really, Manners! Surely you know me better than that!" exclaimed Baggy, in an injured tone. "Oh, and there's some more news! He, he, he! Cardew's for it!"

"Cardew?"

"Yes, Cardew! He went to Spalding Hall last night. True. And Miss Finch caught him! He, he, he! He's booked for a flogging. The Head said so. Serve him right."

And Baggy Trimble scuttled away excitedly to spread his exciting items of news further afield, leaving the Terrible Three staring at one another, with startled faces.

"So Levison's bunked!" breathed Manners. "I—I can hardly believe it!"

"He always seemed so happy here," said Tom Merry, in bewilderment.

"It can't be true!" Monty Lowther shook his head decidedly. "Baggy's got hold of the wrong end of the stick somewhere, or else he's made it all up!"

But the chums of the Shell soon learnt that they had misjudged Baggy.

It was true enough—a letter had come from Levison, telling the Head that he had run away never to return! All St. Jim's knew that by dinner-time, and talk was of nothing else—with the exception of the fact that Cardew was to be flogged for having visited Spalding Hall against the Head's command.

But Cardew's flogging was as nothing to the fact that the

secret of Levison's disappearance was out at last, in the opinion of the St. Jim's fellows. This was the overwhelming topic of conversation.

Levison—a runaway from St. Jim's!

It seemed too amazing to be true. Some fellows might run away, but Levison—never! So everyone would have imagined. But he had done so, for there was proof of it in that letter to the Head.

St. Jim's fairly gasped.

"It's wotten!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy miserably, addressing his chums in Study No. 6. "Poor old Levison! Fancy Levison doin' a bunk! It seems frightfully wum!"

And for once Blake & Co. all agreed with the swell of St. Jim's.

It was certainly rum! And yet there seemed to be no doubt about it. Levison's letter to the Head seemed conclusive proof.

It was like a dark shadow over St. Jim's. Everyone liked Ernest Levison. Gloomy faces were to be seen on all sides. Only such fellows as Racke and Crooke, the two black sheep of the Shell, were perhaps rather glad than otherwise. And Mellish of the Fourth did not look particularly sorry.

Secretly, Mellish was fairly hugging himself at what he considered his tremendous triumph over Levison.

For Mellish was convinced that Levison had run away because he had been afraid to face the music after being caught visiting Spalding Hall!

Mellish told himself that he had scored with a vengeance. He had only one uneasiness. Cardew knew his secret. But Cardew had sworn secrecy, and Mellish knew that Cardew was a fellow of his word.

"Hang Cardew!" thought Mellish bitterly. Then he grinned. Cardew had forced the truth out of him, and had kicked him—he was still very sore, and disinclined to sit down. But Cardew was to be flogged by the Head! Mellish gloated gleefully at that thought!

But to most other fellows Cardew's curious action in visiting Spalding Hall was forgotten in the excitement over Levison. No one asked why Cardew had gone to Spalding—not even Clive, his studymate.

And that afternoon, while a very disheartened St. Jim's team was battling with Gordon Gay & Co. on the footer field, Ralph Reckness Cardew sat in his study, thinking, thinking.

He was sore and aching. Dr. Holmes was a stern disciplinarian, and he had not spared the rod. Cardew had taken his medicine unflinchingly, and had left the Head's

study with his usual cool nonchalance. But he was feeling the effects of his severe punishment now.

Not that Cardew cared. It was of Levison that he was thinking.

Cardew, alone, of the fellows at St. Jim's, was not convinced.

The slacking dandy of the Fourth knew Levison better than did anyone else at the school—better even than did Sidney Clive, perhaps. And Cardew could not bring himself to believe that his missing chum had run away from St. Jim's.

Whether the letter received by the Head that morning had been a forgery or not, he did not know. But that Levison had "bunked" he utterly refused to credit.

"I don't believe it!"

Cardew gripped the arms of his chair fiercely, staring with gleaming eyes at the flaming coals in the grate.

"Levison, old son, I won't believe it! I'll swear you never ran away!" he muttered to himself.

Cardew rose painfully to his feet, and clenched his hands, staring out of the window, over the leafless elms, to where the distant figures of Tom Merry & Co. and Gordon Gay & Co. could be seen on the muddy footer field. As Cardew watched, he heard a faint, distant shout—"Goal!"

It was Gordon Gay's team that had scored. They were two up on their adversaries now, for the St. Jim's juniors, worried and depressed with thoughts of Ernest Levison, were finding it impossible to concentrate on footer.

But Cardew watched the distant footballers with unseeing eyes.

"I won't believe it!" he muttered again fiercely. "He never ran away! I'll swear it!"

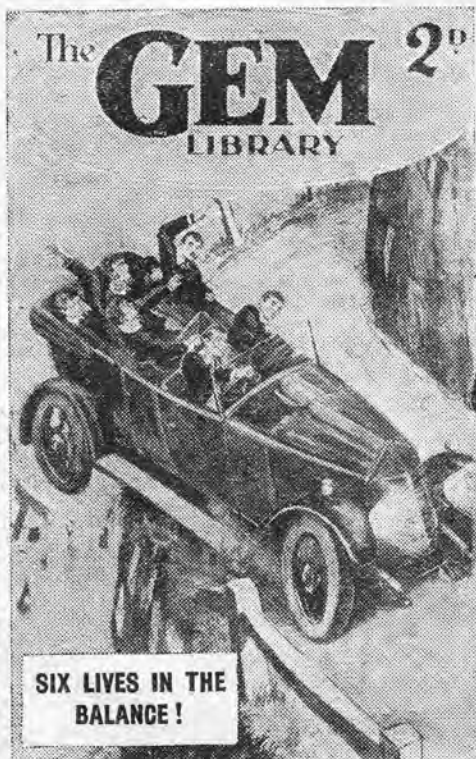
Levison had vanished from St. Jim's; but although the rest of the school believed he had run away of his own accord, Cardew was not satisfied.

