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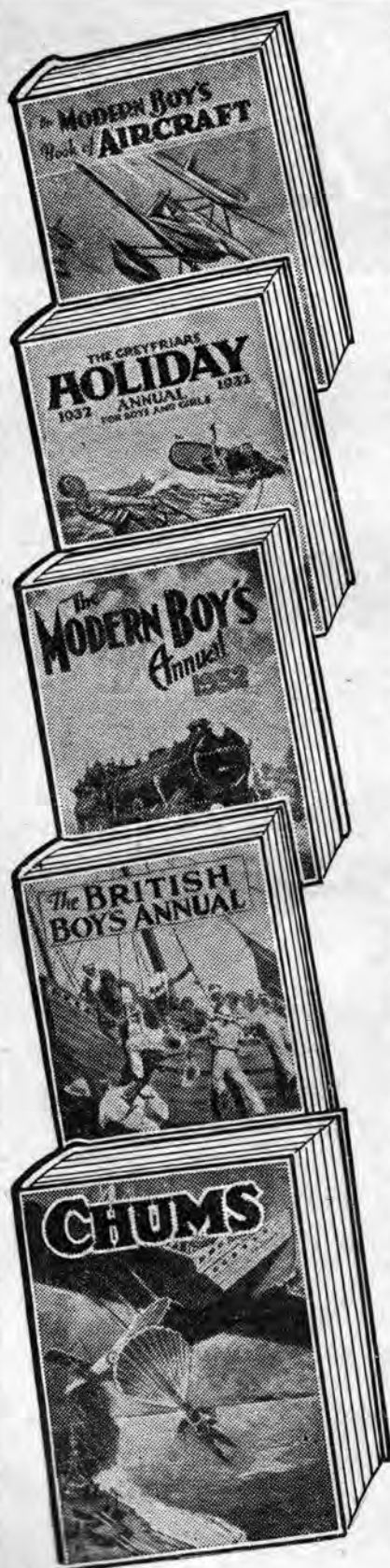
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THE 'BIG NINE' AT ST. JIM'S!



CHAPTER 1.

A Mysterious Letter.

TOM MERRY was standing at the gate of St. Jim's, talking to Manners and Lowther, when the postman came up the road from Rylcombe. Tom gave him a welcome nod.

"Hallo, Blagg! I was waiting for you. Anything for me?"

Blagg, the postman, grinned amiably. Like nearly everybody else in Rylcombe, he knew and liked Tom Merry.

"Yes, I think so, Master Merry," he said. "I'll look."

Tom Merry turned to his chums, with a smile of satisfaction.

"It's all right," he announced. "It's from my old governess, as sure as a gun. There will be a postal order inside, and we'll go down to Rylcombe this afternoon and cash it, and everything in the garden will be lovely."

"Good!" said Manners. "Jolly good sort, your old governess, Tom! Wish I had a few like her."

"Yes; she turns up trumps every time," said Monty Lowther. "It was only yesterday you wrote to her, Tom. Now, I wrote to my uncle three days ago for some tin, and he hasn't answered the letter yet. When he does answer it, it's more likely to contain a sermon than a postal order. I'd change him for your old governess any day you feel inclined for a swap."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Miss Fawcett is a jolly sport," he agreed. "If this letter is from her—and I hope it is—it's pretty quick work. Haven't you found it yet, Blagg?"

"Here you are, Master Merry!"

Blagg held out the letter. Tom Merry took it, and gave a grunt of disappointment. It was directed in a man's hand, and bore the postmark of London, instead of that of Huckleberry Heath, where Miss Priscilla Fawcett dwelt. It was not the letter he wished for.

"I say, aren't there any more, Blagg?"

"No. That's the only one, young gentleman."

"Oh, hang! What do you mean by bringing me this when I wanted one with a postal order in it?" demanded

A Grand Long Complete Story of TOM MERRY & CO.

By

MARTIN CLIFFORD.

Tom Merry. "I shall report you, Blagg."

Blagg grinned and shouldered his bag.

"Here, I say, any of us?" demanded three voices in unison, as Figgins & Co. came hurrying up. "Hand them over, Blagg!"

The postman shook his head.

"None for you, young gentlemen."

Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn growled as the postman went on through the gateway. The three juniors of the New House of St. Jim's looked enviously at Tom Merry. Tom had the unopened letter still in his hand.

"That's rotten!" said Figgins. "None for us! You'd better read out your letter to all of us, Tom Merry. That's only fair."

The hero of the School House smiled and shook his head.

"Oh, come!" urged Figgins. "Don't be mean, you know!"

"Can't be did," said Tom Merry loftily. "This is a private communication from Ferrers Locke."

Figgins & Co. moved off. Tom Merry laughed as he put his letter into his pocket.

"I say, aren't you going to open it?" asked Manners.

"Yes; but come into the study first. It may be important. It is from Ferrers Locke."

