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**GOING...
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*(See the wonderful story of school life and adventure,
featuring Tom Merry & Co., of St. Jim's, inside.)*

A ROUSING LONG COMPLETE SCHOOL STORY—

TWO FORMS at WAR!

by Martin Clifford



Burning for revenge, Aubrey Racke is determined to stir up strife and trouble all round in the Lower School at St. Jim's. But even the cad of the Shell does not bargain for the success that attends his cunning schemes!

CHAPTER 1.

Gussy Chips In!

"YARROOOOOH!"

That wail of woe fairly rang along the Fourth Form passage at St. Jim's. In Study No. 6 Jack Blake lifted his head and listened.

"Sounds like trouble somewhere!" he remarked.

"It was Trimble's voice," said Herries carelessly. "The fat ass is always in trouble of some kind! He deserves all he gets, too!"

"I expect he's been up to his grub-raiding games," said Digby, with a chuckle. "Perhaps old Wildrake's laying into him. I hope he lays it on well, for— Hallo! There it goes again!"

"Yow! Yoooop!"

"That was Mellish's voice!" said Herries, looking interested at last. "Wildrake must be pitching into 'em both."

"Yaas, wathah!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, shaking his head. "It must be vevy twyin' for Wildwake to have two such feafuh funks and slackahs in his studay, you know. I fancy that— Bai Jove! They are weally goin' it wathah stwong!"

"Yarroooooogh! Yow! Yoooop! Stoppit! Yow-ow-ow!"

Crash! Bang! Crash!

They certainly were going it—whether it was Trimble, or Mellish—or whoever it was. And the howls and yells were accompanied by various significant bangs and crashes.

"Sounds more like a scrap!" grinned Blake, getting to his feet. "My hat! Is it possible those two funks are scrapping?"

"It makes the eighth wonder of the world if they are!" chuckled Digby. "Let's go and see, anyway."

"Yaas, wathah!"

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The four chums of the Fourth hurried from the room and made tracks for the study Wildrake shared with Trimble and Mellish. If the two biggest funks in the School House were scrapping, then the scrap was likely to be worth seeing—from a comical point of view.

Blake & Co. found several grinning juniors already congregated round the doorway of Wildrake's study.

"Come on, you chaps!" called Levison of the Fourth. "The sight of a lifetime—Trimble and Mellish scrapping!"

"Going great guns!" grinned Dick Julian. "Especially at yelling!"

"My hat!"

"Bai Jove!"

With varied expressions of astonishment, Blake & Co. looked into the study. There was no doubt about it—Baggy Trimble and Percy Mellish were scrapping. And they were going it with a will—both vocally and fistically, so to speak.

They rolled about on the carpet, punching and pummelling each other. On the window-seat Kit Wildrake sat and watched, tears of merriment streaming down his face.

"Well, my hat!" gasped Blake. "You might have warned us you were giving an entertainment to-night, Wildrake. This is great! Go it, you cripples!"

"What started it, Wildrake?" grinned Herries. "Trimble boning Mellish's grub, or Mellish sneaking about Trimble?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Wildrake. "Look at 'em! Every hit a fluke, and every punch an accident! And they both

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—OF TOM MERRY & CO., AND JACK BLAKE & CO. OF ST. JIM'S!

want to give up, and daren't! Trimble started the trouble—pinched and scoffed a packet of Mellish's chocolate. Go it, you cripples!"

Trimble and Mellish were "going it"—though, judging by their howls of anguish, they seemed desperately anxious to stop it. Yet the wild and whirling conflict still went on, simply because both combatants were vengefully determined to have the last blow. Trimble suddenly sighted the crowd in the doorway.

"Help! Draggimoff, you fellows!" he shrieked. "I've told the cad I didn't bag his rotten chocs, but he won't—Yooooop!"

Mellish's fist stopped Trimble's vow of innocence.

"Bag my chocs!" shouted Mellish. "Of course you did, you fat thief! The stuff's round your—yow!—rotten chivvy now!"



"Yow-ow! I tell you I didn't!" howled Trimble. "Besides, they were only measly things—cheap and—Yarooogh! Yow! Stop him, you fellows! Yow!"

Punch, punch, punch!

Neither seemed to know just how to stop—they wanted someone else to do the stopping. By the look of things, the scrap seemed likely to go on indefinitely. The on-lookers were howling with laughter at the sight of the gasping combatants, who were doing more ducking, dodging, and yelling than punching.

"Bai Jove! This weally must be stopped!" said the kind-hearted Arthur Augustus, who did not join in the general laughter. "I am surprised at you fellows! Twimble—Mellish! Stop, you silly asses!"

And the swell of the Fourth stepped forward to stop the fight—always rather a risky undertaking. Arthur Augustus had rather a weakness for chipping in on other fellows' business—always with the best intentions in the world, of course. Gussy always did mean well. And more often than not he suffered for his well-meant actions.

He did so now.

As he stooped over the struggling pair one of Trimble's wildly-waving fists took him clean under the chin.

"Yawwoogh!"

It was the turn of Arthur Augustus to howl; a punch from Trimble's fat fist was no joke. Gussy staggered backwards and sat down with a terrific bump on the carpet.

But he had accomplished his object; his intervention stopped the fight, if it could be called a fight.

With Trimble's attention momentarily engaged on Gussy, Percy Mellish jumped up, obviously with the intention of going while the going was good.

Unfortunately, the sneak of the Fourth was in far too big a hurry to notice Arthur Augustus, who was just scrambling to his feet. As Mellish jumped for the door he went head-long over Gussy.

Crash!

It really was a terrific fall for the hapless Percy Mellish. He went down flat, his long nose scraping for several inches along the carpet until his head brought up against the bookshelves with a thump.

"Yarooop!"

"Ow! Ow! Oh, bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus was also hurt; but he made nothing like so much noise about it as did Mellish. That junior howled fiendishly. Then he staggered to his knees, and, sighting the face of Arthur Augustus scarcely a foot from him, he smote it—hard, and with vengeful fury.

Biff!

"Yawwoogh!"

Arthur Augustus sprawled on the study carpet.

"You—you footling, glass-eyed tailor's dummy!" hissed Mellish, almost beside himself with rage and pain. "You—you silly, clumsy fool, D'Arcy! You—you—"

Percy Mellish suddenly stopped short, realising just what he had done. Biffing the fat and flabby Baggy Trimble was a very

different matter from biffing Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, who was a renowned man in the Fourth with his fists. Being a funk of the first water, Percy Mellish suddenly realised that he had "done it." Trimble had been guilty of a similar crime, of course. But that had been an accident; he had certainly not intended to punch the noble and aristocratic nose of Arthur Augustus.

But now Mellish had done it—and with malice aforethought, so to speak. There was no accident about that fatal punch. There rolled Arthur Augustus, the renowned fighting-man—bowled over like a nine-pin by his fist!

Mellish shivered.

Arthur Augustus would exact a terrible vengeance, of that there was not the slightest doubt whatever.

The sneak of the Fourth suddenly decided not to wait to discover just what Arthur Augustus would do; though he could guess. He decided, as before, to go while the going was good.

He scrambled up just two seconds before Arthur Augustus did. For Mellish was a prophet; the noble Gussy did intend to exact a terrible vengeance. He was hurt—hurt as much by Mellish's allusion to a "glass-eyed tailor's dummy" as by Mellish's vengeful fist.

Gussy scrambled up, raging, and jumped for the door just two seconds after the sneak of the Fourth did.

But those two seconds were enough for the fleeing Mellish, and he made the most of them.

"Look out!"

"Oh, my hat!"

The laughing crowd round the doorway made way with great haste; Mellish was not standing on ceremony. He went through them like a knife through butter.

"Come back!" shrieked Arthur Augustus, the crimson streaming from his aristocratic nose. "Come back, you fearful wottah! Stop him! Stop the wuffian!"

But Percy Mellish was gone; and, in spite of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's wrathful commands, he certainly had no intention of returning.

CHAPTER 2.

Chess—and a Move!

"THEY'RE at it again!"

Tom Merry passed the remark, with a chuckle, as he came along the Shell passage with Monty Lowther and Manners. At the corner of the passage two elderly gentlemen in caps and gowns were standing together, deep in discussion—though it sounded more like a rather heated argument than just a discussion.

"They're at it again!" repeated Tom Merry. "It beats me hollow. I can understand anybody getting excited and enthusiastic when discussing footer, now; but chess—Br-r-r!"

"Oh!" Manners and Lowther also chuckled as they understood what Tom meant when he stated that Mr. Linton and Mr. Lathom, the two masters in question, were "at it again." But Manners, who was something of a chess enthusiast himself, refused to allow Tom's remarks to pass.

"Well, why shouldn't they be at it again?" he demanded. "Chess is a jolly good game, Tom. If you played oftener you'd be the better for it, old scout—intellectually, I mean."

"Bow-wow!"

"It's a game that keeps a chap good-tempered and normal," said Manners sagely. "Linton and Lathom are frightfully keen on it, and they are quite decent as masters go; but look at Ratty and Selby, frinstance, neither of 'em play, and they're both mean ill-tempered old hunks!"

"Well, there's something in that!" admitted Tom Merry, with a chuckle. "But by the sound of things, Linton and Lathom are none too sweet-tempered now. They'll be scrapping soon if they keep on. Hark at 'em!"

Undoubtedly Messrs. Linton and Lathom were chess enthusiasts. It was common knowledge that both scholastic gentlemen spent practically all their leisure either playing chess or discussing and arguing about their favourite pastime. And, though very good friends, their arguments very often became rather heated, and provided the juniors with amusement.

Chess between the master of the Shell and the master of the Fourth was something in the nature of a never-ending tournament, in which each fancied himself the victor. Hence the frequent heated, though quite friendly, arguments on the subject.

Up to now all the juniors had heard were snatches of the conversation in which knights and castles and bishops and king's pawns predominated—sounding weird and wonderful to the ears of the non-chess players.

But as the Terrible Three strolled slowly nearer the remarks became more personal and illuminating.

"Pardon me, my dear Linton, but—"

"You are certainly in error, my dear Lathom—"

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"But allow me to point out that in our last three games, I—"

"Two, my dear Lathom—two!" said Mr. Linton firmly.

"If you remember—"

"I remember that after I had opened by moving king's pawn, white knight to king's bishop's third, and black—"

Mr. Lathom had just got as far as that in pointing out his moves, when he made another move—a move of a different kind altogether. It was not a chess move at all, and it was a very forcible one caused by the arrival on the scene just at that moment of Mellish and D'Arcy of the Fourth.

Mellish came round the corner with a rush, the raging Arthur Augustus hard at his heels. Then—

"Look out! Mellish, you ass—"

Crash!

Tom Merry's frantic warning came too late—much too late to be of use. Into the back of the august Mr. Lathom went the hapless Mellish, his head acting as a battering-ram.

Mr. Lathom gave a sort of yelp, and crashed forward into Mr. Linton. Not expecting the sudden, blundering embrace, the latter gentleman sat down on the linoleum with a resounding bump.

The master of the Fourth went sprawling forward with him, still clasping him fondly.

"Oh, gweat Scott!"

Just in the nick of time Arthur Augustus pulled up—on the brink of further disaster, as it were. Mellish was on his hands and knees, half-dazed, but realising, with growing horror, as he blinked at the struggling figures in caps and gowns, just what he had done.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Tom Merry. "Now for trouble!"

Mellish seemed to realise the full extent of the disaster at last. As he did so he jumped up and turned to bolt, hoping against hope that he had not been recognised. Unfortunately, he ran right into the arms of Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, who had just come hurrying up.

"No, you don't, kid!" said Kildare grimly. "Stand where you are, Mellish!"

Mellish did as he was ordered; to disobey was futile, in any case. Kildare, aided by Tom Merry, helped both masters to their feet. They stood gasping and panting painfully.

"Ow! Ow-ow!" gurgled Mr. Lathom. "Thank you, Kildare! I—I am very hurt indeed!"

"And I also!" gasped Mr. Linton. "Ow-ow! I am considerably hurt and severely shaken. That—that wretched boy—"

"That—that reckless young rascal!" stuttered Mr. Lathom. The two masters blinked round in search of Mellish. That unlucky youth would have been modest and kept out of sight if he could; but he could not. He shivered as the two scholastic gentlemen, both rubbing themselves painfully, glowered at him ferociously.

"Mellish!" gasped Mr. Lathom.

"Wretched boy!" panted Mr. Linton.

"Ow! Oh dear!" groaned Mellish, who was hurt enough himself by the collision. "It—it was an accident, sir! It—it wasn't my fault, sir! D'Arcy was chasing me, and—"

Mellish stopped short. He had well-earned the title of the sneak of the Fourth; but he rarely did his sneaking openly. Mr. Lathom scarcely heard him, however.

"Wretched boy!" he hooted, getting back his wind with a rush. "I am well aware that it was, on the face of things, an accident. But it was an accident that should never have occurred. You are well aware that it is a breach of rules to go rushing about the House in that manner! Scandalous!"

"Abominable!" gasped Mr. Linton. "Such reckless horseplay is disgraceful, and cannot be excused."

"Certainly not!" said Mr. Lathom. "I am very much shaken and hurt, Mellish—"

"And I also!" snorted the Shell master. "The boy has merited severe punishment, Mr. Lathom."

"He has, indeed!"

"Were he a member of my Form, Mr. Lathom, he should be punished very severely indeed. A severe caning and an ample inquisition should meet the case, Mr. Lathom," said Mr. Linton, looking quite viciously at the shivering Mellish.

Mr. Lathom bridled a little. He had already been feeling a trifle irritated with his colleague over the chess argument. Now, Mr. Linton's suggestion as to punishment seemed to imply that the master of the Shell wished to teach him his business.

"You can safely leave the matter of punishment in my hands, Mr. Linton," he said stiffly. "Mellish, you will accompany me to my room without delay."

"One moment, sir!" interrupted Arthur Augustus. He stepped forward gracefully. Whether Mellish sneaked or not, Arthur Augustus had no intention of keeping out of the limelight—whether it was an unpleasant limelight or not!

"One moment, sir!" he repeated. "Pway allow me to explain that it was weally as much my fault as Mellish's,



The crowd of Fourth-Formers in the doorway roared at the sight of Baggy Trimble and Percy Mellish rolling about on the carpet, punching and pummeling each other. On the window-seat Kit Wildrake sat and watched, tears of merriment streaming down his face. "This is great!" gasped Jack Blake. "Go it, you cripples!" (See Chapter 1.)

You see, I happened to be chasin' Mellish, or he wouldn't have wushed into you at all."

"Oh, indeed, D'Arcy!" said Mr. Linton, switching his ferocious look from Mellish's white face to the serene countenance of Arthur Augustus. "Ah! Another Fourth Form boy!" Mr. Linton's tone implied a lot—clearly that he had expected it, and that members of his own Form never did such things. "Ah! Of course! Then doubtless you will also receive the punishment you so richly deserve, D'Arcy. Were you in my Form—"

"D'Arcy is not in your Form, Mr. Linton!" snapped Mr. Lathom quite crossly. "He is in my Form; and, therefore, the question of his punishment rests entirely with me."

"Very good, Mr. Lathom!" said Mr. Linton, with dignity. "I must confess that dealing with unruly and undisciplined boys would be an unusual task for me; and I, therefore, gladly leave them in your hands, sir."

With which parting shot, Mr. Linton limped away with as much dignity as he could muster in the circumstances.

Mr. Lathom glared after him, pink with wrath. It was just as well, perhaps, that Mr. Linton had walked away. The little argument over the question of chess victories had made both gentlemen rather cross; and the accident had added fuel to the fire, so to speak.

Having glared at his colleague, Mr. Lathom glared at the two culprits.

"Follow me!" he boomed. "Follow me at once!"

"Yaas, sir!"

Arthur Augustus followed, sedate and unmoved. He was in for trouble, but the swell of the Fourth was not the fellow to whine. Mellish was, however, and he groaned and glowered, and followed with lagging footsteps.

"Oh, you rotter, D'Arcy!" he whispered vengefully. "This is all your rotten fault!"

"Wats!"

"It's you he ought to lick, not me!" groaned Mellish. "The beast has a down on me, too! I'm booked for a licking already over those lines he gave me this morning. And now—"

"You should have done your lines, Mellish! As for this unfortunate accident, Mellish, you were responsible for it in the first place by punchin' me and callin' me wude names. Furthermore, you should have looked where you were wushin'."

Which was all the sympathy Mellish got at the moment.

The next moment Mr. Lathom reached his study door, and the two victims of his great wrath entered that dreaded apartment, and the door closed behind them.

CHAPTER 3.

A Cunning Scheme!

MR. LATHOM was usually one of the best-tempered little men in the world. He was kind, and he was forgiving and considerate. The Fourth Form considered themselves very lucky indeed to have such a master as little Mr. Lathom.

But at the moment Mr. Lathom was most emphatically not his usual mild and good-natured self. Instead, he was in a very wrathful state indeed. The fall in the Shell passage had hurt him considerably. Moreover, his dignity had suffered, and the whole episode had been humiliating in the extreme. But what hurt him most was Mr. Linton's attitude in the matter.

To begin with, Mr. Linton had earned Mr. Lathom's grave displeasure over the matter of chess. The question as to who was the better player, and who won the majority of the interminable games, had always, more or less, been a moot point between the two masters. They had argued the point many times and oft—quite good-humouredly, and in a spirit of friendly rivalry.

Before tea that evening, however, something had happened that had quite upset the good-humour of the rivals in the matter.

While discussing chess with the Head, Mr. Lathom had, rather incautiously, and in response to Dr. Holmes' subtle flattery, admitted that he invariably got the better of the innumerable encounters on the chess-board between himself and Mr. Linton.

Unfortunately, Mr. Linton had accidentally overheard some of the conversation, and Mr. Lathom's gentle bombast had filled him with great wrath and indignation.

After tea he had taken his rival to task about it. He had been sarcastic, and he had been ironical; he had been icily reproachful and coldly biting. A heated argument had thereupon resulted—the argument Mellish and D'Arcy had interrupted so very abruptly and rudely.

Now, Mr. Linton had added to that displeasure by being

sarcastic concerning discipline in the Fourth—suggesting that only in his—Mr. Lathom's—Form were unruly boys to be found.

Really, Mr. Lathom felt that he did well to be angry. And he also—unfortunately for Mellish and D'Arcy—felt he did well to vent his anger upon the cause of this final humiliation.

Which he now proceeded to do.

He took his cane from his desk in ominous silence as the two culprits stood before him.

"I am going to cane you both severely!" he snapped. "You have caused grievous bodily injury to myself and Mr. Linton. Moreover, you have disgraced me and my Form by your unruly behaviour. You must learn that the School House is not a bear-garden, and that rushing about and horseplay is not permitted or excused. Hold out your hand, Mellish."

Mellish held out his hand—first his right and then his left. Thrice Mr. Lathom's cane descended upon each hand. Then the angry master turned to Arthur Augustus, and that youth got exactly the same.

"In addition, you, Mellish, will do me five hundred lines!" gasped Mr. Lathom, breathing hard from his exertions. "Now go—both of you—and I trust this will be a lasting lesson to you. Ah! One moment that reminds me, Mellish. Have you done the hundred lines I gave you this morning in the Form-room?"

Percy Mellish, who was doubled up with anguish, shook his head, quite unable to reply for a moment. Then he panted out:

"No, sir! I—I haven't finished them yet!"

Mr. Lathom gave a snort.

"You were ordered to bring them to me at the close of afternoon lessons, Mellish!" he fapped out. "It is now five o'clock. If the hundred lines I gave you are not handed in by six o'clock I shall double them. Now go!"

The two victims tottered out of the study, both groaning and hugging their burning hands. Mellish's eyes were glittering, and he turned furiously upon Arthur Augustus when the door had closed behind them.

"Oh, you rotter, D'Arcy!" he hissed. "You ought to have had the same as me—it was your fault more than mine. You only got a licking, you cad!"

"Bai Jove! If you call me a cad, Mellish—"

"So you are!" gasped Mellish vengefully. "A rotten cad! That's six hundred lines—and I've not done one yet. And that hundred will be doubled unless it's done by six! Oh, you beastly cad! And Lathom is a bigger cad!"

"Weally, Mellish—"

"You'll have to help me with the rotten lines!" gasped Mellish furiously. "You'll jolly well have to do. It's all your fault!"

"Wubbish! If you had not stwuck me and called me wude names, this would not have happened, Mellish!" said Gussy severely. "Howevah, as I was wesponsible somewhat for your wushin' into Lathom, I will help you with your lines."

"Oh!" Mellish was rather astonished to hear that.

"None the less," resumed Arthur Augustus. "Though I will help you with the five hundred to-morrow, I uttaly wufuse to allow you to wufer to me as a tailor's dummay and a cad, Mellish. In the cires, I have no othah wesuource than to punch your nose, Mellish."