"Levison, old scout," said Cardew quietly, in the silence of the study, "I promise you, on my honour, to find out the truth!"

Could Ernest Levison have heard that solemn promise, and seen the look of grim determination on the face of the slacker of the Fourth, it might have been some comfort to him in his desperate plight—a helpless prisoner in the hands of the scoundrels who were planning to kidnap his sister.

To solve the mystery of Spalding Hall, and find his missing chum—that was the task Ralph Reckness Cardew had set himself. Would he succeed?

THE END.



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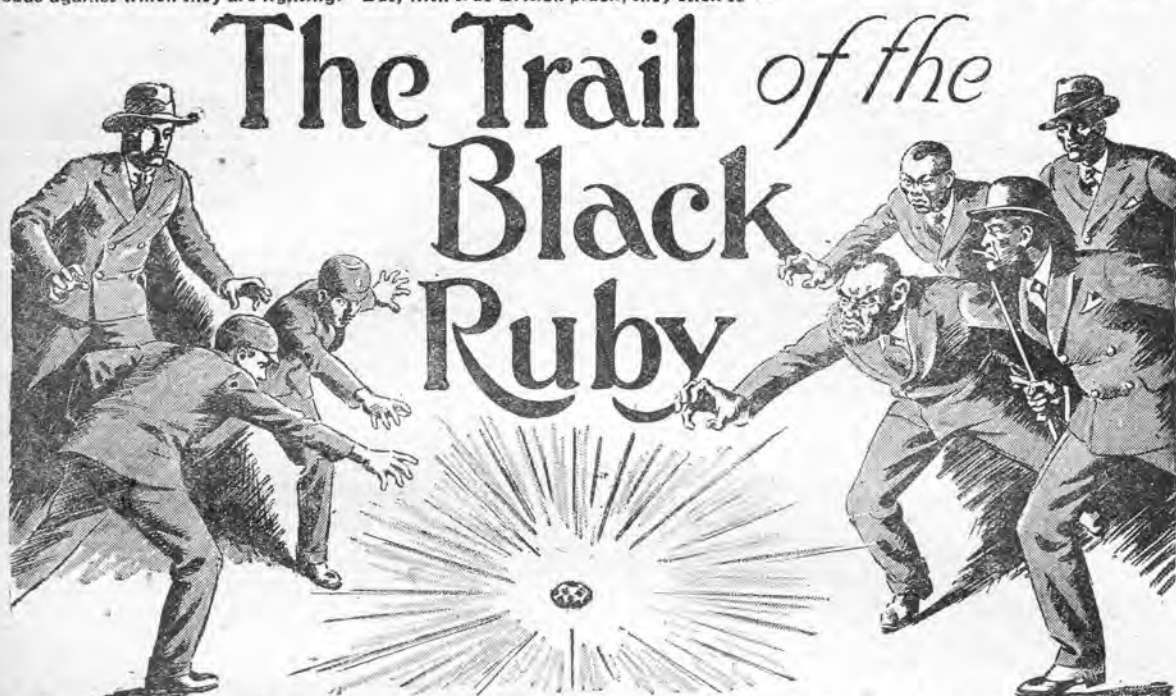
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WHAT HAS HAPPENED.

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 elude their pursuers, however, by boarding the Marseilles express. Not to be outdone, 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. Before he can get clear, however, Syd is surrounded by three more members of the gang. Displaying great presence of mind, he succeeds in deceiving them and rejoins his chums. Anxious to get clear of Marseilles, Bob and Syd and their "Aussie" pal board a ship bound for Alexandria on which they meet a Swedish food crank by the name of Johan Svenskhem. A heated argument ensues, and in a fit of temper Steve sends the stranger crashing to the floor. Syd assists the man to his feet, and the Swede expressing his thanks, tenders the youngster a huge apple and then hastens off.

(Now read on.)

A Mysterious Disappearance!

"SO I'm a madman, am I?" rasped Steve. "By gravy, I—"

"Pack it up!" retorted Bob. "That's the third time you've smashed your fist against a fellow's face for nothing. That's the third time we've saved you from bad trouble. Be grateful!"

"Exactly!" said Syd. "It's a fine thing, at times, to be able to hit out quickly, but you always choose the wrong times. You ought to be thanking us, not cursing us."

"He insulted me!" growled Steve, by way of excuse. "But, still—you boys are my mascots. Let's eat and forget it."

Syd pocketed his huge apple and they went down to dinner. Steve was anxious.

"You've got the ruby all right?" he asked.

"In my pocket," said Syd.

"We've got to hide it, somehow," said Steve grimly.

"Windy!" exclaimed Bob.

They had their dinner, and by that time the sun was beginning to sink below the horizon. Already the dark line that marked the French coast had disappeared. The liner

was speeding south-west, with her engines purring rhythmically.