The Terrible Three strolled across to the School House, and went up to their study. There Tom Merry slit open the envelope and took out

the letter. Manners and Lowther looked out of the window.

It was possible that the letter was intended for Tom Merry's eye only, and though the Terrible Three had few secrets from each other, it was for Tom Merry to decide whether he would read the letter out or not. And so Manners and Lowther became intensely interested in watching the pigeons in the quadrangle, while Tom Merry read the letter.

A look of surprise dawned in Tom Merry's face.

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It was some time since he had seen Ferrers Locke, the Baker Street detective. Twice the leader of the School House at St. Jim's had been useful to the detective, and he was very pleased to help him again if the time should ever come.

Tom Merry had not thought it likely that it would ever come. But the letter in his hand told differently.

"Dear Tom," ran Ferrers Locke's letter, "I hope you have not forgotten me, and a promise you made me once. I believe you can help me in a certain way if you still wish to do so. The matter, however, will have to be kept a great secret. You may tell your two chums, as I believe you never keep secrets from them, and I know they are to be trusted. But no one else must know a word about it. Meet me this afternoon at four—or as near as possible—at the old castle, near the school. As it is a half-holiday with you, I suppose you will have no difficulty in getting away. Come alone.—Your sincere friend,

"FERRERS LOCKE."

Tom Merry gave a whistle.

"Listen here, you chaps!"

Manners and Lowther turned from the window. Tom Merry read the letter through to them.

"What do you think of that?"

"I think you're a lucky beggar," said Manners. "All the good things come to you. Why the detective hasn't written to me instead of you, I can't imagine."

Tom Merry laughed.

"I must go," he said. "I'm sorry to leave you two fellows out of it, but I must do as Ferrers Locke asks. He's an awfully decent chap, and this may be another adventure."

"Looks to me something mysterious about it," remarked Monty Lowther. "When Ferrers Locke wanted you before, he wrote to the Head in a straightforward manner, asking permission. This is rather queer, this meeting you secretly at the old castle."

Tom nodded.

"Yes, it's queer; but I suppose Ferrers Locke has his reasons. Of course, you chaps will keep it dark? You remember the happenings last time, how Study No. 6 got on the track, and Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy tried to take a hand in the game?"

The chums of the Shell laughed at the recollection.

"Rather!" said Manners. "We'll be careful. But, I say, old Figgins must have heard you say that it was Ferrers Locke's writing on the envelope."

Tom Merry looked very grave.

"I suppose so. That's unlucky. I thought that it was just a friendly letter from Locke, you see, and didn't really think there was anything important in it till I had time to think about it. I wish I hadn't spoken before Figgins now. Those New House bounders will put their foot in it if they get half a chance."

"Yes; it was a feather in the cap for the School House, that affair last time," Monty Lowther remarked, "and Figgins has never quite got over it."

"What are you chaps going to do this afternoon while I'm gone?" asked Tom.

"I was thinking of getting a look at the Sixth Form football match," said Manners. "You know the First Eleven is playing a match with a scratch team, and I fancy it will be a rather interesting match to watch."

"Think I might as well do the same," said Lowther.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"The football can stand over for a bit," he said. "Never mind that, for once. Keep an eye on Figgins & Co., and see that they don't get up to any mischief. It might be just like old Figgins to take a hand in this matter, not knowing how serious it is."

"We'll do it!" said Manners at once. "We'll dog Figgins & Co. like giddy shadows, and if they try to shadow you, we'll come down on their necks like a ton of bricks!"

"Good! And mind, not a word to Study No. 6."

The chums nodded together.

"Not a giddy word."

CHAPTER 2.

The Artfulness of Figgins!

F IGGINS stood with his hands thrust deep into his trousers pockets, a thoughtful frown corrugating his manly brow. The Co. watched him, waiting for him to speak. The great Figgins was deep in thought, and Kerr and Wynn did not venture to interrupt him.

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Figgins looked up suddenly.

"We're not going to be left out of this!" he exclaimed. "Certainly not!" said Kerr, the Scottish partner in the Co. "Perish the thought! But what is it we're not going to be left out of?"

"Yes, what's the wheeze, Figgy, old chap?" said Fatty Wynn. "You've been scowling like a demon in a pantomime for five minutes, and now, what's the trouble?"

"Tom Merry is up to some new wheeze," said Figgins.

"We used to have our hands pretty full to keep our end up against the School House when Blake was head cook and bottle-washer over there among the juniors, but since Tom Merry came to St. Jim's there's no denying—among ourselves—that the School House has gone ahead!"

"Oh, I don't know," said Kerr unwillingly. "We've done pretty well, you know!"

"I know we have, but Tom Merry is always getting up to some new wheeze—something a bit out of the common," said Figgins. "There was that detective affair, for instance. He got no end of giddy glory out of that, and any of us could have done as much as he did, or twice as much, for that matter!"