"Look here, you silly— Yooocoo!"

Mellish ended with a startled yelp as the fist of Arthur Augustus smote his nose. It was not a hard tap, but it was quite unexpected, and it caused Mellish to sit down with a thump. Arthur Augustus gave him a disdainful glance, and walked away. His honour had been vindicated, as it were, and he felt no further interest at the moment in Percy Mellish.

That junior scrambled up, his eyes glittering with spite and fury. Fortunately Mr. Lathom had not heard the little commotion, and, hugging his aching nasal organ, Mellish ambled away, seething with fury. Knocked about by Trimble, punched by D'Arcy, and licked and lined by Lathom, the sneak of the Fourth felt just then that life was scarcely worth living.

But the thought of the hundred lines to be finished before six sent him to his study. He did not want them doubled. Even with the help of D'Arcy—if that youth really meant to help him—Mellish knew he had a terrific task before him.

Wildrake greeted him with a chuckle as he entered the study. Trimble was out—apparently not wishing to risk further trouble, even with Percy Mellish.

"Hallo, here you are!" said Wildrake, who had heard of the accident. "Well, what did you get from Lathom—six of the best?"

Mellish gritted his teeth.

"Yes; and five hundred lines as well!" he said savagely. "The old beast has a down on me—he always had!"

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"Well, you shouldn't be such a crawling little worm," said Wildrake cheerfully. "The masters as well as fellows would love you a bit more, old top."

"Oh, rats!" snarled Mellish. "He only licked D'Arcy—didn't line him at all. It isn't fair. I've a good mind not to do the beastly lines at all!"

"You'd better!" grinned Wildrake. "I guess you'll have 'em doubled if you don't. Get down to 'em, and don't whine!"

"Oh, rats!" snarled Mellish. "I tell you it's a beastly shame, and not fair. Anyway, I'll pay that beast Lathom out somehow; and I'll pay D'Arcy out, too! I'll teach him to punch me for nothing!"

"Better not try," advised Wildrake. "Unless you want more trouble with Lathom, and another biff from old Gussy. You're a cheerful sort of galoot, I guess, Mellish."

With that, the Canadian junior strolled out. He was obliged to put up with a great deal of Mellish's company, but he was not fond of it, and avoided it when he could.

Left alone, Mellish glowered, and settled down to do the hundred lines. He had already done more than fifty, and it did not take him long to finish. Having counted them, he took the ill-written scrawl of lines along to his Form-master's study.

The study was empty, and Mellish threw his lines viciously on the desk. He was about to turn and depart when he paused. It was nearly six o'clock, and the lines had to be handed in by that time. But if Mr. Lathom stayed out long he might question when they had been brought. Moreover, Mellish had wanted an opportunity of speaking to the master. He wanted badly to explain just exactly how the accident had occurred—that it was all D'Arcy's fault and not his. Even if he didn't succeed in getting his lines cancelled or reduced, he might get that cad D'Arcy booked for the same dose!

It was a pleasant thought to the sneak of the Fourth, and he decided to wait. As he stood by the desk his eyes happened to fall on a pile of papers lying thereon. Being a nosy youth, Mellish stooped and looked at the pile, turning the sheets over to do so.

As he did so his lips curled in a sneer. The various numbers and pencilled remarks on the sheets obviously referred to chess. Mellish knew what the pile was now. It was the treasured record of games innumerable on which Mr. Lathom and Mr. Linton had spent hours and days and terms, all totalled up neatly and carefully.

Mr. Lathom specially was a very painstaking and exact little gentleman, and the hoarded records he kept docketed and ready to hand to prove any possible argument.

In Mellish's eyes the records were not worth the paper they were written on; but he knew they were the apple of their owners' eyes, so to speak.

"Fancy the beastly old brute wasting time on that rot!" grunted Mellish to himself. "My hat! I've a jolly good mind to—"

Mellish paused, a glitter of spite coming into his eyes. Why not burn them? He owed Mr. Lathom a grudge, and it would be getting his own back a bit. And nobody would know who had destroyed them.

For a moment or two Mellish dallied with the temptation, and then his hatred and spite got the better of him, and he slipped quickly to the fireplace with the pile of sheets, his ears cocked for the sound of footsteps.

It was done in a moment.

The sneak of the Fourth's first impulse had been to toss the whole bundle into the glowing coals. But caution bade him pause at that. If he did happen to be found out—

Better just make Mr. Lathom think his precious records were destroyed. In the belief that Lathom would suffer just the same, Mellish told himself. And if he was bowled out—well, he could produce them then.

Hastily detaching the top sheet, Mellish dipped it in the flames, allowed it to burn half through, and then, snatching it out again, he stamped out the flame with his boot on the hearth. Another thought struck Mellish then, and he hurried to the wastepaper-basket, leaving the half-burnt sheet in the hearth.

The basket was nearly full of wastepaper—most of it old impots done by juniors for the master of the Fourth. Grabbing a pile of these, Mellish crammed them into the fire, ramming the pile well down into the heart of the flames with the poker. Then, after watching the pile burst into flame, Mellish was about to hasten from the room when he paused again.

His impot! It would never do to let the master know he had been there at all. Far better to have his imposition doubled by failing to hand in his hundred lines to time. It would be worth far more than that to get his own back so neatly on his enemy.

Leaving the half-burnt top sheet still lying in the hearth, Mellish stuffed the rest under his jacket. Then he grabbed his hundred lines, stuffed them into his pocket, and left the

study, his heart thumping more than a little at the thought of what he had done.

He reached his own study, and found it still empty. Carefully closing the door, Mellish got a chair to the bookcase, and standing upon the chair he hid the pile of chess records on the dusty top, shoving the pile well down behind the ornamental beading. Then Mellish took his lines out of his pocket and coolly destroyed part of them.

If Mr. Lathom asked for them that evening he could say he hadn't finished them yet, and show what he had done, thus removing any suspicion Lathom might have that he had been to the study at all.

Percy Mellish was a very crafty youth, and though he knew his hundred lines would be doubled, he felt it was well worth it.

CHAPTER 4.

Trouble in High Places!

"I SAY, you fellows, old Linton and Lathom are having a row. Come and hear 'em!"

"Rats! Buzz off, you fat clam!"

"But it's a fact!" gasped Baggy Trimble, his fat face ablaze with excitement. "I happened to be passing Linton's study, and I heard 'em going it! They're squabbling about chess, or some silly rot like that. I heard Lathom telling Linton to come to his study and he'd fight him!"

"Oh, bai Jove!"

"You fat fibber——"

"Well, he wants him to go to his study for some reason, anyway," amended Trimble. "I bet it's to scrap—must be! I heard Lathom say, 'Come to my study and I'll show you, and we can settle the matter!' Those were his very words," ended the fat Fourth-Former impressively and with great excitement. "Come along—quick!"

And Trimble rushed away.

The chums of Study No. 6 of the Fourth looked at each other. There was quite a shocked expression on the face of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Bai Jove!" he murmured, in great alarm. "How wotten, you fellows! Fancy Form masters offwin' to sewap, you know!"

"You silly chump!" snorted Jack Blake. "Can't you see it's only one of Trimble's wonderful yarns? I expect he's

heard Linton and Lathom arguing about their giddy chess——"

"I am afwaid it is wathah more sewious than that, deah boys!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, shaking his head. "They were w'anglin' wathah heatedly, you'll wemembah, when Mellish barged into them. Then Linton started to wrb it in about the Fourth bein' unwuly and undisciplined, you know. I could see Lathom was watty about it—feahfully watty! I've nevah known him lay the cane on as he did this evenin'," added Gussy, rubbing his hands ruefully. "I'm afwaid——"

"Phew! Well, there's something in that!" admitted Blake, with a chuckle. "I say, it would be rather a lark if they had a real row. Let's go and see what happens."

"Good egg!"

Blake led the way out of the study with a rush, and his chums followed eagerly enough. A row between masters was an unheard of happening—quite unprecedented, in fact. It would be worth seeing and hearing, thought Blake & Co.

They arrived in Masters' Corridor, to find several fellows, including Baggy Trimble, already gathered there. Baggy himself had one fat ear almost to the closed door of Mr. Linton's study.

"Come away, you fat clam!" snorted Blake. "I say," he added, a trifle uneasily, "let's clear; it's rather too much like eavesdropping for my liking."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "I nevah thought of that, Blake. Let us go. Twimble, you fat wottah——"

"Rats!" breathed Trimble. "I say, hark at 'em!"

Raised voices certainly came from behind the closed door—the voices of Messrs. Linton and Lathom undoubtedly. But the juniors could not distinguish a word, though Trimble evidently could, having very big and efficient ears and being near the door.

As Blake and the rest stood undecided the Terrible Three came along the passage with Talbot.

"Hallo, what's on?" said Tom Merry staring.

Trimble held up a warning hand.

"They're going it!" he sniggered. "My hat! Quiet!"

"What the dickens——" began Manners.

(Continued on next page.)

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"Linton and Lathom are squabbling, I believe," said Blake, grinning. "I think we'd better clear—"

"Let's hope they get to a scrap!" said Lowther, with a soft chuckle. "I should like to see a good set-to between 'em, the dear old birds! Two to one on Linton, anyway!"

"Rats! I bet Lathom could knock your old frump into a cooked bat!" said Herries witheringly. "Like old Linton's cheek to—"

"You leave old Linton alone!" snorted Manners. "We're not allowing kids in the Fourth to slang our giddy Form master, are we, Tom?"

"Who are you calling kids—" began Blake warmly; and the matter might have developed into a Form row there and then, but Tom Merry grinned and chipped in.

"Cheese it!" he said hastily. "Chuck it, Manners! I say, it's hardly the thing to— Hallo, look out!"

The door of Mr. Linton's study suddenly opened, and Mr. Lathom came out, looking pink and angry. Behind him came Mr. Linton, looking angrier still, his own features giving evidence of his feelings.

Mr. Lathom was talking as they emerged, looking over his shoulder to his colleague as he did so.

"It is the only way, as you suggest, Mr. Linton!" he was retorting acidly. "I have already taken out the records, and they are now lying on my desk ready for you to inspect, if you wish, sir. I trust then—"

Mr. Lathom broke off abruptly, having caught sight of Trimble, who had jumped away quickly, but not quite quickly enough.

"Trimble, what are you doing here?" he thundered. "How dare you loiter about this passage, boy? Go at once, and— Bless my soul! Why, there are quite a number of boys—"

"Members of your Form, of course!" snapped Linton, quite failing to see the Terrible Three and Talbot.

"And members of your Form also, including the junior captain of the Lower School!" snapped Mr. Lathom, with biting sarcasm. "Boys, how dare you loiter here? Leave this passage at once!"

"Yes, indeed!" snapped Mr. Linton, glowering at Tom Merry and his chums. "Merry, and you other Shell boys, take fifty lines each. Go!"

"Oh crumbs!"

The two masters marched away, Mr. Lathom leading the way to his own study higher along the passage. Both of the masters evidently took it for granted that their orders would be obeyed. Tom Merry and his chums and Blake & Co. did obey—not quite liking the idea of listening in any case. But Trimble stopped—as did one or two others—too excited and interested to go, despite the risk of staying. But only Trimble—with one fat ear near the keyhole of Mr. Lathom's study door—quite heard what took place in the study.

Having closed the door behind him, Mr. Lathom walked to his desk, Mr. Linton behind him, looking calm and frigid.

"Now, Mr. Linton," remarked the master of the Fourth icily, "we shall soon settle the matter once and for all. I have all the records here, all carefully docketed—carefully dated, and kept up to date. As you will see, I have not—"

Mr. Lathom paused, with rather a gasp, his eyes scanning the top of his desk.

"Bless my soul!" he murmured. "I am quite certain I left the records on the desk, Mr. Linton. It is very strange. They do not appear to be here now."

"Very strange!" agreed Mr. Linton, with a certain dryness in his tone that made the master of the Fourth go pink to the ears.

"I repeat, Mr. Linton," said Mr. Lathom tartly and with no little heat, "I left the records safely on my desk before coming to your room, sir. They should be here now."

He started to open drawer after drawer in the desk, evidently coming to the conclusion that he must, after all, have placed them in a drawer before leaving the study.

But he drew blank. They were not there. The treasured records had gone. Where?

As he glanced dazedly about him, Mr. Lathom met Mr. Linton's eyes, and he flushed crimson. Actually, Mr. Linton was fully expecting his colleague to produce the records, not for one moment really believing that he did not intend to do so. It was sheer irritation and temper that caused the master of the Shell to be sarcastic and pretend not to believe so.

"They must be in the study somewhere, Mr. Linton," said Mr. Lathom, biting his lips in vexation. "I assure you that I am only too anxious, sir, to settle this deplorable dispute."

"Quite so—quite so!" said Mr. Linton, with icy politeness. "It would be a pity if the records were lost—a great pity. Dr. Holmes would have been greatly interested in them, I am quite sure."

That was really nasty of Mr. Linton—evidently he was still sore over the conversation he had so unfortunately over-

heard between the Head and Mr. Lathom. Mr. Lathom went crimson once again, and started once more, with a very flushed and determined face, to hunt for the missing records.

As he started to turn out drawers and cupboards, Mr. Linton strolled grimly to the fireplace, and was about to take his stand there with his back to the fire when his eyes fell upon something in the hearth.

It was the half-burnt sheet of paper—the top sheet of the records. Something familiar about the sheet took Mr. Linton's eagle eye at once—he had often enough seen the records, of course.

"Ah!" he exclaimed.

Stooping, he picked up the sheet and glanced swiftly at it. Then another exclamation left his lips—a very startled exclamation indeed this time, as he saw that it was indeed the first sheet of the famous records of his struggles on the chessboard with his rival.

"What—what—" Little Mr. Lathom came up to him hastily, struck by the tone in his colleague's voice. "What—bless my soul!"

Mr. Linton said nothing—then. He handed the half-burnt sheet with a dramatic gesture to Mr. Lathom.

Mr. Lathom took it, giving a violent start as he did so. He blinked and blinked at it. Then, following Mr. Linton's eyes, he saw something else—the charred, blackened scraps of paper still showing amid the flames in the grate.

Obviously papers had recently been burnt there—a pile of papers—a thick wad of sheets of paper!

The inference was unmistakable—just as Mr. Linton's icy glance was unmistakable.

"Bless my soul!" repeated Mr. Lathom in great horror. "Mr. Linton, that—that—"

"Is the top sheet of the records, Mr. Lathom!" ended Mr. Linton, with deadly politeness. "I presume," he added, with a wave of his hand towards the flames, "that the rest of the records are—there, burned and destroyed."

"Bless my soul! Good heavens!"

"It is most unfortunate," said Mr. Linton, his voice trembling a little. "Most unfortunate indeed, sir. But it saves us the trouble of examining them, of course. It is now impossible, I presume, to settle our dispute—to prove my claim that, so far from your having invariably won in our encounters on the chessboard, I have more than held my own. It is very unfortunate indeed for me, Mr. Lathom. But I am surprised—more than surprised, sir."

There was deep indignation in Mr. Linton's voice; there was also not a little scorn a great deal of sarcasm, and a world of meaning in his words.

Mr. Lathom staggered back, going quite white.

It was impossible to doubt just what Mr. Linton meant. He supposed, obviously believed, that the master of the Fourth had purposely destroyed the records, so that he could not be called upon to make good his claim—the claim he had even made to the Head.

Mr. Lathom stared at his colleague, as if rooted to the floor.

Was it possible? Was it possible that Mr. Linton, his colleague of many years, tried and trusted friend, was accusing him of wilfully destroying the precious records?

The look in Mr. Linton's eyes was enough to tell him that. "Mr. Linton!" he gasped. "Sir! Am I to understand, am I to believe, that you suspect I have maliciously destroyed the records in order to serve a dishonourable purpose of my own?"

Mr. Linton hesitated. To do him justice, he would have hesitated a great deal longer had he been cool and collected. But he was already very angry indeed with his old friend. Mr. Linton was very proud of his prowess on the chessboard. He loved to relate his victories to anyone who would listen to him. His unfortunate overhearing of Mr. Lathom's mild bombast on the subject to the Head, however, had quite upset him, and made him feel very jealous and cross.

At the moment, however, he felt he could believe nothing else. The evidence was there. It was he who had suggested, during their argument that evening, to settle the matter by a careful and thorough scrutiny of the records. Certainly Mr. Lathom had agreed to do so. But he had not been very eager to do so—Mr. Linton remembered that point now.

Moreover, there the evidence was before his eyes. The mass of blackened paper in the glowing fire—the top page, half-burnt through, which had evidently fallen from the fire and so escaped being consumed with the other sheets.

What else was he to think—to suspect? He was astounded and hurt. That his old friend and adversary should descend to such means of hiding the proof of his skill was amazing and horrifying. But there it was—and now all the cherished records of his, Mr. Linton's, victories were gone for ever—utterly destroyed.

That their destruction was a far greater loss to the painstaking Mr. Lathom did not occur to the master of the Shell at all in the heat of the moment. He hesitated, and then—

"Be good enough to leave my study at once, Mr. Linton," cried Mr. Lathom, his voice trembling with indignant anger, "and oblige me by refraining from entering it again!" "I will certainly leave this study at once, sir!" snapped the master of the Shell. "So be it!" (See Chapter 4.)



"I—I am compelled to wonder, Mr. Lathom!" he said, with deliberate and icy politeness. "Though doubtless you can explain just how the accident occurred, just how they came to be burnt in your fire, sir?"

It was enough. Mr. Lathom gasped with indignation and wrath.

"You—you are well aware, sir," he stammered, "that I can no more explain that than you can yourself, Mr. Linton. I left the records safe on my desk before coming to you. I return with you to find them—or what remains of them—on the fire. I am shocked—astounded that you should accuse me of such a mean and despicable action!"

"Mr. Lathom," returned Mr. Linton coldly, "I am prepared to have this matter investigated before making any such accusation. As the matter stands, it is most unfortunate that you should have been somewhat reluctant to refer the matter to a careful examination of the records. It makes one wonder, indeed, why—"

"What? Enough!" cried Mr. Lathom, his voice trembling with indignant anger. "That is enough, Mr. Linton! Kindly leave my room, sir! Be good enough to leave my study, sir, and oblige me by refraining from entering it again, or speaking to me again until you have sent me a written apology for your despicable and unfounded accusation!"

"Very good, sir—I will certainly leave this study at once, Mr. Lathom!" said Mr. Linton, bridling at once at the tone of his colleague's voice. "So be it!"

He departed, with lofty dignity, carefully opening the door, and as carefully closing it after him. Mr. Linton prided himself on his self-control, and he had no intention of showing temper in the matter—certainly not to the extent of slamming the door, though he felt much like doing so.

There was a sudden scuttling of feet in the passage as he emerged. He was just in time to glimpse a pair of fat legs as they vanished round the corner of the passage. But the master of the Shell was too disturbed and agitated to notice or wonder to whom the fat legs belonged, even if he saw they were fat. And so Baggy Trimble got away safely with the great news, eager and almost frantic to spread it far and wide.

Mr. Linton and Mr. Lathom had quarrelled—they were not now on speaking terms! It was amazing news, and very soon the whole School House was buzzing with it.

CHAPTER 5.

A Form Matter!

"MY hat! It's true, then?"

"Yes; pistols for two and coffee for one next," grinned Monty Lowther.

"Quarrelled! Great Scott!" chuckled Aubrey Racke. "Fancy the beaks squabbling like kids! Nice example for us little boys, I must say."

"They'll be scrapping next," said Crooke.

"I hope they do," said Mellish viciously. "I—I'd like to see Linton punch Lathom's nose, the beast!"

"Oh, would you?" said Blake pleasantly. "So you'd like to see your own master licked by a Shell beak—eh?"

"Yes, I jolly well would!" said Mellish, his eyes glittering with triumphant spite. "Lathom's a beast! And I hope—Yarrup! Wharrer you at, Blake, you cad!"

"Kicking you for being unpatriotic," said Blake, giving Mellish another gentle drive with his boot. "As a Fourth Form man it's up to you to support home industries and back up Lathom. Allow me to point the fact out to you with this—"

Thump!

"Yooooop!"

Again Mellish yelled, and then he scuttled away, taking no further part in the discussion in the junior Common-room.

There was no doubt about it—the news of the split between the two Form masters had caused a sensation. Moreover, by the look of things it was going to cause something else—trouble between the juniors in the Fourth and Shell.

Naturally, the Shell fellows were disposed to "back up" their own master, while the Fourth-Formers were disposed to support theirs.

For there was no doubting the truth of the matter. As a general rule nobody believed Trimble's yarns. Only Trimble had overheard what had passed in Mr. Lathom's study. None the less quite a number knew of the trouble beforehand, and quite a number had seen the two masters pass each other and give each other the "cut direct," likewise the "marble eye."