As the pals emerged on deck on their way to their cabin, the first person they clapped eyes on was Johan Svenskhem. He was munching an apple for ability.

"That chap's haunting us!" hissed Steve suspiciously.

Maybe it was the way Steve glared that caused it, for as soon as the Swede saw them he started violently, and waddled away along the deck as hard as he could go.

Steve snorted with disgust, and led the way into the cabin, and closed the door after them.

"Now, then," he said. "Maybe I am windy, but better be safe than sorry. We've got to hide that ruby where it won't be easy to find. It's madness to carry it about with us, when one of Karl Sweetman's gang can just knock us on the bean and take it from us. Not good enough. We've got to hide it."

Syd had taken the big rosy apple from his pocket. Bob stared.

"Are you turning vegetarian?" he wanted to know.

"If you like," grinned Syd. "But, look, I'll hide that Black Ruby where no one would ever think of looking for it."

With his pocket-knife he cut the apple into halves. Then he scooped a hollow out of each, placed the ruby in one hollow, and fitted the other half neatly over it.

"We glue the two parts together," he said.

He left the cabin and was away for a few minutes. When he came back he took the apple from his pocket and showed it to his chums.

"Done!" he said. "I borrowed some glue and fixed it!"

Syd propped the apple on the edge of his bunk, and the light of evening from the nearby porthole, that looked out on the promenade deck, glinted on its rosy skin.

"Brains will tell!" he said proudly. "Now we can safely go for a walk round the decks and leave that in here. If Sweetman should call during our absence, he'd never be likely to pinch an apple whilst looking for a ruby!"

"Dingoes!" exclaimed Steve. "When it comes to grey matter, you boys are the big noise!"

But all the time someone was watching through the porthole, and if they had looked they might have seen the big spectacles of Professor Johan Svenskhem. When they emerged on deck again, however, there was no one in sight.

Quite peacefully, they promenaded on the boat deck, THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,095.

enjoying the air and peace of the night. Eventually they returned to their cabin, and no sooner had he poked his nose inside than Syd ripped out a yell.

"The apple! It's gone!"

He was out on deck again the next moment, the others close on his heels. Dismay, perplexity fired them. Helter-skelter they went, hardly knowing what they could do, or where they could go, along the promenade deck, round the corner by the deckhouse, and—

"Dingoes!" hissed Steve, pulling up sharply.

The boys came to an abrupt halt. Four men sat there in deckchairs—Bully Mahon, picking his uneven teeth; Twisty Baker, idly studying his wire-like hands; Karl Sweetman, as debonaire as ever, but with a patch of sticking-plaster on his forehead; and Ah Wong, eyes half closed, his yellow hands clasped serenely in his lap.

The crooks were on board.

Bob was the first to recover. He pulled himself together, and calmly walked past the crooks to the starboard side. The others followed, bewildered, dismayed, and yet a long way from being scared.

Bob was scowling. He glared at the backs of the crooks. Especially did he glare at the back of Ah Wong. He hadn't forgiven the Chinaman for that trick with the snake in Paris.

Suddenly he crept back across the deck. He stooped behind Ah Wong's chair, gripped the stepped rail, and pulled.

The deckchair collapsed. Ah Wong yelped in dismay. His legs went up in the air, and he hit the deck a resounding thwack. But by the time the crooks were on their feet Bob had disappeared in the wake of his pals.

Round the boat Steve hurried with Syd and Bob. But they were sorely puzzled. The apple had gone, and the Ruby was inside it. How on earth were they ever to get hold of it again? How could they advertise their loss?

"There's nothing else to do," snapped Steve angrily, "but watch those crooks! Maybe they've got it. It's our only hope, anyway!"

Back they went to where the crooks had been sitting in the shelter of the deckhouse. The three of them peered round the corner.

"Jumping wallabies!" hissed Steve.

Syd and Bob drew in their breath sharply.

For Svenskhem was there, talking to Karl Sweetman—Professor Johan Svenskhem, the vegetarian. And he was handing the boss of the crooks the huge, rosy apple!

The Bent Rail!

KARL SWEETMAN sat there in the deck chair, the big apple in his hand. He turned it over and over, a bland sort of smile on his swarthy face. Ah Wong, Twisty Baker, and Bully Mahon were leaning forward in their chairs, but it was too dark to see if they were merely curious or intensely interested.

The pals, lurking by the deckhouse, in the deep shadows, heard the booming of Svenskhem's voice:

"Der abble for der ability, ain't it?" he was saying. "Von abble der day, der doctor away keep. Ja? You der fruit eat, und der meat der 'go by' gif, und you von big mans become. So? Und you der oder matter think, ain't it?"

"Yes," agreed Sweetman. "I'll think it over. You won't find me too hard a nut to crack. I'll be generous."

"So!" murmured Svenskhem. "I leave him. You him think."

He waddled off, and Karl Sweetman sat there turning that great red apple over and over in his hand.

Steve Barrett peered round the corner of the deckhouse, his eyes burning like red-hot coals.

"That's our apple!" he hissed.

"Then they've got our ruby!" added Bob curtly. "I wonder if they know?"

Silence fell upon them for a moment. Steve was breathing hard.

"They may know," he said. "I reckon Svenskhem got it for them, and they're going to pay him for his trouble. You heard what he said. But that's not our affair. The point is, whether they know or not, we've got to get that apple back—now! The ruby is inside that fruit. I'm going—"

He stepped forward, but Bob drew him back.