"Rather!" said Fatty Wynn emphatically. "I don't know exactly what it was he did, but I know we could have done it better!"

"And now there's something of the sort cropping up again," said Figgins gloomily. "You heard him say that that letter was from Ferrers Locke. That means that there's some new case he's going to take a hand in, and we shall have the School House wasters crowing over us the same as they did last time!"

"Beastly!" said Kerr.

"Well, we're not going to be left out of it," said Figgins. "It's the New House against School House, and all's fair in war. We are going to take a hand!"

"Good!" said the Co. together. "But how?"

"Oh, I don't know how! Never mind how! We shall soon find out how," said Figgins rather vaguely. "The thing is, to decide what we're going to do, and do it. Let's have a stroll round and think it out. And mind, not a word! No good letting the three guess that we're on the track!"

"No good at all," agreed the Co.

"Hallo, there's the bounders!" said Figgins, in a whisper. "I suppose they're going out. Don't take any notice of them!"

Manners and Lowther were strolling down to the gate. Figgins & Co. turned up their noses and walked off. They took a circuitous route round the New House, and stopped to look in at the "menagerie," as the boys called the House where the pets belonging to the Saints were kept. They had not been there two minutes when Manners and Lowther strode past the door. Figgins gave a little start.

"I say, that looks queer," he said.

"What looks queer?" asked Fatty Wynn. "Do you mean Herries' bulldog? He—"

"No, I don't, fathead! I mean Manners and Lowther passing the door just now. It looks to me as if they're watching us!"

"My hat! What on earth should they watch us for?"

"I don't know, unless they're keeping us under observation while Tom Merry is up to some game. He's not with them. Anyway, don't let them see that we notice them, and we'll soon make sure whether they're watching us!"

Somewhat excited, the New House trio quitted the menagerie, and wandered away with apparent aimlessness through the doctor's garden. Sure enough, Manners and Lowther were hovering in the distance. Figgins & Co. strolled down to the football ground, and stood watching a practice match of the Sixth Form. A few minutes later Manners and Lowther were watching the match, too, and cheering a goal kicked by Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's.

There could be no further doubt.

Manners and Lowther were watching the New House chums. Something was on, and Figgins & Co. were to be kept under observation. Where was Tom Merry? The school clock chimed out the hour of three.

Figgins' eyes were glittering with excitement now.

"You can see it for yourself now," he murmured. "Look here, there's only one possible reason why they should watch us, and that is, because Tom Merry is going to meet the detective somewhere, and they don't want us to spot him!"

"We'll jolly soon see to that," said Kerr. "If Tom Merry leaves the school, we'll follow on his track, and see for ourselves!"

"And then they'll go for us, and keep us busy while Tom Merry gets away," said Figgins sagely. "Not much! I know a trick worth two of that. Come over here, and let's speak to Blake!"

Somewhat mystified, the Co. followed Figgins as he walked towards the pavilion, where Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy were watching the play of the Sixth Form team. Study No. 6 were usually at loggerheads with the New House boys, as well as being in a state of warfare with the Terrible Three in their own house. But sometimes the rivals met on friendly terms, and Figgins' manner was cordiality itself as he nodded to Blake now.

"I say, Blake, will you do me a favour?"

"Millions of 'em," said Blake generously. "Hard up? You've come just at the right time, as I had a remittance this morning. How much?"

"You're awfully good, old chap," said Figgins gratefully. "But it isn't cash! I'm in funds just now as it happens. It's something else—something up against those bounders of the Shell, you know!"

"I'm on!"

"There's Manners and Lowther—they're following us about like our giddy shadows," said Figgins. "Like their check, isn't it? We want to get rid of them, and they're sticking to us. We're goin' for a—for a stroll soon, and if they follow us from the school, I want you to stop 'em!"



While Mr. Rateliff and the juniors stood around him, Monteith unlocked the door and flung it open. A furious man appeared in the doorway, but he certainly did not look like a burglar!

Blake looked amazed.

"What the deuce are they following you for?" he exclaimed.

"Oh, it's a little game they're playing, I suppose!" said Figgins. "Will you do it for me?"

"Certainly!" said Blake heartily. "If they follow you, we'll jump on them, and they'll get it where the chicken got the chopper—in the neck. We'll sit on them, never fear!"

"Right-ho!" said Herries. "We haven't had a row with the Terrible Three for a couple of days, and things are getting monotonous!"

"As a matter of fact," said Blake, in a burst of confidence, "we were wondering whether we should go for the Terrible Three, or for you, Figgy, just to liven things up a bit. We were going to toss up for it!"

Figgins grinned.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "It was my ideah all along, though, to go for the Tewwible Thwee. Tom Mewwy was extwemely wude to me this mornin'. He actually chawactewised me as an ass, and wewused to apologise. I was goin' to give him a feahful thwashin', but he pushed me ovah a form in a vewy wude way!"