It was the sensation of the hour, if not of the term.

It was unprecedented.

"This comes of playing such piffing games as chess," remarked Blake, "as Mellish vanished. 'I must say I'm not surprised. Why the dickens can't the beaks play sensible games like footer, instead of footling games like chess.'"

"You dry up, Blake!" said Manners warmly. "Chess is a jolly good game. As for the question as to which was the better man—Linton or Lathom—I plump for Linton. I've seen him play. It was an epic game—nothing less."

"Bow-wow!" retorted Blake scornfully. "I'm blessed if I know anything about such a footling game, but I do know Lathom could lick Linton into a cocked hat."

"Then why did he destroy the dashed records?" said Racke, with a sneer. "Tell me that, if you can?"

"Lathom didn't destroy the rotten things," snorted Digby. "If you say he did, for one, I'll punch your silly nose, Racke."

"Will you?" sniffed Racke, feeling in this instance that he could be sure of the support of the Shell fellows present. "But that won't alter facts. If Lathom wasn't afraid of the records being examined by Linton, he wouldn't have burned the dashed things!"

"Oh, cheese it!" said Tom Merry peaceably. "Don't talk rot, Racke! If you say Linton's as good a man, if not better than Lathom, then I'm with you all the way, and further. But I don't think anyone really believes Lathom destroyed those silly records—not even Linton himself. Lathom's a decent old bird—"

"Thanks for nothing!" sniffed Herries. "But we don't think the same about that rotter, Linton! He's no right to have charged old Lathom with such a rotten trick. He's a beastly cad, and—"

"Well, my hat!" spluttered Grundy. "You heard that, Tom Merry? If you're standing by and hearing old Linton slanged then I'm not, and this'll prove it."

With that George Alfred Grundy—always on the look out for trouble—hit George Herries a hefty clump on the nose with his fist.

That did it.

It usually took less than that to start a Form row.

In a flash Grundy and Herries were scrapping furiously. With a praiseworthy intention to stop the scrap Tom Merry unwisely plunged in.

Unfortunately, his intentions were mistaken by the Fourth Form fellows. Digby gave a roar, and, jumping in, he grabbed at Tom Merry. Lowther wasn't going to stand that, and he took a hand, and before anyone scarcely knew it three or four scraps were in progress in the Common-room. In a few seconds after that nearly every fellow had taken sides, and the room was full of tramping, struggling figures.

Great friends as they were Tom Merry & Co., and Blake & Co., took sides against each other. It was a "Form matter," and there was nothing else for it.

Only Racke and Crooke kept out of it. That precious pair did not mind hard words, but they disliked hard blows intensely. The two cads of the Shell were not heroes. They looked on with grins, quite prepared to enjoy the scene, so long as they were not in it.

The battle raged fast and furious, and the dust rose in clouds in the Common-room. The tramp of feet, gasps and yells and roars filled the air. Streaming noses and darkening eyes were soon as plentiful as blackberries in summer.

But it did not last long—even without Racke and Crooke, the Shell fellows were in the majority, and one by one the struggling, gamely-fighting Fourth-Formers were evicted from the Common-room, the evictions getting quite brisk towards the end.

Jack Blake, game to the last, was the last to go. He went sprawling out into the passage with a bump, and the Common-room door closed.

The battle was over. It was unlikely the Fourth would seek to renew it. Tom Merry & Co. gasped and panted as they hugged their hurts and fastened collars and ties that had broken adrift in the melee.

"Phew!" gasped Monty Lowther. "That was warm work, and no mistake. There looks like being trouble over this business, Tommy."

"Well, let it come!" gasped Grundy, who had fought like a Trojan. "Phew! I'm ready for as much scrapping as those kids want!"

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CHAPTER 6.

Unfortunate for Racke!

"WELL, if they want trouble they can have it quickly enough," said Tom Merry, frowning as he buttoned his collar. "Those Fourth kids are getting a bit too cheeky for my liking lately. They need putting in their places."

"Hear, hear!"

"And that reminds me," said Tom, looking round him grimly. "Racke started this trouble really, but I noticed he didn't lend a hand in the scrap. Oh, there you are, you rotten funks!" he added, as his glance fell upon Racke and Crooke's grinning faces. "It was all very funny, wasn't it, Racke? But I noticed you kept out of it, you worm!"

"Oh, go and eat coke!" said Racke uneasily.

"Pitch 'em both out after those Fourth bounders!" said Lowther, in disgust.

"And give 'em a good bumping first," snorted Grundy warmly. "I spotted Racke standing looking on and grinning like a blessed Cheshire cat! Why didn't you lend a hand, you rotten funks?" he ended, with a roar.

"Because I didn't choose," said Racke sulkily. "I'm dashed if I'm goin' to scrap either to back up Lathom or Linton! They're both rotten beasts! As for backing the Form up—what about Tom Merry, the dashed leader of the Form? He was backing up Lathom a minute or two ago, though he knows jolly well old Lathom did it."

"That's enough, Racke!" snapped Tom, his face flushing angrily. "I've stood quite enough cheek from you. Out you go!"

With that Tom Merry grabbed Aubrey Racke by the collar and whirled him round. Then he planted a hefty boot behind him, and started to rush him to the door.

"Leggo, you rotten cad!" howled Racke. "I jolly well won't go! Leggo! Yow-coop!"

He struggled furiously to avoid Tom's hefty boot, and to hold his ground, his face set doggedly and savagely.

"Rescue!" yelled Racke furiously. "Crooke, Gore, Lumley—rescue! Back up your own Form! Tom Merry's backing up that beastly old fool, Lathom, and—"

"Racke! How dare you!"

It was a scandalised, angry voice from the door which had opened, unnoticed by the excited juniors. And on the threshold stood Mr. Lathom himself!

There was a sudden silence. Tom released Racke as though that mischief-making youth were red-hot. Racke himself almost fainted. Without the slightest possibility of a doubt, Mr. Lathom had heard his last furious words—possibly he had heard more.

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Lowther.

Mr. Lathom's face was pink with outraged wrath.

"Racke!" he gasped. "I—I heard you refer to me in a most outrageous and insulting manner a moment ago. You—you actually dared to refer to me, a Form master of this school, as a—a beastly old fool!"

"Oh!" gasped Racke. "I—I—you must have been mistaken, sir! I really said—"

"Silence! Do not add falsehoods to your scandalous behaviour, Racke!" said Mr. Lathom angrily. "How dare you? I distinctly heard you refer to me in those terms. You will be punished with the utmost severity for such gross disrespect to a master!"

Racke's face darkened. He took it that Mr. Lathom intended to punish him himself, and he meant to have a say in that. With the knowledge that the master of the Fourth and the master of the Shell were at loggerheads, Racke felt quite safe in resorting to "cheek," feeling quite certain Mr. Linton would back him up.

"Mr. Linton's my Form-master, sir!" he said sulkily. "I appeal to him, sir. You've no right to punish me."

"Oh, indeed!" said Mr. Lathom, his lips setting. "Oh, indeed, Racke! Very good! I will respect your right in that regard. I will not punish you myself, but I will take you before the Housemaster, who will know how to deal with such gross respect and impudence."

"Oh!"

Racke gave a dismal, dismayed groan at that. The juniors looking on could not help chuckling softly. Obviously, Racke had not thought of Mr. Lathom doing that—having "banked" on his reporting the matter to Mr. Linton.

In such circumstances, Mr. Railton was likely to deal far more sternly with Aubrey Racke than either Messrs. Linton or Lathom.

Racke's face was a picture.

"Oh!" he repeated. "I—I say, sir—I'm sorry! I—I never meant—"

"Silence!" Mr. Lathom raised his hand and cut Racke's whining appeal short. "Silence! You will follow me at once to the Housemaster, Racke. Boys!"

Mr. Lathom turned to the staring crowd.

"Boys!" he repeated sternly. "I came to investigate a

disgraceful uproar that came from this room some moments ago. I see that you have been fighting."

Tom Merry & Co. did not deny the soft impeachment—with their damaged features and ruffled attire it was futile to do so.

"As you all appear to be members of the Shell I cannot, of course, deal with you myself," continued Mr. Lathom, with a trace of bitter sarcasm in his tone. "But it is my duty to report such an unseemly disturbance. Each boy in this room will report himself to Mr. Railton for punishment."

He motioned to Racke, who followed him out, glowering back furiously at Tom Merry as he did so. The passage was empty—all the Fourth-Formers had evidently fled at the approach of Mr. Lathom. In grim silence, the master of the Fourth led the way to Mr. Railton's study.

The Housemaster was seated before the fire with a pipe and a newspaper. He frowned as Mr. Lathom entered with Racke trailing dismally behind him.

"I regret to have to disturb you, Mr. Railton," said Mr. Lathom, whose face was still pink with indignant wrath, "but I have to report a most unseemly disturbance in the junior Common-room. Something approaching a riot has, apparently, taken place there. Hearing the commotion, I went to investigate, and found at least a score of Shell boys with disarranged attire, and bearing obvious evidence in their persons of having been fighting—a state of affairs they did not attempt to deny to me."

"Oh, indeed!" said Mr. Railton, frowning. "But—"

"I ordered them to report themselves to you in due course, Mr. Railton," proceeded Mr. Lathom. "As they were not in my Form, I could not, of course, deal with them myself—indeed I considered the matter too serious to be dealt with by a Form master."

"Quite right, Mr. Lathom!" said Mr. Railton, who could see that his colleague was agitated and angry. "But this boy—Racke?"

"He's treated me with gross disrespect and rudeness," explained the master of the Fourth, with great indignation. "As I entered the room I overheard him refer to me by name as a 'beastly old fool!'"

"What?"

"He then added to his insulting behaviour by impudence," continued Mr. Lathom, his voice trembling with wrath. "He had the astounding impudence to point out the fact that I was not his Form master, and that I had no right to punish him. In the circumstances, I felt I had no course other than to bring the boy to you, sir."

Mr. Railton laid aside his pipe and paper, and rose to his feet, his face very stern.

"You did quite right, Mr. Lathom, in bringing the boy before me," he said sternly. "This is very serious. Racke, what explanation have you to offer for your scandalous behaviour?"

"I—I'm sorry, sir!" panted Racke. "I—I didn't really mean what I said—"

"That is no excuse!" said Mr. Railton harshly. "You must learn to have more respect for a master of this school, Racke, than to refer to him in such disgraceful terms, and afterwards adding to your offence by gross impudence."

Mr. Railton took a stout cane from his table drawer. Aubrey Racke shivered; he had need to shiver, knowing only too well the strength of the Housemaster's right arm.

"Touch your toes, Racke!"

"Oh dear! But, sir, I'm sorry—"

"Silence! Obey me this instant, Racke!" thundered the Housemaster.

Racke obeyed. The next moment Mr. Railton was wielding his cane as though he were beating a carpet.

Racke's worst expectations were realised. He gasped and gasped as the cane rose and fell, and by the time the Housemaster had finished he was fairly howling.

"There!" said Mr. Railton, throwing down the cane at length. "Let that be a lesson to you, Racke! Go!"

And Aubrey Racke went limp as a rag, squirming like an eel, and gasping like a damp squib. It had been a record licking for the cad of the Shell, and his face was white, and his eyes glittering as he tottered to his study.

Crooke was there, and also Percy Mellish of the Fourth.

They looked quite startled at the expression on Racke's face, and the traces of tears in his eyes.

"Phew!" gasped Crooke. "You've had it hot, then, old man! Hard lines!"

Racke said nothing for the moment. He collapsed into the study armchair, panting. Not for a long time had Aubrey Racke had such a thrashing as this. Mr. Railton knew the cad of the Shell only too well, and he had no mercy for him, knowing his mean, spiteful nature.

Crooke and Mellish eyed him in silence for some moments, too afraid at the look on Racke's face to speak. But Crooke ventured to speak at last.

"Hard lines, Racke!" he repeated again. "But that rotter Lathom was bound to make it hot for you after hearing that. And you shouldn't have made matters worse by cheeking him, you know."

"Shut up!" hissed Racke. "I've had it hot, I tell you! But—but I'll make that brute Lathom squirm somehow for this. As for that cad Tom Merry—it was all his fault! I'll get my own back on him, too!"

"Like I did, eh?" grinned Percy Mellish.

Racke looked at him suddenly.

"What do you mean, Mellish?" he demanded. "If you grin at me, you snivelling worm—"

"I'm not grinning at you," said Mellish hurriedly. "Far from it. What about the way I got my own back?"

"What—"

"What about those giddy records?" grinned Mellish. "Who'd you think made 'em disappear, Racke?"

"What?" gasped Racke, his pains and aches forgotten as he stared at the grinning sneak of the Fourth. "It wasn't you—"

"Little me!" grinned Mellish, quite enjoying Racke's astonishment. "The giddy records aren't burned at all. But I know just where they are, old top!"

"Well, my hat!" said Racke.

"I thought it would be some satisfaction to you to know who did it!" said Mellish. "Lathom licked me yesterday and piled lines on me, the beast. That was how I got my own back. I found the records on his desk when I took my lines in, and I left the first sheet half-burned in the grate and collared the rest."

And with gloating glee Mellish explained.

Racke's eyes glittered as he finished.

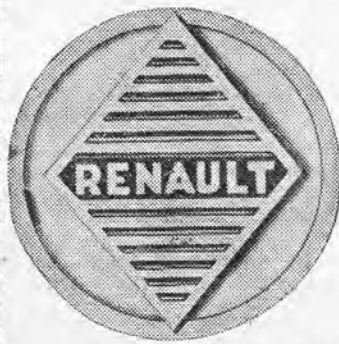
"So you were going to make the records appear again when you'd made Lathom squirm for a bit?" he said, gritting his teeth.

"That's the idea! I shall wait a bit and then—"

"No you jolly well won't!" said Racke thickly. "Lathom isn't goin' to see those dashed records again, my pippin!"

(Continued on next page.)

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You're goin' to hand 'em over to me, and I'm goin' to burn 'em, Mellish."

"But—but—"

"Shut up, you snivelling little worm!" snarled Racke. "Think I'm goin' to miss a chance like this of gettin' a bit of my own back? I'll finish the job you've begun, Mellish, by—no, by Jingo, I won't!"

"What—" began Crooke.

He eyed Racke's gleaming eyes curiously.

"I've got a better wheeze even than that!" breathed Racke. "What about gettin' hold of the dashed records and plantin' 'em on Tom Merry? It was that cad's fault—"

"Phew! Yes, but Lathom will get the silly things back, then. That will be doing him a good turn, Racke!"

"Will it?" said Racke. "Not when I've finished with the dashed things. I shall destroy half of each sheet and make 'em useless in some way. Then I'll plant the ruined parts on that cad, Merry, somehow. It'll not only get Merry into hot water, but it'll cause no end of trouble between his lot and those Fourth cads—Blake and his pals. We owe them all a few grudges."

"Gad!" breathed Crooke. "I say, that's rather thick, though. Don't do it, Racke!"

"Oh, don't be a rotten funk!" sneered Racke. "My hat! Think I'm missing a chance like this after what I've gone through with the lot of them! I'll teach Lathom to get me thrashed, and that cad Merry to boot me just when he likes! Trouble, eh? Gad! We'll cause some trouble all round now!"

"Oh, dear!" Mellish was regretting now that he had opened his mouth at all, anxious as he had been to earn the praise of the fellows he toadied for. "I—I say, Racke, chuck the idea, it's too risky."

Racke got up, his face set hard.

"Come on, you snivelling worm!" he snapped. "Come and find those records now or I'll make your miserable life not worth living. Not only that, if you don't I'll thumpin' well give you away to Lathom myself!"

"Oh! I—I say—" Mellish paused. He saw with dismay that it was useless to argue with Racke now. That ruthless young blackguard's face was determined and unyielding. "Oh, all—all right!" he gasped. "The bundle's on top of our bookcase."

"Come on, then!"

The three left the study, the expressions of both Crooke and Mellish showing the uneasiness with which they regarded the scheme. It was a little too thick even for them, and certainly too risky. But they saw it was no use trying to persuade Racke from it. The cad of the Shell was likely to feel the effects of that terrific thrashing for a long time yet, and he was more than ready for any rascality to get his own back.

The trio made tracks for Mellish's study. There was every prospect of still more trouble in the School House at St. Jim's!

CHAPTER 7

Trimble Tumbles!

BAGGY TRIMBLE came along the Fourth Form passage in rather a stealthy manner, and he looked guiltily to right and left as he did so. To anyone who knew Baggy, and from the fact that he had something hidden under his jacket, it was clear that Baggy had been "up to" something.

And Baggy had! Under the fat Fourth-Former's jacket was a large plum cake. A few seconds ago that cake had reposed on a shelf in Grundy's study cupboard. Baggy had "found" it there—Baggy being an expert in finding things to eat in study cupboards.

In Baggy's view findings were keepings. So Baggy had taken possession of Grundy's cake, and was now taking it stealthily along to his own study to devour at his leisure.

It was Grundy's own fault, of course. Baggy had asked the great man of the Shell quite frankly to let him have a bit of the cake, and Grundy had refused. He had even added a hefty boot to the refusal. Therefore Baggy felt quite justified in helping himself to the cake, just to teach Grundy to be more generous and unselfish. Luckily Grundy had been out of the study, likewise Wilkins and Gunn, and the finding process had been simple.

Still, Baggy was not feeling very easy in his mind as he hurried to Study No. 2, and he looked many times and oft over his shoulder as he went. It was most unfortunate that Wilkins had come along just as he was leaving Grundy's study. Wilkins was a suspicious beast, and he might easily blame Trimble when the cake was missed!

So Baggy lost no time in scuttling into the sanctuary of No. 2 with his prize.

Luckily the study was unoccupied, and Baggy breathed in relief. If Wildrake had been in, the fat Fourth-Former was well aware that he would have been made to return the cake. Wildrake was a beast who didn't agree on the point of findings being keepings. And Mellish—well, Mellish would have insisted upon sharing the cake as the price of his silence.

Trimble didn't want to share the cake, big as it was.

Once inside the study Trimble looked for the key. But it was not in the lock, and Baggy grunted as he closed the door. Then he looked about him for a place to hide the gorgeous cake. At any moment Wilkins might miss the cake and come after him—being such a suspicious beast!

Trimble's roving eye fell upon the bookcase and he grinned. It was just the place he wanted—a place nobody would dream of investigating.

Breaking the cake in half for present consumption, Trimble hastily wrapped the other half in a piece of paper, and dragged a chair to the bookcase. Then he shoved the wrapped half of the cake on the top of the bookcase—or, at least, he tried to do so. But something was there already, and Baggy gave a grunt.

"What the thump—"

Standing on tip-toe, Baggy groped over the beaded edge. His fat hand encountered the little bundle of paper there, and he gave another grunt. The top of that bookcase was Trimble's favourite place for hiding things, and he felt quite indignant at the thought of someone else using it for a like purpose!

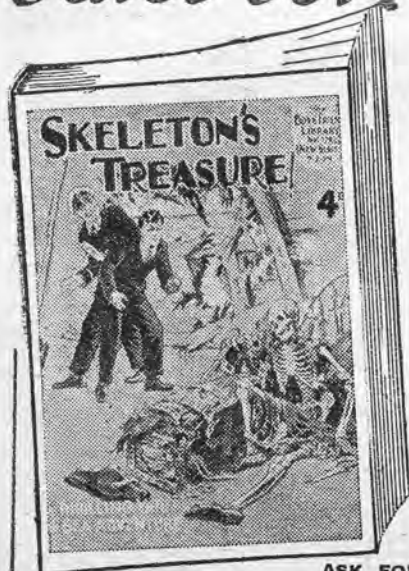
He also felt curious about the bundle. It hadn't been there when he had used the hiding-place last.

Baggy reached up, and with an effort, just managed to get a grip on the bundle. Next moment he gave a startled gasp as the chair beneath him gave a dangerous wobble, and he made a frantic clutch at the edge of the bookcase.

That did it!

The bookcase was a fairly massive piece of furniture, and the shelves of books made it still heavier, but it could not have been expected to withstand a sudden pull with all Baggy Trimble's hefty avoirdupois behind it.

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It lurched forward, and then things moved so quickly that the fat Fourth-Former hardly knew what happened. One of his wildly waving feet sent the chair, already insecurely balanced on three legs, bumping over.

For one dreadful second Baggy remained in mid-air without any visible means of support. The next accompanied by a miscellaneous assortment of books, he had landed on the floor with a bump that shook the study.

"Yoooooop!"

Crash! Bump! Crash!

"Ow! Yaroooooh!"

Under a miniature avalanche of weighty tomes, Baggy Trimble sat and roared. Luckily he had released his hold on the bookcase before it had been dragged right over, or his damages might have been much more serious.