"They'll shoot, or cause trouble," he warned. "You'll never get it openly, nor by fighting them. Wait! And be ready for a catch from the leg."

"What the dickens—" rasped Syd, bewildered.

Steve was scratching his head.

"Jumping wallabies!" he began, then dimly understood, for Bob was down on his hands and knees, crawling across the dark deck towards the back of the four deck chairs.

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He had already upset Ah Wong that evening, and he could do it again. Steve and Syd saw the idea in a flash, and waited, ready for action.

Inch by inch Bob crawled. The crooks were talking together in undertones, and Karl Sweetman was still twisting and turning that big, rosy apple over and over in his hand, studying it intently. He was talking, and as he approached from behind Bob could hear his words.

"I think it must be the one," he was saying. "I have never heard of any other Black Ruby, although how that cranky Swede got hold of it I can't guess. What was Barrett doing to let it slip through his fingers like that?"

"That's the snag, I reckon," declared Twisty Baker. "How could that fruit muncher get that sparkler away from Barrett? I never did think a whole heap of Barrett, but I guess he's too smart to be fooled by Svenskhem."

"As you go through life," murmured Sweetman calmly, "you will find that the unexpected happens more often than the expected. Strange, but true. What one least expects comes out of the darkness as it were—"

And just then Bob gripped the stepped rail behind his deck chair and pulled. The chair collapsed.

Karl Sweetman yelled in amazement. His legs went up in the air as the chair gave way beneath him. His hands flew up, clawing out frantically, instinctively, and the big apple flew from his grasp, backwards over his head.

Out of the corner of his eye Bob saw Syd leap from his place of concealment and catch the apple. As Syd did so Bob leapt to his feet and kicked the supports away from the other three chairs.

It was all done in the twinkling of an eye. The four crooks were scrambling about on deck, swearing and cursing. And Bob didn't stop to apologise. He spun round and dashed round the corner of the deckhouse after his pals.

"How's that, umpire?" he grinned.

Barrett had snatched the big apple from Syd.

"First class!" he panted excitedly. "You boys sure are my mascots. But scatter! They'll be after us. Split up. Each of us bolt round the ship by different ways and meet at the cabin. Lead 'em a dance. Look out! Here they come!"

In the dim vista of the promenade deck the chums saw the dark shapes of the four crooks coming after them at a run, and they bolted. The trio weren't scared, but in this case discretion was the better part of valour. Even now the three could not tell whether the crooks knew that the Black Ruby was inside that apple, but they were plainly out for vengeance, and since the pals had the apple and the ruby it was policy to escape the vengeance if they could.

Helter-skelter, Bob, Syd, and their big pal fled down the promenade deck. Syd went up the ladder to the boat deck like a squirrel. But Steve and Bob kept straight on, round under the bridge. Bob bolted down the ladder to the hurricane deck and for'ard towards the fo'c'sle, heads, while Steve kept on, round to the port promenade deck, in at a sliding door to the smoking parlour.

Here he dropped to a fast walk. There were passengers down there, and the sight of another passenger racing about like a crazy dog with hydrophobia might have caused suspicion. Steve went in one end of the saloon and out at the other into the lounge, then to the music-room, and down the elaborate staircase to the second-class dining saloon. Except for stewards, the place was deserted. Steve glanced back and saw that Karl Sweetman was close on his trail.

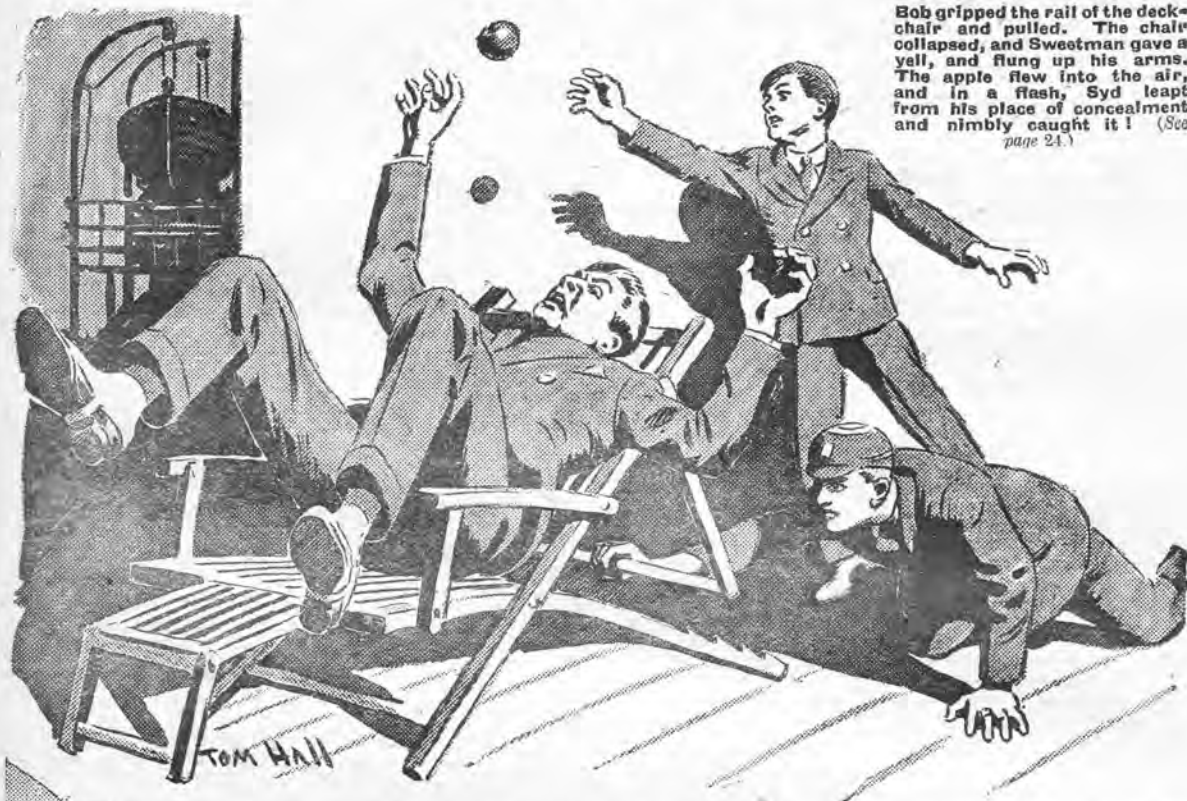
He hurried on, out of that saloon, and up the staircase, to the promenade deck again, then up to the boat deck, hoping to lose Sweetman in the confusing shadows of the lifeboats and the big ventilators. Over his head the two gaunt smoke stacks towered, belching a dense black cloud into the calm air of the night.