"Horrid!" exclaimed Figgins. "Then you'll keep an eye on those kids, Blake, and snatch 'em baldheaded if they start their tracking business on our trail!"

"Certainly, old chap! Anything for a row!"

Kerr nudged Figgins.

The chief of the New House juniors looked round and saw Tom Merry leave the School House and cross towards the gates. Figgins' eyes gleamed.

His surmise had been correct. Tom Merry was going out, undoubtedly to meet the detective, and here was a chance for Figgins & Co., if they could only get rid of their obstinate shadowers.

"Come on, kids!" muttered Figgins.

The New House trio strolled towards the gates. Manners and Lowther promptly strode after them. Blake was watching the chums of the Shell.

"Hallo! There they go!" he murmured. "We're on in this act, my children. Follow your uncle!"

"Right-ho!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Figgins & Co. disappeared out of the gateway after Tom Merry. Manners and Lowther broke into a run. At the same moment Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy started running. They were nearer the gate, and they reached it first and blocked the way.

"Here, let us pass!" exclaimed Manners hurriedly.

Blake gave him a playful push on the chest.

"Not this afternoon, dear boys. Some other afternoon."

"Don't be an ass, Blake! We're in a hurry!"

"I'm sorry for that," said Blake. "Because, you see, we're not going to get out of the way. Are we, my gentle youths?"

"Not half!" said Herries.

"Certainly not!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, screwing his eyeglass into his eye and fixing his lofty gaze on the Terrible Two. "I depwecate wuffness as a wule, but, undah the cirs, we cannot allow these two persons to pass. They can wun away and play."

"Yes, that's right," advised Blake. "Run away and play at marbles!"

"Are you going to let us pass?" howled Manners. "I tell you we're in a hurry!"

Blake shook his head solemnly.

"Get out of the way!" exclaimed Monty Lowther. "What the dickens do you mean by blocking the gateway, you confounded cheeky kids?"

Blake looked at Herries.

"Herries, what do we mean by blocking the gateway? How dare we!"

Herries chuckled.

Manners and Monty Lowther exchanged a look, and then made a rush. It was no time to stand upon ceremony

when Figgins & Co. were upon the track of Tom Merry and following him to his rendezvous with the detective at the old castle.

The chums of Study No. 6 were quite ready for that rush. They had been expecting it, and as they were three to two they were not uneasy about the result. Blake grasped hold of Manners, and they rocked to and fro in a deadly embrace. Herries closed with Lowther and was borne backwards to the ground, falling upon his back with what a novelist would describe as a sickening thud. But he did not let go, and Lowther went down with him.

Just then Mr. Ratcliff, the Housemaster of the New House, appeared.

The New House master was a sour-faced individual, very different from Mr. Railton of the School House. His thin face was flushed with anger now.

"How dare you fight like hooligans in the gateway!" he exclaimed in a voice of thunder. "Cease instantly, I command you!"

The combatants ceased and separated as if by magic.

"Blake! Manners! Lowther! Herries! How dare you!"

"If you please, sir—" said Blake meekly.

"You were fighting, Blake! You were—"

"We weren't exactly fighting, sir," ventured Blake. "It was only a little friendly row, sir."

Mr. Ratcliff grinned grimly.

"Indeed! You must learn not to have these little friendly rows in the gateway. It is bad enough when you are quarrelling with the boys of my House; it is positively disgraceful that you cannot even keep the peace among yourselves."

"But, sir, really we—"

"You need say no more, Blake. I can believe what I see, I suppose?"

"If you would allow me to explain, sir," said D'Arcy, "I should like to point out in the most respectful way that—"

"Enough, D'Arcy!"

"But weally, sir, I protest that—"

"Silence! Go at once to your House and remain there for the rest of the afternoon!"

There was nothing for it but to go. The five went disconsolately to their studies. They stopped in the passage to look dolefully at one another.

"This is distinctly rotten!" said Blake, with a growl. "I should like to knock Ratcliff's head against the wall!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"All your fault!" growled Manners. "What did you want to stop us at the gate for?"

"All your fault, you mean! What did you want to insist upon passing for?"

"We wanted to go out, fathead!"

"Well, we wanted to keep you in, fathead!"

It looked for a moment as though the fracas would recommence there in the passage outside the Housemaster's study. But D'Arcy interposed.

"Pax, deah boys!" he exclaimed. "Don't make a wov now, or we shall pewwaps get a beastly imposition as well as detention. It was all Mannah's and Lowthah's fault for bein' so extremely obstinate. But bygones are bygones—"

"I don't see what you wanted to be so obstinate for," Blake remarked. "Why couldn't you stop in when we told you? You ought to have seen that we were determined."

Monty Lowther snorted.

"You ass, you've played into Figgins & Co.'s hands, and it's up against the School House!"

Blake started.