It was some minutes before Trimble had regained his breath and recovered from the shock. With many grunts and groans he scrambled to his feet at last, his first thought for the half-cape he had dropped. Luckily it had sustained no serious damage and, placing it on the table, Baggy turned his attention to the books and papers that were strewn over the floor of the study in great profusion.

As he did so his look became fixed on some of the white sheets of paper at his feet—evidently part of the bundle that had been hidden on the top of the bookcase. Trimble grabbed them up, and one glance at the figures and neat handwriting that covered them made him jump almost clear of the floor in alarm and astonishment.

For he recognised the papers in a flash!

They were the precious chess records—the very things all the fuss had been about!

"Phew!" gasped Trimble, almost forgetting his injuries now. "Who the thump's put the silly things there? I

wonder—my hat! Mellish! It's that beast Mellish! Only this evening he was vowing to get his own back on old Lathom. Of course! Phew!"

For a few brief seconds Baggy eyed the sheets, wondering what to do in the matter. Then his eyes suddenly began to gleam, and he gave a soft chuckle. The top of the bookcase was certainly not a safe hiding-place now. If Mellish went there to look at the bundle he would find the cake there, of course.

Hurriedly Baggy collected the strewn papers together and stuffed them under his waistcoat. Then he stacked the pile of books back on the shelves, and took a big bite out of the unwrapped half of the cake as if to aid him in his reflections on this new turn of events.

His first thought had been to rush with the records to Mr. Lathom and thus earn the Form master's undying gratitude. His second thoughts were more cautious. Lathom would never take his word at any time, and he might easily think he had had the blessed papers all along. Besides—

Other thoughts were working in Trimble's mind now. But he had not long to think things over then, for hurried footsteps suddenly sounded in the passage, and Baggy started up in alarm.

It was Wilkins after him, of course—possibly Grundy and Gunn as well.

"Oh crumbs!" gasped Baggy.

He looked wildly about him. Then, grabbing the unwrapped half of the cake, he dived beneath the study couch.

He had scarcely done so when the door opened and three juniors entered. But they were not Grundy & Co. They were none other than Mellish, Racke, and Crooke.

(Continued on next page.)



Our freakish know-all knows all there is to know and if there's anything you chaps want to know, all you have to do is to drop him a line.

Q. What is a flange?

A. This is the projecting rim of a wheel such as that which you may see on the wheels of a railway locomotive or coach. On the railways, the flanges of the wheels act as a means for keeping the wheels on the metal and especially when going at a speed round curves.

Q. When was the fork introduced into England?

A. In the year 1660—on November 12th, to be precise, Fred Kelly. It was brought by an eccentric traveller named



A flange—a projecting rim of a railway loco. wheel.

Coryate. In those days in England there was no such table utensil as a fork, most people preferring to tuck in with their fingers. But Coryate during his travels in Italy made the acquaintance of folk who were using a strange pronged implement to avoid touching the food with their fingers. So Coryate took a specimen of the fork home with him, and despite the ribald jests of his pals, wielded it at table.

Q. Where is "White Man's Grave"?

A. It is West Africa, C. F. D., which has earned this grim name.

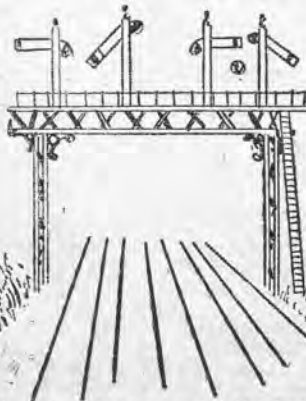
Q. Why do soldiers break step while crossing a bridge?

A. "A Reader Since the First Number" who sent in this query, saw recently a

regiment at manoeuvres. He noticed that whereas they all kept time in marching, they became a sort of rabble when crossing a wooden bridge across a stream. "Why?" he asks. Simply this, that if the soldiers had kept step while crossing the bridge, the "punch" of their feet in unison would have set up vibrations which might have put a dangerous strain on certain parts of the bridge. By breaking step, an even weight was given while the troops passed over. By the way, "Reader Since the First Number," you must be getting on a bit in years! Eh, what?

Q. Is it possible to learn twenty languages?

A. My aunt, yes! Because you find it difficult to learn even English, Charlie



A Signal gantry—see what the Oracle says about it!

Q. What is the difference between a salaam and a salame?

A. A dickens of a lot, Duncan Belcher. A salaam is an Oriental salutation, meaning "peace be with you." In India the salaam is made by bowing the head and body. The salame is a "native" of Italy—it is a sausage highly salted and flavoured with garlic. So you see, Duncan, if you were feeling peckish in a strange land, it would make all the difference whether anyone gave you a salaam or a salame.



An Oriental salutation—salaam.

Q. What is a gantry?

A. It is a kind of bridge or platform built to carry railway signals, travelling cranes or other such things. It is also the name applied to a kind of wooden stand for holding large barrels.

Q. What is the difference between the Jacobites and the Jacobins?

A. They must not be confused in history, "Swotter." The Jacobites were supporters of the Stuarts, whereas the Jacobins were a party active in the French Revolution.

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"Here we are!" said Racke, his voice trembling with eager excitement. "Shut that rotten door, Mellish, and keep your ears open. On the bookcase, did you say?"

"Yes," said Mellish sullenly. "Look here—remember if it comes out, I had nothing to do with it!"

"Oh, shut up, you little funk!"

Racke dragged a chair to the bookcase—the same chair Baggy had used. He jumped up on it and felt over the top of the bookcase.

Then he growled.

"No signs of it here, Mellish!"

"Let me get it!" said Mellish, looking surprised. "It's there, of course—it must be!"

He took Racke's place on the chair, and after feeling in vain he peered over the beading—also in vain. The bundle of sheets containing the chess records was gone—of that there was not the slightest doubt.

Mellish searched and searched, and then he jumped down to the carpet, his face quite white.

"It's gone!" he panted. "Somebody must have found the thing there. I know I put it there!"

"Rot! You couldn't have done!"

"But I did!" cried Mellish frantically. "I know I did! Somebody must have found it!"

The thought of it being found there filled Mellish with sudden dread. Everyone knew his feelings against Mr. Lathom, and whoever did find it there would know at once that he was responsible.

Underneath the couch Baggy Trimble could have grinned as he heard the tremble of fear in Mellish's voice. He lay still as a mouse.

"Well, search round the blessed study!" sniffed Racke. "I bet you put it somewhere else. If anyone had found it there would have been a rumpus before this. They'd take it straight to Lathom—Wildrake would for a cert."

He started on his own account to search, opening the cupboard and peering inside. Mellish, almost beginning to believe himself that he must have changed the hiding-place and forgotten, also began to hunt about in a desultory sort of way.

But it was Racke who found—Trimble!

Quite suddenly he caught sight of the fat junior's leg sticking out from the back of the couch, and he gave a yell.

"Trimble! That fat rotter's here—hiding!"

"Oh!" gasped Mellish, while Trimble himself gave a groan of dismay.

It changed to a yell as Racke grabbed his leg and hauled him viciously out from beneath the couch.

"Now, you fat rotter!" snapped Racke. "What's this game? Why are you hiding under that couch—your own dashed couch?"

Mellish glowered at Trimble—he suspected Trimble knew where the records were at the moment, but he dared not ask.

Trimble gasped in alarm, as the trio of cads glared at him, but for once Trimble kept his head.

"Oh!" he gasped. "I—I thought it was that beast Grundy, and those beasts Wilkins and Gunn."

"What?"

"Not that this is their rotten cake!" said Trimble, taking another bite from the hefty chunk in his hand.

"It belongs to me, of course—came by this evening's post, you know! I—I hid under the couch because—because, well, I thought the beasts might think it belonged to them. Just because Wilkins spotted me leaving their study, he thought—"

"Oh!"

The brows of Racke and Crooke, at all events, cleared. They understood now—or imagined they did. Trimble had pinched one of Grundy's famous cakes, and Trimble had dived beneath the couch, believing Grundy was after him. They had already unwrapped the half cake on the table, and it was clear to them that they had interrupted Trimble at the work of demolishing it.

The slab of cake still in Trimble's hands, and the crumbs on his fat cheeks, bore out that supposition.

But Mellish still eyed Trimble suspiciously.

"Look—look here, Trimble!" he burst out. "Have you taken anything from that bookcase this evening?"

"Eh? The bookcase?"

"Yes. I put something there this evening," said Mellish fiercely. "It's gone now. Have you seen it?"

"Seen what? What was it?" asked Trimble, with apparent carelessness. "Some grub? If you think I'd lower myself by boning anybody's grub, Mellish—"

"Oh, leave the fat ass alone!" grinned Crooke, who was rather relieved than otherwise that the records were missing again. "Can't you see he knows nothing, the fat grub-raider?"

"But—but—" Mellish paused.

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Trimble obviously had been hiding under the couch. And knowing Trimble as he did, Mellish felt it quite impossible that he could have refrained from showing knowledge of what had been on the bookcase if he had really known. Trimble knew nothing about it. Then why make him more suspicious by asking further. Mellish felt thankful that none of them had mentioned the records by name.

Trimble chuckled—seeing the shivering Mellish was still a trifle suspicious.

"He, he! I say, you fellows, what have you been up to?" he said craftily. "What were you after on the bookcase—somebody's grub?"

"You fat-ass!"

"Cigs, then, I bet!" said Trimble. "I say, it's rather thick hidin' 'em in this study—might be found here and get Wildrake or me into a row!"

"Oh, dry up!" snapped Racke. He was bitterly disappointed, and he felt like venting his disappointment on



Blake & Co. arrived just in time to see Mr. Lathom floundering out of from head to foot with mud, and he looked a sight. "Si

someone. "Shut up, you fat ass! Come on, you fellows—no good stopping here! I fancy—"

Racke got no farther than that. At that moment there came the hurried tramp of heavy feet in the passage, and then the door flew back with a crash.

It was followed by a roar of wrath from one of the three fellows, who appeared just then in the doorway.

"My hat! There it is—there's the dashed cake now, and there's that fat burglar!"

Grundy & Co. had arrived.

Trimble gasped as he sighted their red and furious faces. Nemesis was at hand for the grub-raider.

"The—the fat burglar!" gasped Grundy, glaring at the half-slab of cake on the table, and then at the piece still clutched in Trimble's fat fist. "Why the fat little beast is scoffing it now. My cake! Smash him!"

"Yarroogh! I say, you fellows, it's a mistake!" yelled Trimble, in great alarm. "This is my cake—it was sent from Trimble Hall this—Yow! Leggo, I tell you!"

Trimble's wails reached the ears of a number of Fourth-Formers in their studies, and they came rushing to investigate.

Blake, followed by Herries, D'Arcy, and Digby, appeared first in the open doorway, and they were quickly reinforced by Levison, Julian, and half a dozen other Fourth-Formers.

"My hat!" yelled Blake, in wrath and astonishment. "It's Grundy's crowd and Racke and Crooke—bullying Trimble! Cheek! Chuck 'em out!"

"Yaas, wathah! Teach the wottahs bettah than to waid Fourth quartahs, deah boys!"

And Blake & Co., followed by Levison and the rest, rushed into Study No. 2 and laid violent hands on the Shell fellows. Racke and Crooke howled and tried to explain, as did Grundy & Co. But their yells fell upon deaf ears. There was a wild and whirling scuffle in the study, during which Baggy Trimble—with the records still

out" Lathom, but Tom Merry & Co. as well. Now the weapon was gone—had vanished completely. Either Mellish had been spoofing him for some reason or other, or else somebody else had taken the documents. His great scheme had come to nothing.

Having thrown out Racke and Crooke, the Fourth-Formers who had done so, returned to help with the throwing out of Grundy & Co.

Trimble was gone, and with him all thoughts of vengeance—for the present, at any rate.

It was not an easy task. Grundy was raging, and his chums were hardly less furious. On top of this they were handled by the kids of the Fourth—handled in no gentle manner.

Grundy himself was bellowing at the top of his voice—but he was also putting up a tremendous fight. It could not last, however. This time the odds were in favour of the Fourth-Formers, and no aid was at hand.

Gunn went out first, and then Wilkins followed him. A few seconds later Grundy—all arms and legs—also went flying out of Study No. 2.

He dropped in the passage, and immediately scrambled up again to renew the unequal struggle. But as he saw his chums just disappearing along the passage, he gave the idea up—even Grundy had glimmerings of wisdom at times. With a homicidal glare and a shake of his fist at the grinning Fourth-Formers in the doorway, Grundy tottered away, looking very much the worse for wear indeed. He vanished, and Blake turned back into the study.

"What was the trouble about, Mellish?" he demanded. "What were those cheeky Shell-fish after here?"

Mellish licked his lips. He had kept out of the struggle.

"It—it was that fat fool Trimble," he said, pointing to the chunk of cake still adorning the table. "He pinched Grundy's cake, and Grundy and his pals came after him."

"Oh!" gasped Blake, with a rueful chuckle. "So that was it!" Blake saw now that they had been a trifle too previous. Certainly if Trimble had "boned" Grundy's cake, he and his chums had some justification for coming after Trimble. None the less, Blake felt that Grundy & Co. should have come and made their complaint to him before resorting to assault and battery in the Fourth quarters. "Oh, well," he added, "Grundy asked for it, anyway. He isn't going to be allowed to come here kicking up a giddy commotion just when he likes."

"Wathah not!" said Arthur Augustus.

"But what were Racke and Crooke doing here?" demanded Herries.

"They—they came to see me," stammered Mellish.

"Oh, did they?" snorted Blake. "Well, it's a pity you can't find pals in the Fourth, Mellish—that's all I've got to say."

"Hear, hear!"

With that, Blake and his followers departed, leaving the hapless Mellish to himself. Earlier that day, Blake & Co. would not have troubled if Study No. 2 had been filled with Shell fellows. But a lot had happened since then. Once again the rivalry between Fourth and Shell had been roused—with the masters of both Forms at loggerheads, it was only to be expected.

Biting his finger-nails, Mellish sat and stared at the closed door in utter dismay. The discovery that the precious chess records had vanished, had filled him with alarm and fear. Where were they, and who had found them? Even now Wildrake or someone might be handing them over to their owners—to his undoing.

Mellish shivered. It was becoming more and more clear to him that either Wildrake or Trimble had found them. Who else was likely to look up on the bookcase for anything?

With sudden anxiety Mellish began to hunt round the study again, hoping against hope. He was busily engaged on his vain task when Trimble came in, a fat grin on his face.

Trimble's waistcoat was not quite so bulky now. The chess records had been safely hidden under a loose floor-board in the top box-room—Trimble had already seen to that. The fat Fourth-Former prided himself that he had hoodwinked Racke & Co. very neatly indeed. He also congratulated himself on having had amazing luck in escaping the attentions of Grundy & Co. Trimble was feeling quite cheery as he entered Study No. 2 now.

What he intended doing with the records, Baggy had no very clear idea as yet. But he knew he was going to make good use of them—somehow. He was afraid to take them to Lathom in any case. So why not make use of them—of his knowledge concerning them? Besides, only that evening Mellish had licked him—or tried to do so. If only to make Mellish squirm, Trimble was prepared to put his knowledge to some use.

"He, he, he!" he sniggered as he sighted Mellish's dismal

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sep, water-filled ditch that ran through the woods. He was covered asped Blake. "What has happened?" (See Chapter 11.)

safe under his ample waistcoat—sneaked out and made himself scarce.

CHAPTER 8.

Trimble Tries It On!

IN Study No. 2 the struggle waxed fast and furious.

Racke and Crooke were easily disposed of, though in his fury even Aubrey Racke put up a bit of a fight.

The two black sheep of the Shell went out of the study very soon—flying out one after the other like sacks of coke, to fall in the passage outside with hearty bumps.

The Fourth-Formers were not inclined to be gentle with Racke and Crooke.

That precious pair scrambled to their feet and tottered away—with still more vengeful feelings against Blake & Co. Racke himself was seething with anger and disappointment. He thought that with the records in his hands he would have had a weapon that would have not only "paid

face. "You're looking a bit down in the mouth, old chap."

"Shut up!" snarled Mellish.

"Worrying about the giddy chess records, what?" asked Baggy cheerfully. "My hat! I didn't know you were so fond of old Lathom as to worry about his silly old records. Fancy that!"

Mellish looked at him.

"What—what do you mean, Trimble?"

"Nothing, old chap!" said Trimble. "I say, I wonder what Lathom and Linton would do to the chap who really did burn those records, Mellish? I bet they'd yank him before the Head and get him sacked—after causing all this trouble. Don't you think so, Mellish, old chap?"

"Look here," stammered Mellish, eyeing Trimble's fat face fiercely. "What—you know jolly well Lathom burned the dashed things."

"He might have done, and he might not," said Trimble, with a fat chuckle. "Someone else might have burnt 'em—and they also might not! They might, f'instance, have only burnt the first sheet to make Lathom and Linton think they were all burnt. D'you think that's possible, Mellish, old chap?"

Mellish was on his feet now, his eyes fixed fiercely on Trimble's fat face.

"Look here, Trimble!" he panted. "What—what are you gassing about, you fat rotter?"

"The chess records, of course!" returned Trimble. "It's my belief they're not burned at all, and that some unscrupulous chap is hiding 'em to pay Lathom out, old chap."

"Trimble—"

"You'd better look out if that's so," said Trimble, shaking his head. "Everybody knows you were vowing to get even with old Lathom—everyone in the Form heard you gassing. If the records did happen to be found, it might be thought that you'd hidden 'em, Mellish."

"You—you rotten cad!" hissed Mellish. "I'll—I'll—"

"Go on!" grinned Trimble, quite enjoying the situation. "Punch my head if you like—I don't mind. I say, did you find what you were looking for on the bookcase, old chap?"

"You—you fat cad!" breathed Mellish, certain now of his suspicions. "So—so it was you? You'd got them—"

"Got what?" asked Trimble innocently.

"You know what!" hissed Mellish. "Look here, what's your rotten game, Trimble? If—if you've found anything on that bookcase top you'd better hand it over to me, you fat cad!"

"I might have found something, and I might not!" said Trimble cautiously. "It all depends. I say—Oh, good!" Trimble broke off as he sighted the chunk of cake still on the table. "Oh, good! I say, this is jolly good cake, Mellish. Much better than yours, old chap. Still, I think I'll have some of yours when I've finished this, old man."

"Will you?" ground out the sneak of the Fourth. "You jolly well won't, you fat rotter! Look here—"

"Yes, I think I will!" grinned Trimble, munching away at the cake. "I say, I'm rather worried about what I found on the bookcase, Mellish," added Trimble, shaking his head. "I think I ought to take it to Lathom, you know, and explain where I found it."

"You—you—"

"In fact, being a chap of principle," said Baggy virtuously, "I think that's what I ought to do. I am an awfully honourable chap, Mellish. Not like some fellows I know."

"You—you won't, Trimble!" muttered Mellish, realising by this time that his suspicions were only too correct. "Look here—"

"I only said I might!" said Trimble. "It all depends. I don't like the idea of sneaking on any chap—even on a chap who's known as a sneak," he added, with a grin. "It all depends, as I say, how the chap treats me."

"Oh!" Mellish understood what Trimble's game was now. He meant to make capital out of his discovery. "Oh! If—if you really want some cake, Trimble—"

"He, he, he! After I've finished this, old chap. But I say, I'm awfully worried, Mellish. I was expecting a registered letter by the evening post; it hasn't arrived. It's rather unfortunate, as I'm awfully hard up at the moment. I suppose you couldn't change the—the cheque in advance for me, old chap?"

"You—you silly fool!" said Mellish, gritting his teeth as he realised he was fairly under Trimble's fat thumb.

"You fat rotter; I'm practically stony!"

"Well, I can believe that," said Trimble, with a sneer. "You're a poverty-stricken boulder, if you don't mind my mentioning it, Mellish. Still, I think old Racke might cash the order—I mean the cheque in advance. Think he will?"

"You fool! Racke will half kill you if you go to him!"

"I fancy not!" grinned Trimble. "Not when I mention that I found something on the bookcase. I'm rather keen

on palling with dear old Aubrey. He, he, he! I think I'll run along and see the old chap now."

"Do," said Mellish viciously. "You'll get the licking of your life, too!"

"He, he, he!"

Trimble sniggered again, and went out, nodding quite cheerfully to Mellish. As a matter of fact, Mellish was not Trimble's game at all—or, at least, not unless Racke and Crooke failed him. For Trimble fondly imagined that the two black sheep were "in it" in regard to the chess records as much as Mellish was. And Trimble meant to make capital out of Aubrey Racke. Racke was a wealthy youth who would be a horn of plenty upon which Trimble could draw at any time he wanted.

That was Trimble's idea, at all events. In his famous obtuseness, Baggy Trimble was far from realising just what his intentions amounted to. To Baggy, findings were keepings, and knowledge—however come by—was his to make good use of for his own ends. Besides, Racke & Co. had done wrong and deserved to be punished for it. Much better for him to punish them instead of the beaks—better for Racke & Co. and better for Baggy himself.