On the bridge the officer of the watch paced to and fro. A light gleamed in the wheelhouse, where the quartermaster wrenched at the spokes, one eye on the compass, the other on the sharp prow of the vessel, cleaving its way through the rolling waters.

Steve took it all in at a glance. He saw Karl Sweetman come sauntering up the ladder. A cigar gleamed dully in his mouth. To the outward eye of a casual observer the master crook was nothing more than a first-class passenger taking the air after a spell at cards in the smoking-room; but Steve knew that Karl was after him, that the manicured hands, so dainty and white, for a man, would snatch a tiny, but deadly, automatic from a concealed pocket and shoot him dead without a second's compunction or hesitation.

Steve continued at a trot, in and out amongst the ventilators, creeping in the dense black shadows of the lifeboats, until he reckoned he had lost Sweetman.

Then he went to the starboard rail and clambered over



Bob gripped the rail of the deck-chair and pulled. The chair collapsed, and Sweetman gave a yell, and flung up his arms. The apple flew into the air, and in a flash, Syd leapt from his place of concealment and nimbly caught it! (See page 2A.)

the side. Below him the black water hissed and gurgled. He gripped a stanchion and slid down to the promenade deck, swung his legs inboard, and dropped inside the weather rail. He was grinning. He visualised the debonair Karl Sweetman searching for him up there on the boat deck.

It was dark—pitch dark. Steve took that apple from his pocket. He had an idea he might have his pockets picked, and someone was coming along the promenade deck. He could hear the shuffle of feet. He peered ahead, and saw the dark shape of a man, swaying to the motion of the ship.

It was not Sweetman. Steve was sure of that. He went off towards the cabin he shared with Syd and Bob. The stranger came nearer—and nearer—and suddenly the stranger leapt like a wild cat. A clenched fist crashed between Steve's eyes. His hat came off. The apple hurtled through the air, and Steve recoiled with scarcely a cry backwards—backwards—slithering helplessly to cannon against the weather rail, bending it with enough force to numb Steve's body. His legs slid upwards. He lost his balance. He felt himself going over the rail, then down like a plummet to the gurgling black water!

But as he fell he saw that evil face leering at him over the bent rail—the ugly, ape-like face of Bully Mahon! And that helped him to keep his senses. The water gurgled in Steve's ears. He thrust out his hands, and felt the cold plates of the liner slipping past him and sucking him down.

Grimly he fought. He was a strong swimmer. He shot to the surface. The air was good! Out came his hands. Barrett knew that he was in terrible danger, yet in that moment he realised that the apple and its secret had gone for ever.

Meanwhile, Bob was racing about for'ard by the main cargo hatch. Ah Wong was on his trail, creeping silently from shadow to shadow. Bob saw him, and his blood froze at the sight. As the Chinaman trailed him, he kept one yellow hand inside his jacket all the time, and Bob knew that yellow hand clutched the haft of a keen knife.

It was a grim, silent flight, and a grim, silent pursuit. Bob had read a lot about the cunning and craft of Chinamen that the memory of it made him scowl as he slipped from one hiding-place to another. He realised that Ah Wong was cunning, that he was gradually overtaking him.

Bob preferred a fight to cunning. He crouched down in the darkness by the main hatch. Ah Wong approached noiselessly, his narrow eyes glinting hatred. He came rapidly, gliding along the decks like the snake he was, slinking past

the engine-room ventilators, round by the foot of the fo'c'sle ladder, and—

Suddenly Bob thrust his foot out in the darkness, and Ah Wong tripped over it, with a stifled yell of dismay. He crashed full length. Then his yellow hand came from under his jacket and a knife tinkled along the deck.

Bob leapt from the shadows, seized the knife, and hurled it with all his might over the side into the sea. The officer of the watch peered down from the bridge.

"What's that?" he cried sharply in French.