"Hallo! What's that? It was Figgins who asked us to keep you in. I thought there was some sort of a joke on, but—"

"Figgins & Co. were following Tom Merry. Now we can't stop them. It's up against the School House if they get on to what Tom Merry's gone out for. Figgys has just led you by the nose like a silly cuckoo—as you are!"

Blake whistled.

"Well, I couldn't guess all that," he said. "Why couldn't you explain? I—"

"You are quite w'ong, Lowthah," said D'Arcy, with an air of reflection. "How could you lead a cuckoo by the nose? He hasn't one."

"Oh, go and eat coke!" said Lowther crossly.

"That is a wude remark. I—"

"Rats! Come on, Manners, let's go and have a box in the study."

The chums of the Shell walked off. Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy proceeded towards their own study. They had not expected to enter it again that pleasant November afternoon—till tea-time, at any rate. As they drew near the door they were surprised to see that it was ajar.

"Hallo!" muttered Blake. "I'll swear I shut the door!"

Some bounder been rummaging in our quarters, I suppose, and—"

"Bai Jove, he's still there!" exclaimed D'Arcy.

There was a sound from within the study. The chums hurried on, and Blake threw open the door. There was an exclamation from inside.

A little man, with a thin, somewhat foxy face, stood staring at the chums as they entered. He was a stranger to them, and seemed quite taken aback for a moment, but recovered his self-possession immediately.

"Hallo! What the dickens are you doing here?" exclaimed Blake sharply.

"No offence, young gentlemen. I—"

"Who are you?"

"If you please, sir, I am George Cuffe, the new man-of-all-work, sir—assistant to Mr. Taggles, sir, who sent me here to dust Master Kildare's study, sir."

"This isn't Kildare's study."

George Cuffe looked astonished.

"Not Mr. Kildare's study, sir! I really thought it was, sir. I was dusting it, sir."

He had a duster in his hand, so that part of the tale looked true. Blake did not like the man's looks, but he saw no special reason to doubt his explanation.

"Well, you're off the track," he said; "Kildare's study is No. 22, on the lower floor. You can clear."

"Thank you, sir! You are extremely good, sir! Can I do anything for you, sir?"

"Yes!" exclaimed Blake, exasperated. "You can leave off calling me 'sir,' you ass!"

"I am sorry, sir! Certainly, sir! I will, sir! I—"

George Cuffe darted to the door as Blake made a spring towards him. He vanished with a patter of feet down the passage. Blake burst into a laugh.

"That chap's too civil, by half!" he exclaimed. "I don't like him. I suppose he wasn't up to any mischief here, though. Fancy old Taggles getting an assistant! That chap's getting lazy in his old age, kids."

"I don't like this fellow Cuffe," said Herries; "he's too soapy."

"My deah boys, I like to see a fellow polite, even if he is a man-of-all-work," said D'Arcy. "I wathah like the person, don't you know?"

"Yes, but you're an ass," said Blake politely. "Here, get out the foils, and let's have a three-handed duel, to liven things up, do!"

And Study No. 6 was soon the scene of a lively encounter; and, if it had not been a half-holiday, the noise would certainly have brought half a dozen prefects to the spot in towering wrath.

CHAPTER 3.

Shadowed by Threes!

TOM MERRY strode on his way to the old castle without a suspicion of what was happening at St. Jim's after his departure. He looked round once or twice to make sure that he was not being tracked, and saw nothing to make him uneasy.

Figgins & Co. were on the track, all the same.

Whatever the "little game" was in which Tom Merry and the London detective were engaged, the New House trio meant to have a hand in it. Tom Merry had been altogether too much in the public eye of late, Figgins thought, and it was time the New House had a look in. If there was anything to be done, he could manage it quite as well as Tom Merry could. All was fair in war.

He managed this shadowing very well, as a matter of fact. Whenever Tom Merry looked back he saw the lane clear behind him, and he had no idea of the three relentless pursuers who were trailing him down to the rendezvous. Figgins & Co. had adopted the simple device of walking on the inner side of the hedge, along the edge of the fields, and so it was impossible for Tom Merry to spot them.

Tom Merry crossed the stile into the wood, to follow the footpath to the ruined castle. Then Figgins & Co. had to come out of their cover; but it did not matter, for they knew where Tom Merry was going now, and it was no longer necessary to keep him in sight.

"He's going to the castle," said Figgins, with a smile of satisfaction. "Now, a chap could have no earthly reason for going to the castle alone, except to meet somebody. That stands to reason, doesn't it?"

"You're right, Figgys."