Baggy began to feel he was doing quite a praiseworthy action as he thought of that way of looking at it.

He rolled into Study No. 7 in the Shell quite cheerfully, closing the door after him as if he had come to stay.

Racke was there with Crooke. The two were lounging, one on the expensive and elegant couch, the other in the expensive and elegant armchair. Being a wealthy youth, Aubrey Racke had found it easy to surround himself with luxuries.

He glared at Baggy in some amazement.

Racke was sore in body and mind—very sore. He had been roughly handled by the Fourth-Formers, and he had been thrashed by Railton. Racke ached all over and felt as if he had been through a coffee-grinding machine. So that he was not in a pleasant mood—not the mood to be affable to callers like Baggy Trimble.

"Here, get out, you cheeky fat sweep!" he snapped. "My hat! Coming in here as if the beastly fat worm owned the place!"

"Oh, really, old man—"

"Get out!" roared Racke furiously. "Why, I'll—"

"I say, old chap, just a minute!" grinned Trimble, facing himself quite the master of the situation. "You'll ask me to stay, I fancy, when—"

Whizz!

"Yow-ooop!"

Bump!

Trimble sat down on the expensive carpet—hard. The cushion Racke had hurled at him with deadly aim was a heavy one, and it quite bowled the fat junior over.

"Get out!" roared Racke. "Perhaps you will now, you fat toad!"

Trimble scrambled to his feet, his eyes gleaming.

"You—you rotter, Racke!" he gasped. "Just you wait until you've heard—"

But Racke didn't wait until he had heard—he jumped up from the couch and flew at Trimble. Racke was not in the mood to hear anything from Trimble just then. He grabbed the fat junior and brought his boot into play with a will.

Trimble howled with anguish, and vainly tried to make Racke hear what he had to tell him.

But Crooke had jumped to aid his chum, and before he quite knew what was happening Trimble felt himself whirling through the doorway. Then he felt a sudden, painful shock, and found himself sitting on the linoleum in the passage, staring at the closed door of Racke's study.

"Ow!" he gasped. "Ow-ow-ow-ow! Yow-ow-ow! Ow! Oh, the awful beasts! Why, I'll—"

He scrambled breathlessly to his feet, obviously with the intention of having another try to make Racke understand just where he stood. But second thoughts prevailed—fortunately, perhaps, for Trimble. It was obviously not a suitable time to "try it on" with Aubrey Racke. In his rage Baggy felt strongly inclined to go straight to Lathom then and there and tell of his great discovery. But again second thoughts prevailed as he thought of Racke's well-lined purse—and also the risk to himself. And so Baggy Trimble tottered away and gave it up—for the time being!

CHAPTER 9.

An Unfortunate Meeting!

FOLLOWING on the events of that evening there was great excitement in the Lower School at St. Jim's. As Tom Merry had feared, the scrap in the Common-room between Shell and Fourth did not look like being forgotten—as such scraps usually were. Often enough there were little differences between the two Forms, and often enough there was trouble. But the scrapping was

good-natured scrapping, and there was no ill-feeling on either side.

Actually there was no ill-feeling now between Shell and Fourth for that matter—unless one took into account fellows like Racke & Co. and Mellish, who were always in a state of more or less ill-feeling with the rest of the fellows in other Forms. For all that, feeling ran high, and Tom Merry saw trouble ahead. It was only the thing to back up one's own Form master—which both Forms naturally did. And as they could not keep from discussing the matter, the danger of more trouble was always present.

In any case, as Blake remarked, things were getting rather slow, and a good bust-up between the two Forms would liven things up a bit and make life worth living!

By morning it was common knowledge in the school that Mr. Lathom and Mr. Linton had quarrelled, and were not on speaking terms. By noon that day—a Wednesday half-holiday—there was scarcely anyone who had not had evidence of the quarrel.

In the House and in the quadrangle Messrs. Linton and Lathom passed each other without speaking, as if the other did not exist. It was looked upon by most as rather a lark, and the cause of it—the missing chess records—as a bit of a mystery.

Mr. Lathom had made wide inquiries as to who had visited his study that evening—to no purpose. It was a blank mystery to the little master of the Fourth.

Whether the Head had heard about it nobody knew. If he did he had said nothing, apparently, to anyone. Mr. Railton must have known about it. He could not help having seen the attitude of the two gentlemen when they had occasion to approach each other. In fact, Baggy Trimble claimed that Mr. Railton had tried to chip in in an effort to heal the breach—to no purpose.

At all events the affair caused endless excitement and discussion in the school that morning. School House and New House took sides in the matter by common consent—the junior part, that is. It was not a matter of House rivalry now, but of Form rivalry. Figgins & Co. were in the Fourth, and they soon let Tom Merry, and the rest of the Shell juniors know it.

Tom Merry was feeling very glum indeed about the

affair. It was a lark in one way; on the other hand it was beginning to be rather a nuisance. All the Shell fellows who had taken part in the scrap in the Common-room the evening before had reported themselves to Mr. Railton as instructed by Mr. Lathom, and Mr. Railton had caned the whole lot of them in no gentle manner.

But though the Fourth fellows had escaped free without punishment, Tom Merry and his chums harboured no malice, either against them or Mr. Lathom. It was Mr. Lathom's duty to report them, and that was all there was to it—in the view of the majority.

It was not this that troubled Tom, however. As the junior skipper he was afraid the trouble might possibly begin to interfere with the footer; and he soon had proof that it was going to do so. Tom had wanted a little footer practice that afternoon—a scratch match between Shell and Fourth. But Blake & Co. had declined the offer that morning, telling the junior skipper with more vigour than politeness to "go and chop chips!"

As a matter of fact Blake & Co. had arranged to do some shopping in Rylcombe that afternoon, and they saw no reason to change their plans to please their rivals of the Shell.

Tom Merry felt deeply exasperated about it.

"Mucking up a whole afternoon!" he said. "Why give us hard brain work on a half, old chap?"

"You—you—" spluttered Lowther. Any criticism of his home-made jokes always made Lowther wrathful.

"Cut out the jokes," said Tom Merry, "and we'll come for a walk with you right enough. As a matter of fact I was going to suggest a stroll over to the Grammar School to talk over a fixture with Gay for a fortnight's time. What about it?"

"Rather risky," said Manners doubtfully. "It's only two days since we sent Gay and his pals home with their legs tied, and their heads swamped with bran-mash. They won't have got over that yet."

"Rot! They won't have forgotten it, perhaps. But japing takes a back seat to sport," said Tom Merry confidently. "We'll explain that it's a friendly visit to discuss footer, and it'll be all right."

"Hum! Let's hope so."

Both Manners and Lowther were doubtful. But they agreed, and the Terrible Three started out a little later.

They took the path across the fields, which was a short cut to the Grammar School, hoping thereby to catch Gay and his chums before they turned out for the afternoon.

But the Terrible Three were not fated to reach the Grammar School that afternoon.

The Shell fellows were half-way across the meadows when a sudden, shrill yelp from somewhere ahead reached their ears.

"Hallo! Someone in trouble!" grinned Lowther. "My hat! It almost sounded like—"

"Old Skimmy!" said Tom Merry, frowning. "I say, suppose it's some lout bullying the poor duffer? Come on!"

He started off in the direction from which the distant sound had come, his two chums at his heels. Herbert Skimpole of the Shell was a youth most emphatically not able to take care of himself. His brain-power and stores of knowledge were weird and wonderful—weird and wonderful in another way altogether.

He was weedy, and generally regarded as a most fearful duffer—a fit mark for raggers.

So the Terrible Three ran hard, being rather fond of the weedy scientist of St. Jim's. They arrived at the source of the trouble with a rush.

It was as they had expected. Lying on his back in the dry ditch bottom was Herbert Skimpole. On his chest was a Grammar School youth—they recognised him at once as Lacy of the Fourth—one of the Grammarian cads. With him were Carker and two more Grammar School fellows with shady reputations.

Tom Merry and his chums dropped over the stile, and were upon them before Lacy and his pals were aware of it.

Lacy was just in the act of stuffing a horrid-looking frog down the back of Skimmy's thin neck.

That hapless youth was wriggling frantically, and the Grammarians were roaring with laughter.

Their laughter ceased abruptly, and Lacy gave a wild and astonished howl as Tom Merry grabbed him by the collar and sent him whirling.

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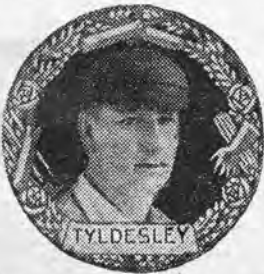
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As he scrambled up Lowther caught him and held him fast, while Manners just managed to catch Carker before that youth could flee. Four to three as they were—counting Skimpole as of no account—the Grammarians were not the sort of fellows to attempt to try conclusions with the redoubtable Terrible Three.

The next moment Carker and the yelling Lacy were flat on their backs in the grass, with Manners and Lowther seated on their respective chests.

Tom Merry hunted for, and found the frog. He brought it over to Lacy, handling it tenderly. Tom had no intention of using the frog for the purpose for which Lacy had intended it. But he wanted to give that caddish youth a fright.

"Now, we'll see how Lacy likes the idea," he said. "You can trot on, Skimmy, old bean. We'll attend to these merchants."

"Yarrooogh!" howled Lacy, as Tom poised the frog over his features. "Take the beastly thing away, you rotter! Oh, gad! Take it away! If you dare—"

"Luckily for you and the giddy frog I'm not such a rotter as you!" said Tom scornfully, as he lowered the frog and allowed it to hop away over the grass. "But you've got to pay for ragging a St. Jim's chap—a chap who can't defend himself. You're going to have a dose of mud down your giddy necks instead of frogs, my pippins."

But Tom had spoken a little too soon. The next moment Lacy gave a sudden convulsive jerk, and sent Manners sprawling off him. Then he tried to jump away, the thought of having mud shoved down his neck lending him extra energy. And at that moment newcomers arrived.

Beyond the stile and the ditch was a little slope down which the footpath ran to the stile. And over the brow of the slope suddenly appeared four juniors wearing Grammar School caps. They were Gordon Gay, Frank Monk, Carboy, and Harry Wootton.

Tom Merry & Co. had no need to go to the Grammar School. Gordon Gay & Co. were here on the spot. The next moment Tom Merry & Co. had good reason to wish they were not.

"Well, my hat!" gasped Gordon Gay, sighting the scene below. "Quick! Giddy Saints ragging some of our chaps! The cheeky rotters!"

"It's only that cad, Lacy!" began Monk. "Still—" "Well, he's a Grammar School man!" snorted Gay. "My hat! It's dear old Tom Merry and his pals. What about that bran-mash the other day? We'll give 'em bran-mash! Just the chance I was hoping for!"

He started down the little slope with a rush, his chums at his heels. The memory of the bran-mash smothered over their heads was enough for the Grammarians.

"Look out!" yelled Tom Merry, suddenly sighting the enemy. "Back up! Here, hold on, Gay—pax!"

But Gordon Gay and his chums were taking no "pax." Nor had the Terrible Three any time to mention the matter of the footer fixture. The next instant they were scrapping desperately. Tom Merry rolled over as Gay jumped at him, but he was up again in a flash.

"Run for it!" he yelled. "Here's that cad, Lacy, and his pal back again."

It was true; in the sudden attack Lacy and Carker had seen their chance and bolted. But on sighting who the newcomers were they had soon hurried back again, also the two who had bolted earlier. It would soon be a matter of eight to three—terrible odds, despite the fact that Lacy & Co. were of little use as fighting-men.

So Tom Merry and his chums acted wisely and made a desperate effort to get away.

Lowther went first, leaving his cap behind him—it was no time to think of caps. He sent Frank Monk sprawling into the ditch, and was over the stile in a flash. Manners followed him the next instant, missing Harry Wootton's frantic grab by an inch. Before the Grammarians quite realised their intention, all three Saints had broke away and were fleeing. Tom Merry butted both Gay and Carboy in their respective waistcoats before making his leap for liberty.

The next instant the Terrible Three were dashing at a great speed back the way they had come.

A roar of baffled wrath from the Grammarians followed them. Gay & Co. could scarcely believe for the moment that their victims had slipped through their fingers.

"After them!" howled Gordon Gay. "My hat! Fancy letting the bounders get away like that! After them!"

"Yes, rather!"

Seething with wrath at the easy way they had allowed their rivals to escape, Gay, Carboy, Wootton, and Monk went in pursuit at top speed. They disappeared over the stile and vanished from the sight of Lacy & Co., who made no attempt to follow. Lacy gave a deep sigh of relief.

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"Phew! That was a near thing for us!" he panted. "Those beastly St. Jim's cads would have made us sit up! That weedy freak's gone, I suppose?"

"Long jago!" grinned Carker.

"Good job for him!" snarled Lacy. "Never mind! A miss is as good as a mile; and let's hope Gay and his blessed pals capture the rotters! I'd like to see them boiled in oil! It isn't the first time Tom Merry's handled me, by a long chalk—confound the cad!"

"Let's clear, in case they do happen to come back!"

"They'll watch coming back, with Gay on their tracks," sneered Lacy. "Besides, we've promised to meet Racke and Crooke here. They should be along soon now, blow them!"

And Lacy took out a cigarette-case and passed it round; and soon the shady four were pretending to enjoy a smoke as they waited for the arrival of their St. Jim's "pals."

CHAPTER 10.

Racke's New Scheme!

"OH, here you are, Mellish! Thought you weren't coming!" sniffed Racke.

Racke spoke with his customary sneer—he always did when addressing his toady, Percy Mellish. There was little love lost between either of the three pals. But Crooke was in Racke's study, and his pursuits and tastes were similar to Racke's. Moreover, Racke was a wealthy youth—the sort of pal a fellow like Crooke was likely to make. Percy Mellish found the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table, as it were, very agreeable to him; while both Racke and Crooke, for their part, found the sneak of the Fourth useful—as a toady and general hanger-on.

Mellish looked flushed as he joined the other two at the gates.

"It's all right!" he panted. "It would have been all right if I hadn't done any of the dashed lines, I believe. Old Lathom—the beast—had forgotten all about them! I gave him what I'd done—and what that cad D'Arcy did—"

"D'Arcy?" echoed Racke.

"D'Arcy agreed to do some for me," explained Mellish, without sign of gratitude. "He did three hundred for me—the silly fool! Good job he did, too; for I'd done only a hundred. Anyway, Lathom's let me off the rest, thank goodness! I thought he'd gate me for this afternoon for not having the rotten things done."

"Oh, come on!" snapped Racke. "And blow Lathom! And blow you and your lines! I suppose you haven't found those dashed records yet?"

Mellish's face darkened. Since the previous evening he had not had an opportunity of speaking again to Trimble, nor had he had the chance to tell Racke of his study-mate's little "game." But from the fat grin on Trimble's face he knew that junior had no intention of dropping his game—far from it. Trimble, obviously, was only waiting a chance to get him alone, when Wildrake was out of the way.

"No, I haven't found them," said Mellish, gritting his teeth. "Did Trimble come to see you last night, Racke?"

"Yes," Racke grinned at the recollection. "He went out much quicker than he came in, the fat little beast! But—"

"I suppose he didn't tell you what he was after, then?" said Mellish, looking about him cautiously.

"Eh? No, I didn't give the beast a chance! But—"

"Well, I'll tell you!" said Mellish, his eyes glinting. "The fat little beast must have taken those records off the bookcase, after all."

"Wha-at?"

"He's as good as told me!" said Mellish savagely. "That was what the fat little worm came to see you about, Racke. He thinks you had a hand in taking the records, and he means to screw cash out of you—and me, too!"

Racke stared, and then his face looked ugly.

"Oh, does he?" he snapped. "He thinks he's got us under his thumb, Mellish?"

"Yes, I suppose so! He hasn't actually said he's got the rotten records, but it's only too thumping clear that he has!"

And Mellish was beginning to tell his conversation with the cheery Baggy Trimble, when that fat youth himself came rolling up to the trio breathlessly.

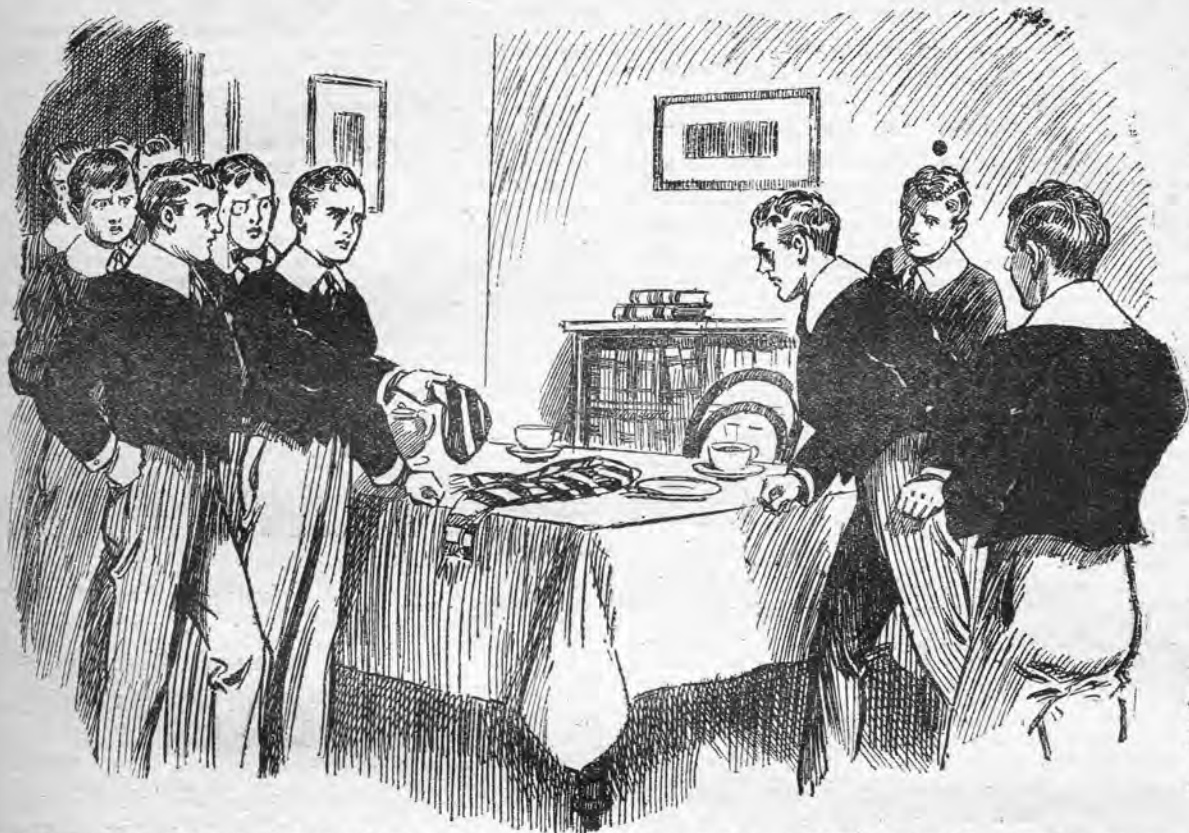
"Oh, here you are, you fellows—" he began somewhat reproachfully. "I say, Mellish, why didn't you tell me you were starting out so early?"

There was a note of command in Trimble's fat voice, and Mellish gritted his teeth.

"Clear out!" he snapped. "Clear out, you fat clam!"

"My dear man, I'm coming with you fellows," said Trimble calmly. "I heard you were meeting your pal Lacy, from the Grammar School. Well, Lacy's rather a pal of mine, you know."

Racke gave the fat junior a curious look.



"Produce the proof, you silly fools!" burst out Tom Merry. "Produce it if you can!" Jack Blake's answer was to draw a scarf from under his jacket and fling it on the table. Then he drew a cap from his pocket and tossed it beside the scarf. "There it is, then!" he snapped. (See Chapter 13.)

"So you'd like to come with us, Trimble?" he said. "Mellish was telling me you're rather keen to pal on with us."

"He, he, he!" giggled Baggy. "So Mellish has told you, what? That's right! It's a go, then! I'm ready to be pals with fellows who'll be pals with me, you know. Of course, as a high-minded fellow, I know I really ought to go and have a chat with Lathom; he'd be awfully interested to hear some news I have for him. Still, on the other hand, I can't see pals of mine sacked, or flogged, can I? It wouldn't be pally at all. So it's a go; I'm coming, old chap!"

"Not at all!" said Racke calmly. "You're going, Trimble—not coming. And this is to help you go!"

With that Aubrey Racke grabbed Trimble suddenly by the collar and raised his boot.

Trimble howled in startled surprise and anguish as Racke's boot landed on his fat person again and again. Then Racke gave him a vicious swing and sent him whirling away, to collapse on the ground in a yelping heap.