But even as the clicking consonants and the hissing sibilants sang in the still night air, Bob was racing up the ladder and along the promenade deck. The bo'sun awoke from his stolen sleep behind the steam winch and saw only a slinking Chinese fireman, as he thought, with a swollen nose.

And then, silence again, save for the purring engines and the gurgling water

Bob came to the cabin and burst in. He was the first arrival, and sat down on the bunk waiting in a terrible, anxious silence—so still, that although his watch was not a cheap one, the ticking of it seemed like a steam-hammer working overtime.

Then Syd came. He looked white and worried.

"How did you get on?" asked Bob. "Ah Wong was after me, but I tripped him up and tossed his toothpick into the sea."

"Mahon and Baker followed me," said Syd. "But in the darkness I climbed one of the funnel stays and they lost me. I saw Steve on the boat deck with Sweetman trailing him. Steve went over the rail and down to the promenade deck. He fooled Sweetman properly. But, Bob, as I came along I—I found this!"

He held it out. It was Steve's hat!

Bob stared, then, without a word, he went out on deck. Syd followed him. They walked slowly along the promenade deck, and came to it—the bent weather rail!

"It was here I picked up his hat!" whispered Syd huskily. "And he had that apple!" exclaimed Bob hoarsely. "And the Black Ruby!"

There was a deathly silence pregnant with doubts, dreads, fears! The two chums turned, peered into the hissing, gurgling water, but saw nothing. They called as loudly as they dared.

"Steve! Steve!"

No answer came. The screws kept up their continual pounding, and the engines pulsed in tune. The water hissed and roared and gurgled against the liner's steel plates. That was all.

Mechanically, the pals left the rail and went walking back towards their cabin. On the way Bob kicked something. It

rolled forward in the darkness. He went after it, picked it up, and his eyes were agog with amazement in the darkness. In his hand he held the missing apple.

Then Syd clutched his arm. Some men were coming along the gangway. The pals dived into their cabin and slammed the door. Then they gasped! For Steve sat on the edge of his bunk, dripping wet! His grinning face changed when he saw the apple.

He was on his feet in an instant.

"You've got it, then!" he cried.

"But—you!" Syd began.

"Never mind me. I'm all right—now! Make sure that is our apple. Gosh! I can't believe we've got it back again. Dingoes!"

His voice trailed off into blank dismay. Bob was trembling. Syd had broken the apple. It came neatly in half where he had cut it and glued it. But it was empty. The Black Ruby had gone!

Up to the Neck in Danger!

SYD slumped down on the edge of his bunk. Bob leant weakly against the doorpost. Steve Barrett was on the edge of his bunk, his eyes starting from his head, his mouth open, in blank amazement.

"Gone!" he whispered, awed.

"Gone!" echoed Syd.

"They've got it, after all," rasped Bob.

And that remark caused Syd to pull himself together. He turned on his pal sharply.

"Are you sure of that?" he queried. "The apple is empty. This is the apple in which the Black Ruby was. That much is proved. But although the sparkler is not here now it doesn't prove that Sweetman has it."

Steve saw what Syd was driving at.

"You think Svenskhem has it?" he cried. "I always was suspicious of that cranky Swede."

"Oh, I'm not thinking anything definite yet," snapped Syd. "I'm trying to find out where the Ruby could have got to. We found the apple kicking about the deck, just near where we found your hat and the bent weather rail. And you come in here dripping water. You had the apple when those crooks chased us round the boat. What happened?"

Steve puckered up his face.

"Soon told," he said. "I fooled Sweetman up on the boat deck, and got down on the promenade deck, then blundered into Bully Mahon thinking I was safe. He caught me a beauty between the eyes, and I went overboard. Dingoes! I thought I was due for crab food, but there was a rope trailing from the after well deck—you wouldn't find ropes hanging loose like that on a British ship. Anyway, that rope struck my hand as I drifted astern and I grabbed it, and hauled myself aboard again. That's all. Maybe those crooks reckon I'm finished with."

"And you dropped the apple when Mahon struck you?" put in Syd.

"Sure," said Steve. "It flew out of my hand like it flew out of Sweetman's."

Syd was talking as much to himself as anybody else.

"If Mahon had been out to get that apple he would have seen it drop on the deck and gone off with it. Yet he left it kicking about in the scuppers! That rather points to the fact that the crooks did not expect to find the Black Ruby in the apple. Either they had already extracted the Ruby or else Svenskhem has it, and they know it!"

"Then we'll talk turkey to that apple eater—now!" rasped Steve.

"No, you don't," said Bob. "What's the use? Both Svenskhem and the crooks, I reckon, are locked in their cabins and won't get up to satisfy your curiosity at this time of night. You'll have to wait till to-morrow."

"Exactly," agreed Syd. "We still have a little over forty-eight hours to remain on this packet. Plenty of time. Let's sleep."

"That's all very well," Steve argued. "How can I sleep not knowing where that Ruby is? You don't understand what it means to me. What'll you do in the morning?"

"Get hold of Svenskhem and talk to him," said Syd. "If possible we'll get him into this cabin where the crooks won't interfere. We'll make him talk!"

But the next morning Svenskhem was not to be found, neither were the crooks. It is amazing how people can lie low and remain unseen aboard a modern liner. There are so many discreet hiding-places—in the holds, in dark gangways, obscure corners of unsuspected cabins and store-rooms.