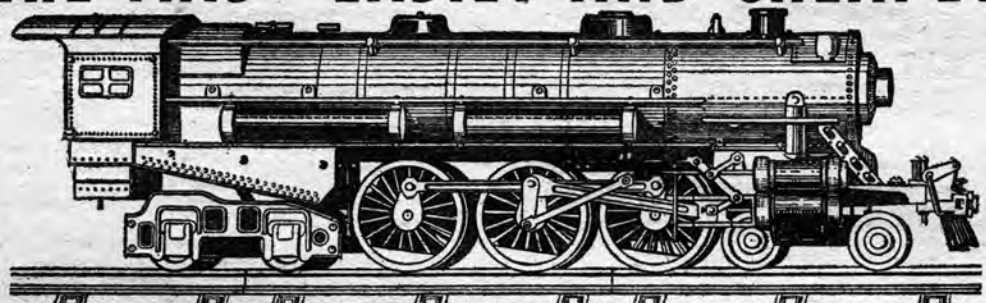
"And whom can he be meeting except the detective?"

"Nobody, of course!"

"Then it's all right," said Figgins. "We'll see what this blessed mysterious meeting is about, and put a spoke in the School House wheel. Come on!"

(Continued on page 8.)

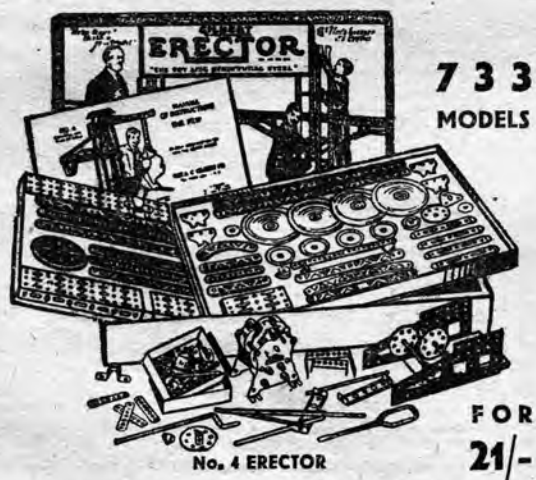
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THE "BIG NINE" AT ST. JIM'S!

(Continued from page 6.)

Taking care to keep out of Tom Merry's sight, in case he should look back, they followed the footpath through the wood. Their footsteps made no sound upon the thick carpet of fallen leaves.

When they came out on the hill they caught a glimpse of Tom Merry passing in at the ruined gateway of the old castle. He vanished from sight the next moment.

"Come on!" muttered Figgins.

They went at a run up the path to the castle. In a few moments they were safe among the massive fragments of the ancient building. Keeping well in cover, they looked through a rift in a tottering wall into the interior of the shattered building.

A sound of voices reached their ears.

"Look!" murmured Figgins. "There they are! It's Ferrers Locke!"

Figgins was right.

Tom Merry was standing there in conversation with a well-built man, whose calm, clear-cut face was quite familiar to the boys from St. Jim's. They had seen Ferrers Locke more than once before.

"You are punctual, Tom," the detective was saying; "it is not yet four."

"Thought I should be here first, sir," said Tom cheerily. "I gave myself plenty of time, in case of accidents. I was afraid some of the fellows might get on my track."

"I hope that has not happened."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Oh, no, sir! Manners and Lowther are keeping guard, and they'll take good care that Figgins & Co. keep off the grass."

Figgins & Co. exchanged a grin.

Every word came to them perfectly clearly in the silence of the old ruins.

Under ordinary circumstances Figgins would as soon have cut off his ears as listen to a conversation not intended for him. But the present case was entirely different.

He regarded himself as a scout discovering the plans of the enemy, and stratagems were permitted in the war between the School House and the New House. That was understood upon both sides.

"I am glad of that," said Ferrers Locke. "I remember Figgins & Co. They played a trick upon us once, Tom, you remember. I rather liked Figgins, and I think he could be trusted; but a matter of this kind cannot be kept too quiet."

"Right you are, sir! Figgins & Co. are out of it. You want me to help you again?"

"That is it. I am not going to ask you to come to London," said Ferrers Locke, with a smile; "what you can do for me can be done at St. Jim's."

Tom Merry looked puzzled.

"I can't guess what it is, sir," he remarked. "Does the Head know?"

"No; I have said nothing to Dr. Holmes. I do not wish needlessly to cause him worry, and he could not assist in the matter. I will explain. Some short time ago an arrest was made in London of a gang of rascals, of whom a character called Jim the Nailer was the leader. Jim the Nailer escaped, and has not been seen since. Now, among the belongings of the rascals which was seized by the police a paper was found, which had evidently been drawn up by a spy of the gang, who had paid a visit to this school."

Tom Merry's eyes were wide open with interest.

"This paper," resumed Ferrers Locke, "contained a plan of St. Jim's, marked with various items of information respecting the valuables kept there, and was evidently intended to aid the rascals in committing a robbery at the school. The police found this paper, but nothing was said about its discovery, and Jim the Nailer cannot know that it is in our hands. Now, the rascal is still at liberty, and he dare not remain in London, and he is almost certainly in great want of money. Under the circumstances I regard it as very probable that he will attempt to carry out the scheme of effecting a robbery at St. Jim's."