Racke was really quite a hefty fellow when dealing with fellows like Baggy Trimble!

Leaving the fat junior roaring on the ground, Racke led his companions through the gates.

Mellish's face was white.

"You—you've done it now, Racke!" he stammered. "The fat beast will go straight to Lathom and split now."

"Oh, shut up, you rotten funk!" snarled Racke, turning on him in disgust. "Trimble can't harm you; he can prove nothing, you fool! You've only got to deny any knowledge of the dashed records."

"But—but everybody knows I vowed to get square with Lathom!" groaned Mellish.

"Rot! That counts for little; it's proof that counts!" sniffed Racke. "You'll see, Trimble won't dare to say a word. If he does—well, they're in his possession, after all, and you've only got to deny everything. Blow the dashed things, anyway!"

And Racke refused to discuss the matter further, being tired of the subject. He felt quite safe himself, and he was not the fellow to worry about the troubles of others—certainly not those of the sneak of the Fourth.

But Percy Mellish's face was quite haggard as he walked along the field path after Racke and Crooke. Again and again he looked back over his shoulder to see if Trimble had followed; he hoped he had, instead of going to Lathom. Once he felt sure he spotted the fat junior behind, and he

felt like stopping, in the hope of having a talk with Baggy—a talk that would keep the fat youth quiet for a time. But the fear of Racke's scorn kept him from doing that.

A moment later the trio reached the stile where Lacy & Co. were awaiting them.

"Oh, here you are, you cripples!" sniffed Lacy. "We've been waiting for ages, Racke! Got plenty of fags, old bean? I hope you have, for I've nearly run out!"

Racke nodded, his lip curling a little. Even the Grammar School fellows seemed to rely upon his well-lined pocket to supply luxuries.

"Yes! I've got a few. Hope you fellows have the cards, for I've none."

"Yes, rather!" grinned Lacy.

"Let's make for a quieter place than this," said Racke. "Hallo, someone been scrappin' here?"

Lacy grunted and told the St. Jim's trio what had happened. He had just finished when Racke pounced upon something lying in the grass. It was a cap. His eyes gleamed as he noted that the name inside it was Lowther's!

The next moment Lacy grinned as he picked up a scarf.

"Here's a scarf, too!" he grinned. "Rip the dashed things up, in case they come back for 'em."

"Hold on!" snapped Racke.

A strange glitter came into the ead of the Shell's eyes as he snatched the scarf from Lacy's hand. Like all articles of clothing at St. Jim's, the scarf had a name-tab stitched to it, and Racke grinned unpleasantly as he saw that the scarf belonged to Tom Merry.

"Hold on!" he repeated slowly. "I fancy these are goin' to be no end useful, Lacy, old bean! You'd like to get a bit of your own back on Tom Merry and his pals, I suppose?"

"Yes, rather!" admitted Lacy, his face taking on an ugly look. "Wouldn't I just!"

"Then I'll show you how!" smiled Racke. "When we came along we spotted one of our masters goin' for a walk through the woods—he took the turning by the last stile, anyway. A little beast named Lathom. You know him, of course?"

Lacy nodded wonderingly.

"Y-yes," he said. "But—"

"Right! Then my little wheeze is for you chaps to put hankies over your faces as masks, and down old Lathom. You needn't hurt the old chap—just rol' h'm in the mud a

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bit—plenty of that in the woods. Just roll him in the mud, and then bolt for it. Quite simple and safe—with ordinary care!"

Lacy & Co. stared—as well they might. "Well, I'm dashed!" gasped Lacy. "You're askin' us to do that—us?"

"Yes, old chap."

"Likely!" sniffed Lacy. "Do your own dirty work, Racke!"

"I would, quickly enough, only Lathom might spot us by our clothes and figures—without seeing our chivvies," smiled Racke. "But he'll scarcely know even your faces. And with hankies with holes torn in to see through—well, you'll be safe enough."

"But—but what for, you ass?" snorted Lacy. "What the dickens have we to do with Lathom? How will that be gettin' our dashed own back on Tom Merry and his pals?"

Racke held up the cap and scarf.

"By droppin' these bits of evidence on the scene of the giddy assault," he said coolly. "See the idea now? You chaps bolt and leave this evidence behind—a cap with Lowther's name in it, and a scarf with Tom Merry's name on."

"Phew!"

"Lathom got them all a licking last night," explained Racke cheerily. "The Shell fellows are supposed to be no end sore with dear old Lathom over it. Well, there's the motive, and here's the giddy evidence, old beans. Now will you take it on?"

Lacy gasped.

"It—it's too risky!" he said, shaking his head at last. "All very well for you chaps. But what about us who take the risk?"

"If the idea of gettin' your own back doesn't tempt you enough," grinned Racke, "then I'll call our little debts off. I think you owe me about two quid, Lacy, and these other chaps owe me a bit one way and another. And—well, if you insist on us helping I'm game—though four of you should handle old Lathom easily enough."

"I—I say," stammered Crooke, eyeing Racke in amazed alarm. "You don't really mean it, Racke?"

"Of course!"

"Assaulting old Lathom, and throwing the blame on Merry and his pals?" gasped Crooke.

"Just that! You're helpin', if necessary, old bean!" said Racke deliberately. "If you don't, you can look out for fireworks! Mellish can keep out of it. He'd faint from sheer funk on the spot, and muck the thing up."

Mellish breathed freely; for once he felt quite thankful that Racke had such a poor opinion of him.

"Well, I think I'm game enough," said Lacy slowly, looking at his three chums. "It should be easy. I know that little old blighter, Lathom. He once reported me to our Head for cheeking him, the sweep! Yes, I'm on. It's worth the risk, anyway. You on, Carker?"

Carker was by no means keen, nor were the other two. But they agreed reluctantly after the advantages had been pointed out to them more clearly. Racke's eyes were glittering as the rascally scheme was fixed up and agreed upon. In his view, the new scheme was much more satis-

factory than "bagging" the chess records, and throwing the blame on to Tom Merry alone.

"That's settled, then!" he smiled, stuffing the scarf bearing the St. Jim's colours under his jacket, and ramming the cap into his pocket. "Now, let's get off. I know just the very place for a giddy ambush, and old Lathom won't be long before he comes back. Buck up!"

"Yes, rather!"

The precious swarm of rascals swarmed over the stile and made for the distant woods. They had scarcely gone when a fat, startled face peered out from the ditch a few yards away from the stile.

It was the face of Baggy Trimble. Mellish had been right when he had imagined he had spotted Trimble behind them. Trimble was a stickler, and he had followed—still hoping to make Racke see that he had him under his fat thumb. If he could not do that, the cheerful Baggy was prepared to follow just to find out what Racke & Co. were up to. Trimble knew that the shady trio sneaked away on halves for the purpose of smoking, or playing games that were not approved of by the school authorities.

If he could catch them in the act—failing his being taken in as a pal, of course—Baggy felt it would be one more little item to hold over their heads.

But he had not been prepared for this.

He had almost blundered upon the little crowd, but the sound of voices had warned him in time. And something about the muttered conversation had made Baggy play the eavesdropper—a little game at which Baggy was a past-master.

Baggy was no scout—his person was not built for scouting. But he managed to get near enough to hear without being spotted, for all that.

And he had heard practically all—or enough, at all events, to satisfy him. Now he raised himself a little and blinked after Racke & Co. and the two Grammarians in startled amazement.

"Oh!" he gasped. "Oh, the awful rotters! The daring cads! Fancy playing a rotten trick like that!"

Trimble snorted with virtuous indignation.

He knew what he ought to do, of course. He ought to jump up, rush across to the woods, and warn Mr. Lathom. Trimble's first thought was to do that—he felt an unaccustomed glow of virtue and pride as the thought came to him.

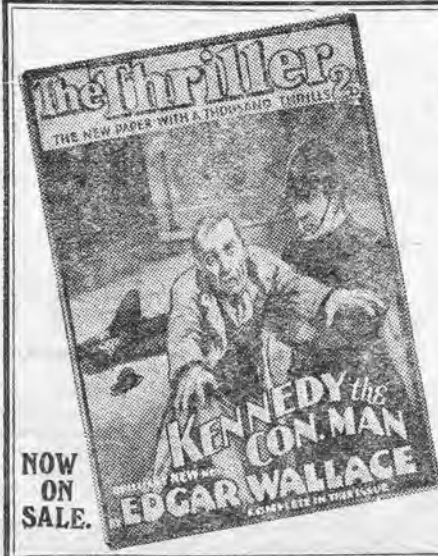
Unfortunately the glow, being unaccustomed to its new habitation, so to speak, soon departed, leaving Trimble with a second, and less virtuous, thought.

If he did—if he did jump up and rush off to warn Mr. Lathom he might easily be caught doing it by Racke & Co. In fact, he would almost certainly blunder into them—even if he could catch up with them in time. Moreover—

And then a third thought entered Baggy's bullet head.

Why not let them roll that beast Lathom into the mud? Lathom had licked him only that morning—wasn't that sufficient reason why they should? And hadn't he licked Baggy Trimble many times and oft—too oft to be recorded, in fact? The old beast deserved it for treating Baggy Trimble so badly. If Racke and his fellow-conspirators intended to really harm the old beast it would be a different matter.

(Continued on next page.)



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As Tom Merry & Co. dropped over the stile, they saw Herbert Skimpole lying on his back in the dry ditch bottom, with a Grammarian on his chest in the act of stuffing a frog down the hapless Skimpy's neck. Three other Grammar School-fellows looked on, roaring with laughter! (See Chapter 9.)



Besides, the fourth brainwave quite settled the matter for Baggy.

He was looking for something to strengthen his hold over Racke & Co., and—here it was. With the knowledge of Racke's disgraceful rascality in his hands, Baggy need not fear being kicked by Racke again.

Baggy grinned a fat, satisfied grin.

He quite overlooked Racke's intentions towards Tom Merry & Co., though it was doubtful if that would have made much difference to Trimble. Baggy would doubtless have remembered some time when Tom Merry had kicked him, and thus earned what was coming to him!

Having quite settled the matter to his own satisfaction, Baggy Trimble rose to his feet, and after a cautious blink about him, rolled away. But not towards the woods—he rolled on cheerily towards St. Jim's. There was no need to follow to see what happened. If the deed was done—if Mr. Lathom was actually assaulted and rolled in the mud—Baggy would soon know about it; all the school would soon know about it.

So Baggy rolled on his way, chuckling, and leaving Racke and his fellow-conspirators to carry on with the scheme.

CHAPTER 11.

A Startling Discovery!

"I INSIST—"

"You silly chump—"

"I utterly refuse to be called a silly chump, Jack Blake!" snorted Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with some heat. "Before we go any further, I must insist upon an instant apology for your rude remarks to me."

"Oh, all right!" groaned Blake wearily, while Herries and Digby grinned. "I apologise, Gussy. I'm sorry I called you a silly chump, old chap. I should have called you just a born idiot, and left it at that!"

"Weally, Blake—"

Arthur Augustus breathed hard as he stood on the path in Friardale Wood. It was all he could do to prevent himself committing assault and battery on his grinning chums.

"Now, cheese it, Gussy!" said Blake, laughing, as he saw that his noble chum was about to turn back his cuffs in great wrath. "All serene, old chap! Only pulling your leg a bit! But for goodness' sake do drop that silly idea of chipping in between Lathom and Linton."

"I refuse to drop it, Blake!" said Arthur Augustus haughtily. "I have thought the mattah out vewy carefully. This wediculous twouble between Linton and Lathom must be ended. It cannot go on, deah boys!"

"Go hon!"

"I have decided to take the mattah in hand before it is too late!" said Gussy modestly. "It is wathah upsettin', to say the least of it, to see such two old fwiends as Mr. Linton and Mr. Lathom at loggerheads, you know. Moreovah," said Gussy impressively, "it is goin' to cause a great deal of twouble between the Fourth and Shell unless it is stopped. I propose to stop it before it gets any furthah. Yaas, wathah!"

"My dear man—"

"I refuse to be turned ffrom my purpose, Blake. I shall see both Mr. Linton and Mr. Lathom sepawately, and speak a few well-chosen words in season to both of them. I shall point out that both are actin' in wathah a childish mannah, and are settin' the whole school by the yahs."

"Oh, my hat!"

"I am quite confident that I can heal the bweach, you know," said Gussy modestly. "There is some wetched mistake somewhere, you fellows. Lathom didn't burn the weords, of course—we know he would be the vewy last fellow to do so."

"That's right enough!" agreed Blake, with a chuckle. "But—"

"And I am quite certain Linton does not weally think he did, eithah!" resumed Gussy, shaking his head sagely. "Therefore, all that is needed is for some fellow—a fellow with delicate tact and judgment, like myself—to bwing the two togethah again."

"Yes, quite so!" agreed Blake solemnly, winking at Herries and Digby. "Easy as falling off a form!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Gussy innocently. "I weally ought to have thought of chippin' in before, you know. Howevah, I am glad I have thought of it at last."

"But will you be feeling so glad after you've done it?" queried Blake, with interest. "You won't be able to sit down for a week or so, to begin with. And—"

"Wats! Your wedic remarks will nevah turn me fwom my purpose, Blake, and— Bai Jove, I do believe that is Mr. Lathom ahead of us now, deah boys!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, in some excitement.

"My hat, I believe it is!" agreed Blake.

The woodland path was fairly straight. In the summer-time the thick foliage made it impossible to see far along it. But in the winter one could see for a considerable distance.

They could see the figure of a man ahead of them quite clearly—though he was much too far away for the chums of Study No. 6 to recognise who it was. None the less, they had overtaken Mr. Lathom on the path when going to Rylcombe, and they guessed the figure ahead was the master returning from his walk.

"You fellows remain in the weah!" ordered Arthur Augustus. "Do not attempt to chip in, or you will ruin ewerythin', deah boys. Lathom will not be pleased to have inwespensible youngstahs like you chippin' in, you know. Leave it to me!"

"You—you cheeky ass!" gasped Blake. "Here, stop, you footling dummy!" he added, in alarm. "Don't do it, you born idiot! Stop him! Oh, great Scott!"

Blake suddenly broke off, with his hand grasping the elegant jacket of Arthur Augustus. And that self-willed youth had also stopped short abruptly, for he had also seen what Blake had seen.

It was remarkable—as remarkable as it was alarming.

One moment the distant figure ahead of them had been alone, walking along slowly; the next, other forms swarmed around it.

Something—a coat it looked like—was wrapped round the distant man's head, and then he was whirled from the watching juniors' sight off the woodland path into the trees.

It had happened in a flash—he was gone even as they glimpsed the startling happening.

"Oh, bai Jove!"

For a single instant the four St. Jim's fellows eyed each other in startled amazement. The next they were running at top speed towards the scene of the unlooked-for happening.

"Footpads, I bet!" gasped Herries. "Put it on, chaps!"

"I don't believe they were footpads!" jerked out Blake. "This is no end queer. Buck up! Hark! That's Lathom's voice right enough!"

"Help! Help!"

The voice, faint as it sounded, was the voice of the master of the Fourth—they did not doubt it.

"Coming!" yelled Blake. "Hold on, sir! Coming!"

"Yaas, wathah!" bawled Arthur Augustus. "Wescue, St. Jim's! Hold on, deah boy—I mean, sir!"

At top speed, Blake & Co. rushed to the rescue.

In a few brief seconds they had reached the spot—the juniors had fairly flown. They arrived just in time to see Mr. Lathom—it was he, right enough—floundering out of a deep, water-filled ditch that ran through the woods. He was covered from head to foot with mud, and he looked a sight.

He gasped and gurgled frantically.

But he was alone. His assailants, whoever they were, had gone. They had evidently taken fright at the sound of Blake and D'Arcy's yells, and had bolted while the going was good.

To the juniors' ears came a distant crashing in the undergrowth—that was all. It died away swiftly, even as they rushed up to Mr. Lathom.

"Sir!" gasped Blake. "What has happened? Who was it?"

He picked up the master's stick and handed it to him. It seemed a futile thing to do, but there seemed little else to be done. Mr. Lathom did not seem to be injured at all—only breathless and muddy—very muddy, indeed, and very wet. To attempt to brush him down seemed a hopeless and impossible task.

"Oh!" gasped Mr. Lathom. "Ow, ow, ow! G-good heavens! I—I have been assaulted, boys—savagely assaulted by some unknown miscreants. Ow, ow! I—I am feeling very shaken and distressed."

"We'll rush off after them, sir!" said Blake eagerly. "If you're all right, sir—"

"I am not hurt—not injured at all!" gasped Mr. Lathom, looking dazed and helpless. "But—but I fear it would be useless to follow them, Blake. Ow ow! I am feeling very uncomfortable and cold. The rascals took me completely by surprise—the attack was sudden and unexpected. I struggled, but it was useless, for they were numerous, I think."

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"Didn't you spot any of them, sir?" asked Blake, in some astonishment. "They—they weren't footpads—"

"No—no, indeed not!" said Mr. Lathom, rising anger and indignation in his tone now. "I am confident they were not footpads—possibly they were village boys, though why they should play such a disgraceful and foolish prank is beyond me. They had handkerchiefs over their faces, and so I could not recognise them. Indeed, I had no time to see anything clearly, the attack was so sudden and swift. I—I must make all speed to the school to change, as I am very wet and uncomfortable, boys."

Blake's face was very grim, and he gave his chums a meaning glance—a glance they did not quite grasp the meaning of. The leader of Study No. 6 did not ask any further questions of his Form master, however.

"I am all right now, Blake!" said Mr. Lathom. "I thank you very much for coming to my aid so promptly. Had you not done so—had you not answered my cry for aid and alarmed them I am at a loss to think what they might have done to me. But—but they shall be found out—they shall be discovered and punished, whoever they are!" he ended, with intense and trembling indignation. "You need not accompany me to the school—I do not wish to interfere with your recreations."

"Very good, sir! If you're quite sure you don't need help—"

"Quite, thank you, Blake!"

And with that the master of the Fourth ambled on along the woodland path, the juniors touching their caps as he went. Blake was glad to see him go—he had not wanted to accompany him for very good reasons.

"Well, my hat!" he breathed. "Well, the—the daring, rotten cads, whoever they were! I wish we'd gone after them and chanced it—but it's too late now. In any case—come on! I'm going round a bit, my pippins!"

"But what's the idea?" demanded Herries. "I could see you'd spotted something, Blake. Got an idea who it was?"

"I hope to have soon," said Blake grimly. "I know it was some fellows from St. Jim's, anyway."

"What?"

"Bai Jove!"

"I spotted something in the grass and dead ferns when I hunted for Lathom's stick," breathed Blake, his eyes on the departing figure of the Form master. "It looked to me like a scarf, and it was red and white—St. Jim's colours."

"Phew! Then—"

"It looks as if the rotters who attacked Lathom were St. Jim's chaps," said Blake grimly, his eyes gleaming. "But we'll soon know. I wasn't going to split to Lathom, of course, though the rotters deserve it, whoever they are! Come on!"

Mr. Lathom had disappeared by this time round a bend in the woodland path. The juniors hurried back to the spot where the assault had taken place. Blake soon found and picked up the scarf.

He also soon saw the name upon it, and he jumped, his face ablaze with excitement and blank amazement.

"Merry!" he gasped. "Great pip! Would you—you believe it possible? Well, if this doesn't— What's that, Gussy?"

"A cap," said Gussy, holding up the article he had just found. "A St. Jim's cap—with Lowthah's name in it!"

"Phew! That settles it, then!" gasped Digby. "Well, I'm jiggered! Who'd have thought those Shell rotters could have done such a thing! Fancy attacking an old chap like Lathom—such a decent old bird, too!"

"Bai Jove! I have nevah had such a shock in my life, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus in great distress. "Weally, I can scarcely believe it possible!"

Blake took charge of both the scarf and the cap. Then, after another careful hunt round for further evidence, with no result, the Fourth-Formers started back for St. Jim's, seething with excitement and anger. Blake had stuffed the scarf into his overcoat pocket, likewise the cap.

"Well, this beats cock-fighting!" breathed Jack Blake, a dark frown on his face. "I knew those Shell rotters were ratty with Lathom about reporting them and getting them licked last night. And it's only reasonable and natural they should back up Linton. But—but—"

"This is altogether too thick!" growled Herries.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We'll see about this!" snapped Blake hotly. "We can't split, of course, though they deserve it. But we'll make them sit up for it! And we've finished with the cads after this as regards being friends. Fellows who play dirty, caddish tricks like this on an old chap like Lathom deserve to be kicked out of the school!"

And D'Arcy, Herries, and Digby agreed with him there. Their faces were dark as they tramped back to St. Jim's. If Racke's intention had been to cause further trouble between the two Forms he had succeeded—only too well! That, at least, was what it looked like now.

CHAPTER 12. Real Trouble!