The day wore on. The pals were early in the dining-saloon, but neither the crooks nor Svenskhem were any-

where about. No doubt they had tipped the steward to take their lunch to them in their cabins. Syd and Bob went off on a tour of exploration to find what cabins were occupied by Svenskhem and the crooks. But they failed. Short of studying the passenger list, it was like trying to find a needle in a haystack.

But that afternoon, Bob came running to the cabin, his face agleam with interest, his eyes glinting dangerously.

"He's out there, talking with Sweetman!"

The three of them left the cabin in a hurry and stood by the weather rail opposite their cabin door. They had only to glance along the vista of the promenade deck to see Svenskhem waving his podgy hands about and talking to Sweetman, who lounged in a deck-chair with his gang behind him.

It seemed like hours that the pals watched that scene. Steve wanted to butt in on that little party, but Syd held him back.

"Maybe those crooks think we still have the Ruby, and what would you gain by telling them we've lost it?" he argued. "Wait. Look out! Svenskhem is saying farewell. Shaking hands as if he'll never see them again."

"He's striking a bargain, I reckon," rasped Bob.

"And he's coming this way, now," snapped Steve, clenching his fists.

"Good egg!" cried Syd. "You two get in the cabin while I lure him in."

They obeyed, diving into the cabin like a couple of rabbits into a burrow.

Smiling serenely to himself, Svenskhem came strutting and waddling along. Syd leaned idly on the rail, watching him out of the corner of his eye. He noted that the big Swede seemed mighty pleased with himself.

Suddenly Syd wheeled.

"Good-afternoon, professor!" he said politely.

Svenskhem pulled up sharply and blinked through his enormous spectacles.

"Donnervetter!" he exclaimed. "Das ist was? Der madman's keeper, ain't it? Der convert to der more fruit eat, das ist. Ja?"

"You're the very man I've been looking for," said Syd. "I want to talk to you."

Svenskhem blinked suspiciously.

"So?" he queried.

"Just so," said Syd. "You tried to convert me to vegetarianism, and I'm interested. I want to hear some more."

"Ach, und I teach, ain't it? Und you der disciple vos. Der abble for der ability. Der meat der curse of der world ist."

"That's it," grinned Syd. "I want to hear more about these apples. But we could talk better in my cabin. If you wouldn't mind coming in—"

"Der honour meine ist, ain't it?" beamed Svenskhem.

Syd led the way into the cabin. The Swede entered proudly. Syd followed after him, shut the door with a bang, and planted his back against the panels.

"Got him!" snapped Steve.

And, blinking around him, Svenskhem realised that all was not well.

"Vot t'is ist?" he wanted to know. "You trap me vos, ain't it? I no money haf. You der learning of der vegetables want. T'en vy—"

"We want to know more about those apples," said Syd sternly. "You'll remember you gave me one—a big one!"

If the pals had doubts before those doubts were dispelled now. The big Swede leant back against the bunks, weakly, his fat face looking ghastly, his overlapping cheeks trembling, and his eyes goggling through his enormous spectacles.

"I remember," he said. "Poot vy—"

"It was stolen from this cabin," Syd went on. "And we saw you give that same apple to a gentleman."

Svenskhem was plainly frightened, but he hid his best to smile blandly and wave his podgy hands.

"Der abbles chip vos," he said. "I anodder buy you for, ain't it?"

Steve could stand idle no longer. He grabbed the Swede's fat wrist in a grip of iron.

"Not good enough!" he roared. "You're going to spill the beans, Dutchy! We want to know why you pinched that particular apple. If apples are so cheap, why come to our cabin pinching that one?"

"Der madman!" gasped Svenskhem. "Pull him off!"

"Madman, your grandmother!" snarled Steve fiercely.

"They spun you that yarn to keep you quiet. I'm not half so mad as you are! We're going to make you talk—I am, if you want to know. You're going to tell us why you stole that apple, and why you gave it to Sweetman."

Svenskhem's eyes went round and round in rolling terror. "I short of meine favourite fruit run vos," he began. "Don't lie to me!" roared Steve. "You must have guessed. You must have been spying on us. You knew what was inside that apple. What have you done with that ruby?"

"Ruby!" screamed Svenskhem. "It wasn't a ruby! It was plack!"

That finished it for Steve. His face was contorted with rage. He had the big Swede by the throat and shook him till his teeth rattled like castanets.

"Then you got it, did you, you fat, lying skunk!" he roared. "Where is it? It's a Black Ruby, I tell you—and ours! What have you done with it? Where is it?"

"Ach, und donnervetter!" moaned the Swede, struggling in the strong grasp of Steve. "I der miserable sinner vos. I saw through der hole of der port, und sore tempted I vos. I der monish vant for der campaign against der meat eaters. So I stole."

"And where does Sweetman come in?" he wanted to know.

"Herr Sreetman, he von pig jeweller vos. He to me that told. So I say I got pig gem to sell. Vot it is like I tell to him, and he so interested. He say I to you five hoondred of der poonds if dat der jewel I vant ist. Und he is so interested in der abble dat I to him run gif."

"And have you sold to him yet?" ripped out Bob.

"No, not yet. I der jewel hid haf. I for him get it t'is efening."

"Listen to me," said Syd curtly. "You stole, and we could get the captain to clap you in irons, here and now. But take us to the hiding-place of this Black Ruby. Give it back to us, and I will contribute one thousand pounds towards the expenses of your potty campaign against meat eaters. What d'you say?"