"I should think it very likely, sir."

"Exactly! This is why I have come down, Tom. I want you to keep your eyes open for Jim the Nailer."

"I'll do it, Mr. Locke, willingly. But is it a burglary you expect?"

"A robbery in some shape or form, certainly. But Jim the Nailer is not a common burglar. His method, so far

as I can discover, is to introduce himself in some capacity into the house he intends to rob, or else to make a tool of someone already there. He has been known to assume the character of a gasfitter, and on another occasion that of a local inspector. He has been cunning enough, too, to keep himself out of our hands so far, and so we have not got his photograph. He usually wears a beard, but at present he has probably sacrificed it for security. Now, you understand what I expect to happen. Jim the Nailer will probably turn up at the school, sooner or later, in some character or other, and will disappear again with most of the doctor's valuables in his possession. That is what I want you to keep your eyes open for, Tom."

Tom Merry nodded.

"I understand perfectly, sir."

"You will note any person who comes to the school to stay there, especially any new servant," went on Ferrers Locke. "But there is no telling what character the fellow may assume. Of course, it is quite possible that he may not come at all. To speak to the Head would be useless, as it is probably only a false alarm. But you can keep your eyes open without trouble. In case of necessity you can wire to me from Rylcombe, and I shall come down instantly, or send someone in my place."

"I'll do my best, sir. It will be a lark if we catch him."

Ferrers Locke smiled.

"I cannot give you any description of him, Tom, as I have never seen him, but I know that he is a small man, and usually wears a beard of a sandy colour. He sometimes wears spectacles, but I suspect simply as a disguise and not from necessity. That is all I can tell you."

"I'll keep a jolly sharp look-out, sir."

"And keep the secret, too, Tom. Let no one know that you have met me here. You see, if it were known that I had come down to St. Jim's it would get talked of, and would undoubtedly reach the ears of the fellow, if he is about, for he is as sharp as a needle. That is chiefly why I have not spoken to the Head; he would probably question all the servants and thus put the rascal on his guard, and cause him to be doubly careful."

"I'll keep my eyes open, sir, and I'll spot him if he comes to St. Jim's," said Tom Merry confidently. "You don't mind my telling Manners and Lowther, sir? They'll be as mum as oysters, and they'll help to spot the scoundrel if he turns up."

Ferrers Locke nodded assent.

"Yes; you may tell them, if you like, but no one else. And mind that you are not overheard discussing the matter—that is the risk."

"We'll be jolly careful, sir."

"I think that's all, Tom. You know where to wire to in case of need."

And after a few more words the famous detective shook hands with the hero of the Shell, and they parted.

Tom Merry took the path back to St. Jim's. He little dreamed of whom he had left in the ruins. Figgins & Co. did not move or speak a word till both the detective and Tom Merry were out of sound and sight. Then Figgins broke into a long, suppressed chuckle.

"My only hat! What do you think of that, kids?"

"Ripping!" said Kerr. "We're right on the track this time, Figgy. Of course, it's no good leaving a matter of this kind in the hands of a School House fathead!"

"No good at all," said Fatty Wynn. "We've got to take it in hand ourselves."

"That's the idea," said Figgins. "Tom Merry is pretty certain to make a hash of it if we give him his head. We're going to look out for Jim the Nailer."

"And I say, Figgy, if we were to catch him, very likely the detective would stand a feed," Fatty Wynn remarked.

Figgins sniffed.

"That's your mark, Fatty—always thinking of a beastly feed. I'm thinking of giving the School House one in the eye, and getting some giddy glory for our side."

"I'm not saying anything against the glory, Figgy; but a feed would be—"

"Oh, blow the feed! We're going to look into this, my infants. If there are any burglars to be caught red-handed we're going to catch them. Tom Merry caught a burglar once, I remember. There's no reason why we shouldn't do the same. It will be a take-down for the School House when we catch their own burglar!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the New House juniors set off for St. Jim's. Meanwhile, Tom Merry had returned to St. Jim's. He found his chums in the study playing at chess, with rather doleful looks.

"Well, you must be asses to stick indoors on a fine afternoon!" exclaimed Tom. "Why aren't you playing football, or, at least, watching it?"

"Detained!" grunted Monty Lowther.

"How's that?"

Lowther explained. Tom Merry's face became serious. "Then Figgins & Co. followed me, you think?"

"Well, we thought they were following you, but we couldn't make sure as those Study No. 6 bounders stopped us at the gate. Of course, Figgins may not have been going out for any special reason."

"I didn't see them," said Tom thoughtfully. "I was on the look-out, too. Still, it can't be helped."

CHAPTER 4.

A Brilliant Capture.

Figgins gave a sudden jump.

"My only pyjama aunt—I mean hat! Look there!"

Afternoon school was over now, and the New House chums were strolling up the lane when Figgins suddenly uttered the exclamation above.