BLAKE & CO. found a little excited crowd gathered round the gates when they tramped in a few minutes later. Several Fourth-Formers were there—including Baggy Trimble—as well as one or two Shell fellows. They looked puzzled, and were in a buzz of discussion, the subject of which was soon clear.

It was Mr. Lathom.
“He, he, he!” sniggered Trimble, as Blake & Co. came through the gates in a gloomy band. “I say, you fellows, seen Lathom?”

“Yes!” snapped Blake.
“You’ve seen him?” grinned Trimble. “So have we. He came in a few minutes ago fairly wallowing in mud. And what d’you fellows think? I suppose you’ve heard, though—”

“Heard what, you fat clam?” demanded Blake.
“About him getting attacked in the woods,” grinned Trimble in an excited squeak. “Some fellows—I mean, somebody bowled him over and rolled the old chap in the mud. He looked a shocking sight!”

“Oh, and who told you about it?” snapped Blake, glancing at the rest.

“You needn’t glare!” said Trimble. “We overheard Lathom telling Kildare about it when he came in—he met him just by the gates, you know.”

“Oh!” said Blake. He had wondered if Trimble and the others knew anything else. “Look here, Levison,” he went on, turning to speak to Levison, Cardew, and Clive. “Have Merry and his pals come in yet?”

“Eh? Oh, yes, they came in ten minutes ago,” said Levison. “Why—”

“Looked as if the dear men had been scappin’!” said Cardew, eyeing Blake’s face keenly. “But—”

“So they looked as if they’d been scapping, did they?” said Blake grimly.

“Well, Lowther hadn’t a cap on, and they all looked

They also intended to do more—to show their anger and scorn by treating Tom Merry & Co. with contempt and scorn.

Tea was soon ended in Study No. 6, and very soon the expected visitors began to arrive, looking a trifle excited and curious. Levison & Co. came first, followed by Julian, Hammond, Kerruish, and Reilly. Soon the study was nearly full with the most important fellows in the Fourth—excepting Figgins and the New House fellows, who had not been notified.

Blake came to the point at once.
“It’s about this rotten assault on poor old Lathom!” he began grimly. “You’ve heard about it, of course?”

“Yes, rather!”
Everybody had heard about it in the Fourth—Baggy Trimble had seen to that, apparently.

“We saw the attack from the distance, but we didn’t see who the fellows were,” said Blake. “They’d vanished when we arrived on the scene. But we know who they were, for all that.”

There was a buzz.
“You know?” ejaculated Levison. “Just tell us who it was, then,” he added grimly. “They’ll know about it from me!”

“Grammar School chaps?” inquired Cardew.
“No,” said Blake briefly. He opened the table drawer and drew out a cap and a scarf. “We found these things on the spot when we rushed up,” he added. “Luckily Lathom hadn’t spotted them, and—well, they speak for themselves.”

There were whistles of amazement as the cap and scarf

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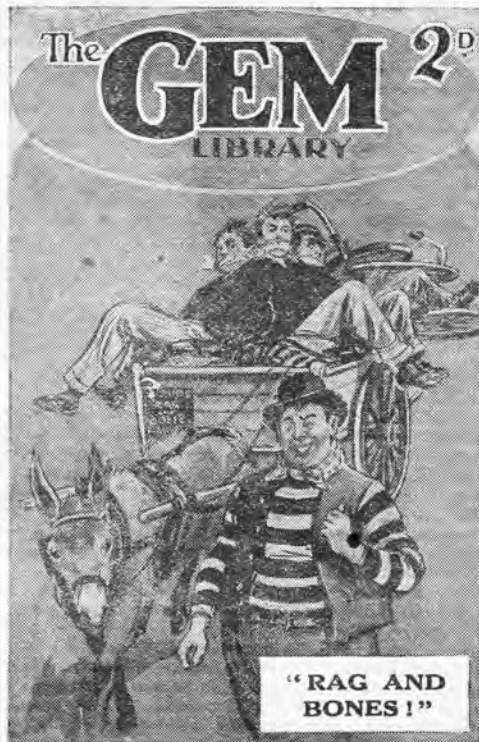
rather the worse for wear,” said Levison, smiling. “I suppose they’ve had a bit of trouble with the Grammar School chaps.”

“I think not!” said Blake. “Look here, you chaps,” he added, lowering his voice. “Come along to our study after tea, and bring as many Fourth chaps as you can get together.”

“Why, what the thump—”
“Never mind why now,” said Blake quietly. “I’ll explain then. Just turn up, and you’ll know.”

The four Fourth-Formers went indoors to tea. Blake did not wish to act too rashly—he wanted a little time to think things over. It was a decidedly unpleasant situation, and needed careful handling. Not for one moment did Blake doubt the evidence—why should he? Certainly it amazed him beyond measure to learn that Tom Merry, of all people, had acted so meanly and caddishly. Still, the motive was there, and the evidence was there. Whether Tom Merry and his helpers had realised it or not, they had acted like cads in assaulting a decent “old bird” like little Mr. Lathom. Possibly they had never intended to be so rough with him as they had been. But they had done it—there was no getting away from that.

Blake & Co. thought it over well during tea, and talked it over well. And the conclusion they arrived at was that it could not be allowed to rest where it was. Reporting the Shell fellows was out of the question—it would be sneaking, whether they had deserved it or not. But Tom Merry and his fellow raggars would not escape scot-free, for all that. They would be charged with the offence, and the chums of Study No. 6 intended to tell the Shell fellows just what they thought of them.



were handed round from hand to hand, and the names on the tabs read.

“Tom Merry and Lowther!” breathed Clive. “Well, who on earth would have dreamed it? And you say there were more of them?”

“Yes, of course.”
“Then they were Shell fellows!”

“Of course!” repeated Blake impatiently. “That’s clear, I should think! Well, what do you fellows think about it?”

“Beats the jolly old band!” said Cardew. “Likewise scoffs the giddy old Huntley and Palmer! But my dear young friends, do be careful, and don’t act rashly—yet! There may be some jolly old mistake somewhere. Before spreadin’ the news round, why not tackle dear old Thomas?”

“We’re jolly well going to do that!” snapped Blake. “I wanted to get you fellows together first. We’ll all go together and have it out with the rotters! And there’s no time like the present.”

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Blake jumped down from the chair he had been standing on while addressing the assembled Fourth-Formers. He stuffed the scarf under his jacket, and the cap in his pocket. Then, with a grim and determined face, he gave the word and led the way to the Shell quarters.

The Terrible Three had not finished tea yet, and they jumped up in some alarm as Blake & Co. kicked open the study door and marched in.

"Hallo!" snapped Tom Merry, sighting trouble at once from the threatening looks of the deputation. "What's this mean? You want me, I suppose?"

"Yes, we do!" snapped Blake, eyeing him steadily. "I think you know what we've come about, too!"

"I don't understand you," said Tom quietly.

"Then I'll explain," said Blake. "As the leader of the Fourth, I've come to ask you what sort of a rotter you think yourself? I've come to ask you to explain if you can, and excuse if you can, your attack on Lathom this afternoon. The Fourth want to know, and, what's more, they mean to know!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

CHAPTER 13.

The Accusation!

THERE was a silence.

Tom Merry himself looked bewildered for a moment. Then his face set hard, and a gleam came into his blue eyes.

Though they had escaped from Gordon Gay & Co., the Terrible Three had not spent a pleasant afternoon. In Tom Merry's view it had been a wasted half-holiday, and Tom was a fellow who hated wasting time. Moreover, the situation in the Lower School was getting on Tom's nerves. He saw that it was going to lead to slackness and a falling-off in sports and games, not to mention trouble in general.

"You—you silly fool, Blake!" he gasped at last. "Are you mad?"

"Not at all! I mean exactly what I've said."

"You—you think I've had a hand in that rotten assault on Lathom?"

"Yes, I not only think it—I know it!" snapped Blake. "Deny it if you can, Tom Merry. You and your rotten pals waylaid Lathom on the way through the woods. You collared the old chap and handed him roughly, rolling him in the ditch. We've got proof."

"That's wight!" said Arthur Augustus, eyeing Tom through his monocle with frigid curiosity. "Pway give us your explanation, Tom Mewwy. We are entitled to one, in my opinion."

"Yes, rather!" said Clive. "Out with it, Tom Merry!"

"You—you've got proof!" almost yelled Lowther.

"Yes," said Blake. "We've got proof all right, never fear!"

"Then produce it, you silly fools!" burst out Tom Merry in great anger and exasperation. "Produce it if you can!"

Blake's answer was to draw the scarf from under his jacket and fling it on the table. Then he drew out Lowther's cap and tossed it beside the scarf.

"There it is, then!" he snapped.

Tom Merry jumped.

"That—that's my scarf!" he gasped.

"And my cap!" snorted Lowther, with a scoffing laugh. "And is that your precious evidence and proof? Well, my hat!"

"Isn't it enough?" roared Herries wrathfully. "We found them on the spot where Lathom was attacked—the scarf and the cap. Now what d'you say?"

"You—you found those things on the spot where Lathom was attacked?" gasped Tom Merry. "What a howling fib! Why, we haven't been in the woods to-day, and those things haven't, either."

"You don't deny that they're yours, then?" said Dick Julian.

"Of course not. Why should we?"

"Nor that you came in looking as if you'd been scrapping or something, and Lowther came in without his cap?"

"Not at all. It's quite true. We—we'd had a scrap with the Grammarians," said Tom, looking bewildered now. "That was how I lost my scarf, and how Lowther lost his cap."

"Very convenient!" said Blake, quite unable to resist the sneer. "Very convenient to have an excuse like that ready."

"What! You—you don't believe us?" shouted Tom Merry, quite losing his temper.

"Is it likely?" asked Blake scornfully. "Who else would want to attack old Lathom? Would any chaps from the Grammar School? Lathom suggested it might have been villagers. But I'm certain he doesn't think so, and we're

quite certain they weren't. What object could they have in attacking a harmless old chap like Lathom? Tell me that!"

"You—you—you—" Tom spluttered helplessly.

"You can keep your temper!" said Blake. "You needn't be afraid of our sneaking and giving you away, Tom Merry. We're not sneaks in the Fourth. But I'll tell you this much—we've finished with you after this. We don't look upon you as our skipper, Tom Merry, and we'll have nothing to do with the Shell, either in sports or anything else. Linton and Lathom aren't on speaking terms, and I don't wonder, if Linton's anything like the chaps in his form. And we'll not be on speaking terms with the Shell chaps. Got that?"

Tom Merry and his chums had—only too clearly!

Tom Merry's face was crimson with anger. His eyes blazed. Blake had made a move as if to end the interview and depart. But he got no chance. Tom's fist shot out and clumped home on his nose.

Biff!

Blake roared. He did more than roar. There is nothing more effective for rousing temper than a sharp rap on the nose, and Blake's peaceable intentions vanished at once.

He struck swiftly back at his old chum, and the next moment the two were scrapping furiously.

Lowther gave a roar—he had been trembling with eagerness himself to get to grips with the Fourth-Formers, and hurl their charge back in their teeth, as it were. He saw his chance now.

"Throw the cads out!" he yelled. "Go for 'em, Manners! Rescue, Shell—rescue!"

Lowther's yell rang far and wide, and having sent the call out Lowther flung himself without further ado at Herries.

The next second a terrible scrap was raging between the Shell and Fourth.

But the cramped quarters soon proved inadequate for the situation, and the fight spread out into the passage, other Shell fellows rushing up to join in with a will.

Blake and his men were soon outnumbered three to one, but they put up a terrific scrap for all that.

Such a state of affairs could not possibly last long, however. The noise soon brought Kildare and a couple of other prefects flying to the scene of the uproar.

They asked no questions. They just piled in with ash-plants, and, amid a further uproar of yells and howls of anguish, the battle gradually lessened, and finally stopped.

Stinging ash-plants were not things to be argued with, and the Shell and Fourth fled in frantic haste before the charge of the prefects.

Order was restored at last. The passage was soon cleared, and Kildare, breathing hard, glanced into Study No. 10, which presented the appearance of having been struck by a cyclone and a hurricane combined.

The Terrible Three were there, and they looked sights. All three were groaning and nursing injuries, and all three looked as though they had been arguing with a threshing machine. They scarcely had the energy to look up as Kildare thrust his red, angry face in.

"Oh, you are here, Merry's!" he snapped. "So this is how you keep order in the Lower School, my lad?"

Tom Merry said nothing.

"Any more of this, Merry," said Kildare grimly, "and you'll hear something from me—and Railton, too! You're junior skipper, and it's up to you to keep order and put down these silly squabbles! It's getting a bit thick, kid! And I warn you that if you don't start taking your job a bit more seriously, there'll be trouble. Got that?"

Again Tom did not answer—he couldn't! But Kildare withdrew without waiting for a reply. He took it for granted that Tom Merry had "got it."

And Tom Merry drew a deep, deep breath.

It was the last straw. The whole Lower School was set by the ears. He and the rest of the Shell had been charged by the Fourth with a cowardly and mean offence. The two Forms were not on speaking terms—they were now deadly enemies. Tom's authority as junior skipper had been flouted, and the Fourth had refused to acknowledge him as their skipper any longer. There was the grim prospect of endless trouble ahead, and, obviously, no Fourth-Former would play footer or any other game with a Shell man. The footer and other games were as good as ruined.

It was an appalling prospect. And the last straw was that Kildare apparently blamed him for it, and looked to him to end the trouble. How on earth was he going to end it?

Tom Merry groaned in deep bitterness of spirit.

Never in his experience had he been face to face with such a hopeless situation. And how was it going to end?

All St. Jim's was asking that before bed-time that eventful evening!

(Continued on page 23.)

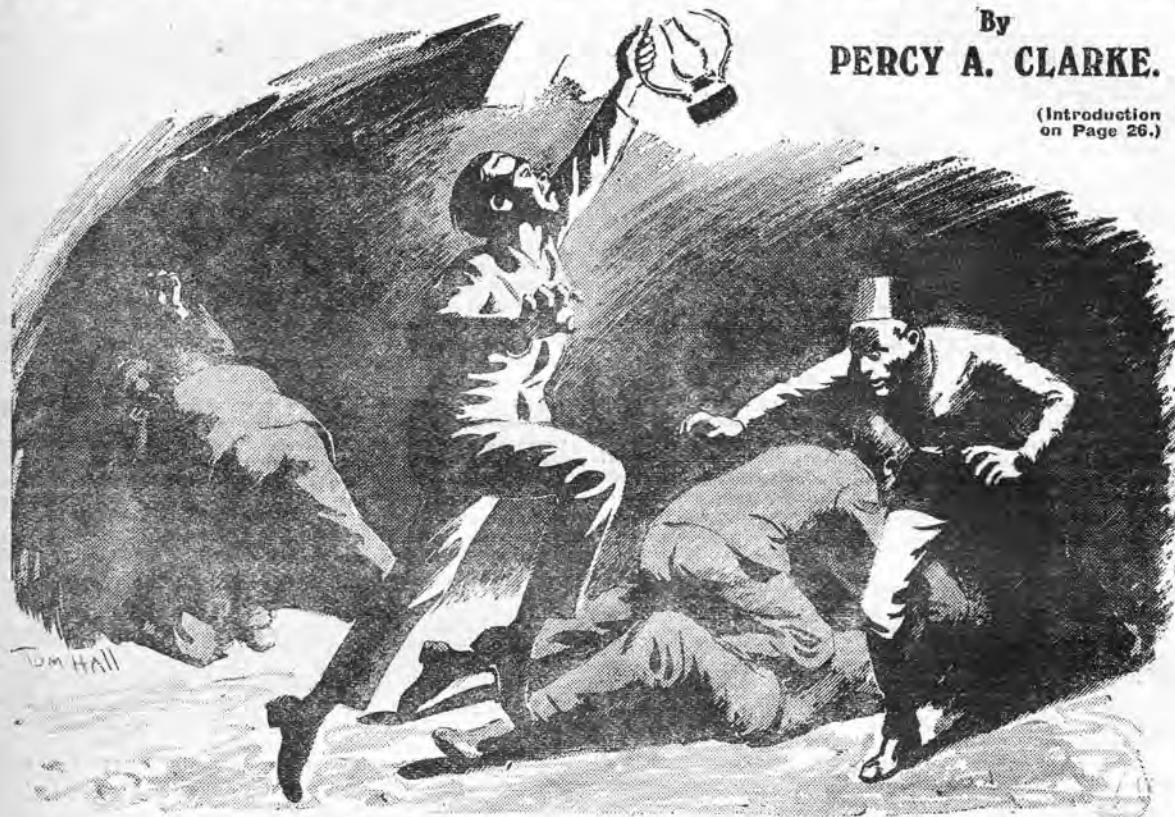
OUT EAST!

Syd and Bob have always wanted to visit the East, to wander through the native bazaars, seeing strange sights and viewing still stranger objects for sale—like any ordinary tourists. They visit the East—but, NOT like ordinary tourists!

THE TRAIL of the BLACK RUBY!

By
PERCY A. CLARKE.

(Introduction
on Page 26.)



A Mysterious Disappearance!

THE sun had long since sunk behind the cupola of the mosque when Steve aroused Bob and Syd, and bade them put on long, Arab cloaks. Not a word was spoken. Young Mustapha led the way. All four were heavily shrouded.

To all outward appearances, the streets of the native quarter were deserted, as they crept along in the deep, black shadows. The pals tried to keep an idea in their heads of the direction in which they travelled; but in that labyrinth it was impossible to keep account of the twists and turns.

Then suddenly they stopped, and the pals saw dimly, over their heads, a window—a sort of casement window. And it was open!

Steve helped Mustapha to clamber up cautiously. He poked his head in, withdrew it, and muttered something to Steve.

"All clear," said Steve. "In you go!"

Mustapha disappeared into the aperture, then appeared again, leaning out. Steve motioned to Syd to jump up next. A leap, a thrust from below by Steve, and Syd clutched at Mustapha's hands and entered through the open window.

Bob followed, and he and Mustapha hauled Steve up.

Steve had an electric torch, and by its light they found themselves in a hut very much like old Mustapha's, though a little more elaborately furnished. The place was unoccupied at the moment, and Steve was busy getting his party hidden behind a curtain that screened one wall.

"And mind!" he hissed. "Not a sound, and not a movement until I butt in. After that it'll be every one for himself, and if we get scattered we meet at old Mustapha's place. If you don't know the way, make for the mosque and take the alley opposite the side door. Get me? Now lay low. They're coming!"

The crooks arrived. A key grated in a rusty lock. A door swung open, admitting a draught of fresh air, then closed sharply, and Karl Sweetman entered with his gang.

Twisty Baker reached up and applied a match to the

crazy oil lamp that hung from a beam in the roof. Sweetman appeared to be in a temper.

"You made a mess of things, Ah Wong!" he was saying. "If you can't get rid of two mere boys, with all the cut-throats from the wharves to help you—"

"Fate," said Ah Wong, shrugging his shoulders. "Me tly, me fail. Just fate."

"Bah! Don't tell me fairy tales like that!" rasped Sweetman. "When I want a thing done I see that it's done. You fail me again, and you know what your fate will be. I won't let you off so lightly next time. But listen. This is no picnic we're on. We've got to keep that Black Ruby where they won't find it. I suggest that we take it in turns to carry the sparkler. I've had it now for some time, and they will make a bee-line for me to get it back, as that cub did after that train smash in France. You take it for a bit, Twisty."

He handed the Black Ruby to Twisty Baker. The crook removed the cotton-wool and admired the scintillating facets of the huge gem. He sat on the floor—there were no seats in that hut—with his back to the curtains that concealed the pals.

Peeping from the folds of that curtain Steve Barrett saw the Black Ruby within reach of his hand. He could not resist. He acted with incredible speed. His long arm reached and grabbed it from Twisty Baker's wire-like fingers. The crook snarled in alarm, but Steve's other arm shot out. Bunched knuckles caught Baker behind the ear with stunning force, and he went down like a log. But Steve had the Ruby!

Sweetman was on his feet in a flash. His hand went to his hip-pocket for his gun. Bob came out from behind the curtain with a rush, grappled the boss crook round the waist, and brought him to the floor.

Syd had Bully Mahon by the throat, and Mustapha came creeping out after Ah Wong, when suddenly the Chinaman leapt—not at Mustapha, but up to the beams of the ceiling. His yellow hands clawed the swaying oil-lamp and brought it down with a crash.

For a space there was darkness—utter, impenetrable darkness. Then came light—the glaring, terrifying light of

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enormous flames shooting up and licking the beams, scorching the walls. It was an inferno, and the pals were fighting in the midst of it for their lives—and the Black Ruby!

Inside the hut it was like a furnace; the heat was terrific. The rickety shelter was built of wood that had long since dried out in the glare of the tropical sun, and now burnt like matchwood. The flames licked the beams hungrily, crackling viciously, spitting and hissing, casting sparks in all directions. Great clouds of pungent smoke filled the hut as the dusty, heavy curtains caught fire.