Svenskhem's eyes glittered behind his huge spectacles.

"Ach!" he cried. "Der goot thing I am on, ain't it? I you show."

"Only, you let us down," hissed Steve in his ear, "and I'll choke the breath out of you!"

Syd walked out of the cabin beside the Swede. Steve and Bob brought up the rear, eyes skinned for treachery. Svenskhem led them down the ladders to the hold, along a dim, dark corridor between bales of cargo, until they came to huge crates that apparently contained machinery of some sort.

Svenskhem pointed.

"See!" he whispered. "Der leetle hole in der crate vos. I him in dere put. So!"

He reached up, thrust his hand into the hole, withdrew it again, and showed them the great Black Ruby, gleaming in his fat palm.

Steve sucked in his breath sharply. He reached out to take the rare gem when it happened. A lithe body came rushing out of the darkness. A yellow hand grabbed the ruby. Svenskhem was toppled over like a ninepin, howling.

Karl Sweetman had his men on the watch. They had never let the Swede out of their sight.

Crash! He fell against Steve, and they went down in a heap together, rolled against Sid's legs, and brought him down, too. Bob leapt forward in the murky gloom, and tripped over Svenskhem's legs, and crashed on the top of the other three.

And in the darkness Ah Wong chuckled grimly.

"White men big fools!" he said, and then vanished.

Leaving Svenskhem to get on as best he could, the pals raced up on to the promenade. They saw Karl Sweetman, Twisty Baker, and Bully Mahon enter a cabin—their own cabin. But Ah Wong was not there. And although at least one of the pals watched outside that cabin for the

rest of that day, Ah Wong did not appear. To all outward appearances, Ah Wong was not aboard the *Rossignol*!

The pals went into their cabin.

"I've got a plan," said Steve. "Listen. This packet is due to arrive at Alexandria early to-morrow morning—about six. My plan is to get up at five, break into the cabin of those crooks, lay them out one by one, before they've the chance to wake up properly, and take our property off them. Then jump ship and get ashore as best we can, and try to board another boat for Australia. If anyone can suggest a better plan I'd like to hear it."

Syd shrugged his shoulders.

"It is all that is left for us to do," he said.

So it was arranged.

But they didn't wake at five. Bob was the first to wake, and he awoke to find his temples throbbing, his pulses pounding, his throat burning like mad. The cabin was filled with a blue haze. He choked, spluttered.

With an effort he dropped from his bunk. Steve stirred and sat up, his eyes bulging. Syd groaned as he rose to a sitting posture.

"What's—what's happening?" he wanted to know, feebly.

Bob kicked the door open and gulped in the sweet fresh sea air. The blue haze drifted out, and the other two dropped out of their bunks. Steve understood in a flash.

"Doped!" he roared.

They saw a brass opium burner on the floor of the cabin, and they spoke in unison—two words:

"Ah Wong!"

Rapidly they dressed.

"Doped!" hissed Steve. "But why?"

"At a guess," rasped Syd. "To keep us here while they get away with the Ruby ahead of us. Come on!"

Helter-skelter they dashed out on deck. They went to the crooks' cabin, but the door was open and the place empty.

Syd had his suspicions. The liner was swinging to her anchor outside Alexandria. Already the Customs launch was steaming towards her. A little way away was a native boat. There was not enough wind yet to fill the huge sail, and a native was hauling on the sweeps. Amidsips sat four men.

A harmless old gent came ambling along the deck, a pair of binoculars in his hand.

Syd grabbed the glasses rudely and focused them on that native boat.

"There they are!" he yelled. "In that boat! They've got away with it before us! If only—"

"Dingoes!" hissed Steve, beginning to run towards the bridge.

But Bob was first. He ripped off his jacket. Impulsive, as always, he leapt up on to the rail, arched his hands over his head and dived.

It was a mad, rash act, but characteristic of Bob. He swam as he had never swam before. The water rippled away from him. He forged ahead like a motor-boat, nearer and nearer to the native boat until he was in the shadow of the limp sail.

He hardly knew what he would do when he got there. It was madness. And yet, having set out, Bob was not the one to turn back. Closer and closer he drew to the boat. Then Bully Mahon saw him, scowled, and stood up, brandishing a heavy oar over his head.

"Keep off, you whelp!" he snarled. "Or I'll brain you!"

Bob heard a sudden swish behind him, and the water was lashed to foam, as the wedge-like fin of a shark came cleaving towards him! Bob was up to his neck in danger!

(The gang in front of him—a large size in sharks behind him; that's the sort of tight corner young Bob is in. But he's full of pluck and resource as you'll discover when you read next week's fine instalment.)

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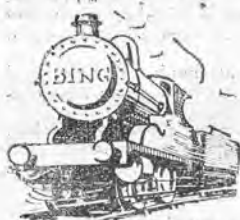
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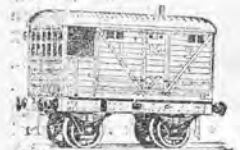
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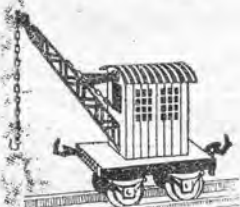
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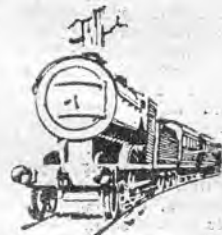
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