And on the flaming floor Bob and Syd rolled over and over, locked in deadly combat with the crooks. Steve was the only one on his feet. He swayed on the balls of his feet, ready and willing, waiting for Bully Mahon to come at him. Steve knew his job. He could have gone after the big tough, but Mahon's right hand was behind his back, and Steve guessed what that meant.

Syd had brought Mahon down with a crash, and was throttling him, when the tough lashed out with his feet, and Syd rolled clean over the exploded oil-lamp to the other side of the hut. He fetched up against Twisty Baker, who had fallen, half senseless, from the impact with Steve's fist. His senses had just returned, and he grabbed out with his wire-like hands. He got Syd round the body and they wrestled grimly on that fire-licked floor.

And Steve was watching Bully Mahon. Mustapha was struggling with Ah Wong. The Chinaman had his knife out, but Mustapha's lean hand gripped his wrist and held that gleaming blade suspended in the air. Their legs were intertwined. They swayed to and fro amidst the flames.

Steve had all his attention centred on Mahon, who was creeping towards him, his right hand still behind his back.

Bob was in the corner on top of Karl Sweetman. A grim struggle was taking place there. For once Sweetman was no longer debonair. He was a savage. He fought tooth and nail. He bit Bob's arm, and snarled like a wild animal. Bob hit him, but Sweetman was harder than he appeared to be. Bob's fist crashed full in his face. The crook's head went back and cannoned on the floor planks. His face was contorted with pain, but he still fought, biting and kicking.

Bob used strategy. He just had to do something. He pretended to be hard hit, and rolled clear. Sweetman gave a grunt of triumph, and leapt to his feet. But Bob was on his feet at the same moment and leapt at his opponent as Sweetman braced himself to strike.

Bob got his blow in first.

Crack!

His bunched knuckles connected with Sweetman's jaw and dropped him in a senseless heap.

In an instant, Bob had spun round to help somebody else. And it was then that Bully Mahon sprang at Steve. His right hand flashed into view, brandishing a wicked clasp-knife. Steve had been waiting for that knife, and he knew what to do. One brawny hand clutched at Mahon's right wrist and held it firm. Steve's right came up in a vicious upper-cut. The clenched fist caught Mahon on the side of the jaw.

It was quick, so quick that Bob had no time to realise that Steve was capable of looking after himself. For, as Steve struck, so Bob rushed in to his rescue and struck Mahon at the same time. As Steve's fist crashed on the tough's jaw, so Bob's fist landed with amazing force on the tough's ear. Bully Mahon just grunted and went limp. He swayed for a second, then toppled sideways, knocked-out to the wide. No man living could have remained on his feet after those two blows.

Bob and Steve stared at each other for a second, grinned and then, realising that seconds were precious, spun round. Bob saw Mustapha grappling with Ah Wong. He went up behind the Chinaman and seized him by the neck. Mustapha released his hold, and the Chinaman was hurled bodily on top of Mahon.

Meanwhile, Steve skipped across to Syd and Twisty Baker. Syd was having a rough-house. Baker had wriggled on top of him and was doing his best to squeeze on Syd's ribs. But Steve caught Baker by the scruff of his neck and one leg. With a monstrous heave, the big

Australian dragged Twisty Baker off Syd and hurled him on one side. The crook seemed to flatten against the opposite wall, then he dropped half senseless to the floor.

The flames shot up around them now. A beam fell from the ceiling, throwing up a shower of sparks. Ah Wong moaned, and slowly struggled to his feet.

Steve sprang at a curtain that still hung on one wall, and pulled it down. He flung it on top of the remains of the oil-lamp that lay in the centre of the hut. It served two purposes. For it smothered the flames for a moment, and revealed the window by which they had entered. Towards this aperture the victorious pals struggled.

Steve stood there and helped them out one by one. Syd went first, then Bob, then Mustapha. And then the Australian came out in a hurry.

"Out of this, as quick as you like!" he rasped as soon as he alighted outside. "Remember, head for the mosque!"

In a moment they had fled. There was no need to explain why they had to hustle. For one thing, Steve had the Black Ruby, and the crooks were bound to be on their heels. And for another, the stillness of the Oriental night had long since been shattered. Men were rushing in all directions—men of all nations, white, black, coffee-coloured, yellow.

Whistles shrieked and men shouted. The bells at the mosque were clanging. And behind the pals a dull red glow showed where the hut was burning. The leaping flames had penetrated through the crazy roof and lit up the native quarter like a huge candle.

The fire alarm had been given. Soudanese police came rushing with fire-fighting appliances, and troops from the barracks came out at the double. Fire in the native quarter was worse than a riot, for in that collection of tumble-down wooden huts there was no knowing where and how the outbreak would finish.

But much as they hated Sweetman and his gang, the pals were greatly concerned.

"D'you think they got out of that hut?" queried Syd, as he ran beside Steve.

"By George!" rasped Steve. "D'you think I've got time to worry about them now?"

"But," put in Bob, "I don't like the idea of them being burnt to cinders—"

His voice trailed away into nothingness. They were racing down a long, narrow street. At the other end a light streamed out into the night from a window, and in the path of that light four men suddenly appeared.

Steve halted abruptly, and the others followed suit. It was easy to recognise those four men. Karl Sweetman and his gang had won clear of the flames and were seeking the Black Ruby again!

"This way!" cried Steve hoarsely, and they dived down a side alley, knowing that the crooks were on their trail.

If that native quarter was a maze by day, it was hopeless to find one's way at night. But Steve seemed to know his way, for he rapped out instructions.

"Left! Now right! Head for the mosque! Under that arch!"

And so they fled, in and out of alleys, round corners. And by reason of their superior sprinting qualities, Syd and Bob drew ahead.

They rounded a corner into a street that seemed very dark and deserted. They raced on until—

Crack!

A revolver-shot sounded close behind them. They spun round, and saw Steve turning back.

"Mustapha's got it!" he called.

He disappeared round the corner. For a brief moment Syd and Bob stood there inactive, then they went after Steve, back round the corner, and stopped.

They gazed about them. They stared at each other in stupid bewilderment. The place was deserted. There was not a soul in sight. Steve and Mustapha had vanished completely.

The Peculiar Stranger!

"WELL, I'm blessed!" gasped Bob.

"They couldn't have got far!"

"In any case, why—" Syd began.

INTRODUCTION.

Trailed across two continents by a gang of cunning crooks, Steve Barrett, in possession of a Black Ruby, eventually reaches England. With the aid of this 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 Bob Crompton and Syd Dyson, two plucky, athletic fellows, with whom he sets off on a wild dash south on the trail of the Black Ruby. After a series of exciting adventures the chums retrieve the precious stone. Their efforts to shake off Sweetman and his gang by boarding a fast boat bound for Egypt, prove of little avail, however, for just as they are nearing Alexandria the crooks sneak the ruby again and get clear in a native boat. Leaving his chums in a mud hut in the care of an old Arab named Mustapha, Steve sets out on his own to discover the hiding-place of the gang. A forged letter purporting to have come from Steve shortly afterwards leads Bob and Syd to a jeweller's shop in the vicinity of which they are attacked by Ah Wong, the Chinese member of the gang, and a crowd of Arabs, Turks, and Lascars. Thanks to the timely intervention of Mustapha and Steve, the mob is dispersed, after which the chums return to the evil-smelling hut to rest, determined to carry on the chase in company with Mustapha's son, after dark that night.

(Now read on.)

Then suddenly at the far end of the street appeared the dim figure of a man. It might have been one of the crooks—they couldn't see—but it reminded them that they were still in danger.

"No sense in stopping here!" growled Syd. "Can't do anything. Better make for the mosque. Come on!"

They continued on their way, walking rapidly round the corner, and down the dark, deserted street. Behind them the sky glowed red where the hut was still burning. They could hear the noisy confusion of the fire-fighters. Before them all was darkness and quiet. Apparently the native population had left their dwelling in this part of the town to see the fire.

The pals walked rapidly on their way. At last the dome of the mosque showed dimly ahead against the background of the star-studded sky. The amazing disappearance of Steve and Mustapha was bewildering, but obviously there was nothing else for the pals to do but go on to the mosque and try to find old Mustapha's hut.

But as they rounded the first corner they came to, they butted into Ah Wong and Bully Mahon. The Chinaman hissed, and Mahon ripped out an oath. There was no alleyway at hand to dive down, so the pals continued on their way.

The two boys leapt forward. Bob's fist landed on Ah Wong's nose and toppled him over. Syd's bunched knuckles got Mahon between the eyes, and sent him staggering. The next moment they were past the crooks and sprinting again.

"Round the block!" panted Bob. "Got to shake them off before going to the hut. Round the block!"

And round the block they went; but Ah Wong and Bully Mahon were close behind—too close to be pleasant. They could hear the thudding of the crooks' feet on the uneven stones. Bully Mahon was panting audibly, so close was he.

"Keep going, Syd!" hissed Bob. "Got to fool 'em somehow!"

Round the corner they sped, and strong arms seized them and hauled them into a dark doorway. Syd hit out savagely.

"Let go!" hissed Bob, lashing out with his fists.

Someone cursed fluently in Arabic, and the other fellow spoke—in English.

"Keep quiet, you idiots!"

It was Steve! And the pals froze in the darkness—merged into the dense shadows, and kept quite still as Ah Wong and Bully Mahon went chasing past the doorway and down the street.

Then, without a word, Steve led the way, swiftly, silently, across that street, down a dark alley, out the other end, along another street and in at a hut. The door was closed and bolted. Someone lit an oil-lamp, and they found themselves in old Mustapha's hut.

The pals slumped down on the couch arrangement that ran along one wall. Old Mustapha still sat there, pulling away at his bubble-bubble pipe, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Young Mustapha limped painfully across the floor, and said something to Steve in Arabic.

"Sure," replied Steve. "We'll fix it for you."

Young Mustapha sat down on the floor, and Steve went down beside him and began to probe about in the calf of his leg. Eventually he sighed with satisfaction, and held up a revolver bullet.

"Guess that was a chance shot of Sweetman's," he said. "And only just pinked you, Mustapha. If we had been a few yards closer, you'd either be in hospital or a cemetery now. That was a near thing for us."

"And a rummy go," put in Bob. "What happened? And where on earth did you two get to?"

Steve grinned as he glanced up.

"Jumping wallabies!" he exclaimed. "Haven't you guessed yet? It's as plain as the nose on your face. Sweetman and his crowd caught sight of us rounding that corner. Karl got mad, and took a pot-shot with his gun, and got Mustapha in the leg. Down went Mustapha, and I went back to help him up."

"Yes. But you vanished," said Syd.

"Like Lucifer, we did!" retorted Steve. "I had Mustapha up on his feet, but one leg wasn't a lot of use to him, and then crooks were coming on with a rush. I reckoned you boys would go on, so, rather than lead them to you, we dodged in a doorway, and, finding the door unlocked, we waltzed into the place and out the back door into another alley. We properly got those crooks rattled. And, having fooled them, we set out to look for you. And, tell you what, boys, hunting needles in haystacks is kids' play to finding anybody in this show after dark."

"I believe you!" growled Bob. "Compared with this place, Hampton Court Maze is just bun! We must have gone over the same ground time and time again."

"And I," put in Syd, "was scared stiff in case we should sort of run into ourselves from the back. I'm stiff and sore and fagged out. I'm hungry and thirsty and dirty and—"

"So'm I," agreed Steve. "But what does that matter? Look!"

He stretched out his hand and showed them the Black Ruby reposing on his palm. The flickering rays of light from the oil lamp gleamed and scintillated on its facets. Bob drew in his breath sharply.

"You're right, Steve," he said. "It was worth it!"

Syd said nothing. He was staring at the gem as if fascinated. But, in reality, he was thinking hard. Steve gazed at the Ruby, a grin of eminent satisfaction on his face.

"We've got it again," he said, "and it's up to us to keep it!"

"Put it away, and let's eat!" said Syd sharply.

Steve started, and stared at him, then obeyed. He stowed the Ruby in a pocket in the stout leather belt that was round his waist. He spoke to Mustapha, and before long they were eating and drinking with much relish.

Appetites appeased and thirsts quenched, they stretched themselves on the benches, too tired to take much notice of anything, although in that squalid hut there were plenty of little things calculated to worry any European—little things that bit.

But the pals needed sleep, and they got it. Steve needed sleep, and he made plenty of noise about it. His snores were sonorous, and at any other time the boys would have shied something at him, but now they were too exhausted even for that.

Then young Mustapha woke them. He had been sleeping noisily on the bench, but was wide awake now. He shook Steve, and spoke to him in Arabic, and Steve came to earth with a gasp.

"By George, boys! That tender for the P. & O. heat leaves at dawn. We'll have to buzz if we're to catch her. Come on! Hustle!"

A few minutes later they left the hut and headed cautiously for the quay, in case any of the crooks happened to be lurking in the doorways.

Shipping officials, Government officials, Sudanese police, various types of beggars and hawkers, always to be found in the tropics, were crowding the quays, even at that early hour. With his back to a crate of machinery sat a dirty Arab, his hands outstretched, chanting his plea mournfully.

"Backsheesh! In the name of Allah! Backsheesh! Great is Allah and Mohamed his prophet! Backsheesh!"

But the pals passed on round the crate to the quay side, all littered with the conglomeration of merchandise and commerce. Hogsheads and barrels, boxes and trunks, crates and bales were strewn about in confusion. People hustled lither and thither. The tender was moored to the quay. Fellahs ran to and fro along her gangways with boxes and trunks and packages on their heads.

The boys gazed about them, interested. But Steve, hardened traveller as he was, studied the Europeans present. Suddenly he grabbed Bob's arm and spoke curtly.

"Look! Who's old Svenskhem tailed up with now?"

They gazed suspiciously at the big Swede. He was jabbering away to a Sudanese policeman, and not making much impression. And by his side stood a debonaire man, neatly dressed, smoking a cigarette. The stranger was a military-looking man with a black moustache. He was bronzed as if he had spent much of his life in the tropics. He stood erect and held himself as if the barrack square was not strange to him.

"And yet," murmured Syd, "he strikes me as familiar. Where have I seen him before?"

"And I ought to know that face," put in Bob.

"And I can't place him!" growled Steve. "But these soldier chaps are all alike. Those sergeant-majors turn 'em out according to pattern like sausages out of a machine. But—dingoes! Look at the old apple-chewer going red in the face! Let's see what the rumpus is all about."

They approached Svenskhem. Steve slapped him familiarly on the shoulder.

"Cheerio, cabbage-eater!" he cried. "Why the sermon?"

"I want to know if this is the tender for the Maharanee?"

"Yes," answered Steve. "This way, gents. This is the tender, and we'd better get aboard quickly. She leaves in five minutes."

They walked towards the tender. Svenskhem seemed strangely excited. He talked rapidly to his friend, then turned to Steve.

"Meine frient von pig dealer in der jewels vos. He buy from me vot I buy in der native bazaars, und der pig broff I make. Und I tell to heem I haf seen a ruby dot plack vos, und he not believe. Poot you show heem, ain't it?"

Steve turned on the Swede, fairly snarling at him.

"You keep your mouth shut about that ruby," he hissed, "or you'll meet trouble—big trouble!"

(So the three chums have got the ruby back again! But what's happened to Sweetman and his gang? You can rest assured they'll turn up again very soon. Look out for next week's instalment. It's better than ever.)

Two Forms At War!

(Continued from page 24.)

Racke and Crooke rolled about on the couch in their study, nearly helpless with laughter. From afar they had heard the commotion, but they had not troubled to go out to see what was happening. There was no need to go out—they knew without doing that. Percy Mellish was there, but he was not laughing. He seemed to be scared out of his wits by the result of Racke's little scheme of vengeance.

But Racke and Crooke were not scared—at least, Racke was not, and Crooke pretended not to be.

Aubrey Racke's face was flushed with unholy glee. Never had any scheme of his met with such complete success. It was a complete triumph for the end of the Shell.

All was quiet now, however. The prefects had cleared the passage, and the Fourth-Formers had departed to their own quarters—all excepting Mellish, who dared not venture out yet.

The door of Racke's study opened gently and a fat figure insinuated itself into the room. It was Baggy Trimble, and Baggy was wearing a fat, satisfied grin. Racke's laughter ceased abruptly and he pointed to the door.

"Outside!" he snapped.

Baggy closed the door and came right into the room.

"Ho, ho, he!" he sniggered. "What a scream! I say, Racke, old man, congrats! You pulled that off rather neatly, I must say."

"Eh? What's that, you fat worm?"

Racke sat bolt upright on the couch. A stifled exclamation came from Gerald Crooke.

"I say it's all right!" said Trimble hurriedly, still grinning, however. "No need to get up, Racke, old man! I say, the blessed Lower School's fairly upside down. You really are a goer, Aubrey!"

"You—you cheeky fat rotter!" hissed Racke, looking quite startled now. "What the blump do you mean? What has it got to do with me, you worm?"

"Oh, nothing at all!" said Trimble cheerfully. "I know nothing, of course. I'm your pal, Racke, ain't I? And I'm Lacy's pal, too."

"What—what—" Racke halted, half-rising, as if to fling himself at the grinning fat junior.

"Better not, Aubrey!" said Baggy, with a fat chuckle. "I say, I wonder what would happen if it came out, who really did attack old Lathom and caused all this rumpus? If you ask me, Aubrey, it wasn't Tom Merry and his lot at all. In my opinion, somebody found that scarf and cap, and planted 'em on the spot to shove the blame on Tom Merry. Don't you think so, Aubrey?"

Racke breathed hard. There was no mistaking the meaning underlying the grinning fat junior's remarks. He eyed Baggy wolfishly. But he did not move.

"But never mind that now," said Trimble. "Rather an unpleasant subject—what? It's my opinion this affair will end with the sack for someone. But I say, Aubrey, you might have waited for me this afternoon. I followed you as far as the stile across the meadows, you know."

"You—you did?"

"Yes, old man! But you happened to be busy talking to

some friends from the Grammar School," said Trimble blandly, "so I thought I wouldn't interrupt you, you know! Kind of me, wasn't it?"

"You—you fat cad!" hissed Racke.

"But we're going to be awfully good pals after this, aren't we, Aubrey?" resumed Baggy sweetly. "You see—"

"Get out!" breathed Racke, his eyes glinting dangerously. "Get out of my study, you fat cad!"

"Oh, all right!" said Trimble loftily. "I'm not particular about your friendship, Racke. I can easily find friends, on top. I think I'll trot along to see Blake now; and I've an appointment with Tom Merry, too. And Lathom's rather a special pal of mine, you know. I want to suggest to him my belief that it was that rotter Lacy and some more chaps who attacked him."

And Trimble rolled to the door carelessly.

Racke called him back hoarsely.

"Hold on—hold on, Trimble!"

"Sorry! I'm in rather a hurry!" said Trimble. "The fact is Blake's promised to cash a registered letter—I mean a banknote—for me. It hasn't come yet—I was expecting it this evening—but Blake will cash it in advance. I fancy, being such a pal of mine, you know. And I want to get the cash before the tuckshop closes. So long!"

"Stop!" panted Racke, meeting Crooke's scared look. "Look here, I'll cash that—that banknote for you, if you like. How much was it for, Trimble?"

"Ten bob, old chap!"

"What?"

"I mean the banknote is for a tenner," said Trimble hurriedly. "But I only want the ten bob on account now. If you'd like to hand me ten bob now—"

Silently Racke took out his wallet, extracted a ten-shilling note, and handed it into Trimble's fat paw.

"Thanks!" said Trimble carelessly. "Mind, it's a loan. I insist upon paying it back when my cheque—I mean my banknote, the tenner, you know—comes! Well, I must be off, or I'll be too late for the tuckshop, old man! See you later, Aubrey."

And Baggy Trimble departed hastily, chuckling.

Aubrey Racke dropped on the couch again, and groaned.

Quite suddenly all the sweetness had gone out of his success—vanishing like mist before the morning sun. Trimble knew the truth—there was no doubting that. And he meant to make capital out of his knowledge. But Racke was not worrying about that fact. A little cash—much as it hurt him to part with any—was as nothing to the fear that had suddenly gripped him.

Trimble knew—and a secret with Trimble was not likely to remain a secret long. The obtuse and fatuous Baggy was bound to let it out sooner or later.

In Study No. 10 of the Shell, Tom Merry was certainly not looking forward to the future with confidence of late. But his feelings, compared with those of Aubrey Racke, might almost be described as cheerful!

THE END.

(How is this extraordinary situation going to end, chums? Be sure you read the exciting sequel to this yarn, entitled: "A SPLIT IN THE SCHOOL!" which will appear in next week's bumper issue of the GEM. An early order will save disappointment.)



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