The Co. stared at him inquiringly.

"What's the row?" asked Kerr. "Look at what?"

"That chap! Look—just look!"

Figgins nodded towards a man coming up the lane towards the school. He was a gentleman of short stature, with a short, crisp beard of a sandy hue, and a pair of gold-framed spectacles.

"Look at him!" murmured Figgins. "Spot the colour of his whiskers! Note his specs! Size him up! You remember Ferrers Locke's description of Jim the Nailer?"

The Co. gave a simultaneous jump.

A little man, with a sandy coloured beard and spectacles. The very man!

"My word!" exclaimed Kerr. "You've hit it, Figg!"

"He's coming to speak to us!" exclaimed Figgins.

The gentleman with the glasses and beard had indeed stopped as he came by the juniors, and turned to them with the evident intention of speaking.

"Can you tell me if that building is St. James' Collegiate School, my boys?" he said.

Figgins' heart beat hard. His suspicion had received confirmation sooner than he had dared to hope.

"Yes, sir; that's St. Jim's," he said. "We belong to the school."

"Do you really?" said the stranger. "Indeed!"

"Yes, sir! Are you going to St. Jim's?"

"Yes."

"We'll show you the way, sir, if you like. We're just going in, as a matter of fact. Come on, kids! This way, sir!"

"You are very obliging, my lad," said the stranger.

"Not at all, sir! Only too happy!"

Figgins led the way. The stranger walked by his side. The Co. dropped to the rear, with the idea of cutting off the rascal's escape if he should lose his nerve as soon as he came near the school and should try to bolt.

They arrived at the gates of St. Jim's.

"Here's the school, sir," said Figgins. "This way, sir. Who is it you want to see?"

"Mr. Ratcliff, my lad."

"He's the master of our House, sir."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, sir. We belong to the New House. You're sure it's Mr. Ratcliff you want to see?"

The gentleman gazed at him in surprise.

"Of course, I am sure!" he replied. "What a singular question!"

"Oh, I only asked, sir, because Mr. Ratcliff isn't at home now," said Figgins, with a wink at the Co. "He went out about half an hour ago."

"Dear me! How annoying! Probably he has gone to meet my train."

Figgins could hardly suppress a laugh.

He had worked the matter out satisfactorily in his own mind. The scoundrel knew that Mr. Ratcliff was absent, hence his pretence of coming to see the New House master. He expected to be shown into the New House, and left there to wait for Mr. Ratcliff to return, and in the meantime he would effect the robbery, and escape before the House-master turned up.

"Yes, sir," said Figgins, giggling. "No doubt he has gone to meet your train. What a pity he should miss you, sir!"

The visitor looked more astonished.

"Yes, it is a pity; but I fail to see the cause of your merriment, my boy."

"Was I merry, sir?" said Figgins, becoming grave at once. "I—I didn't mean it, sir. It—it seems so funny that he should miss you!"

"It was natural enough under the circumstances. I came by an earlier train than I had intended, and walked from Rylcombe," said the visitor. "I did not know it was my cousin's intention to meet the train."

Figgins gave a start. He knew that Jim the Nailer had plenty of nerve, but that he should have the nerve to claim the Housemaster for a cousin was amazing.

"Your cousin, sir?" ejaculated Figgins. "Is Mr. Ratcliff your cousin, sir?"



Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy all let out terrific yells as three buckets of ice-cold water were tipped over their heads by the New House juniors, who were hiding on the roof!

"Yes, certainly! I am Mr. Dawkins. Please show me to the New House, and I will await his return. It is a great pity."

"This way, sir. This is the New House. That rotten old show over there is the School House—a measly hole, and no mistake. This one is the New House, the Cock House of St. Jim's, you know. Come in, sir!"

With the Co. still bringing up the rear, Figgins ushered the little gentleman into the New House. Tom Merry was coming off the football field, and he glanced towards the visitor. Figgins gave him a glance of triumph, which Tom Merry did not understand.

Mr. Dawkins entered the New House.

"This way, sir," said Figgins. "I'll show you to Mr. Ratcliff's study."

"Thank you, my lad!"

Figgins led the way—not to Mr. Ratcliff's study, but to Figgy's own. Mr. Dawkins followed him without a suspicion, and entered the room. Then he looked round him in amazement through his gold-rimmed spectacles. He seemed surprised to find himself in an apartment of such small dimensions.

"My lad, you have surely made a mistake——"

Figgins chuckled as he stepped back into the passage. The door slammed. Figgins had placed the key in the outside of the lock, and he turned it in a twinkling.

"Caught!"

Figgins put the key in his pocket. The Co. grinned with satisfaction. The very first effort had been crowned with success, and Figgins & Co. were triumphant.

There was a knock at the door from inside.

"Boys, what does this mean? Have you dared to play a trick on me?"

"Oh, ring off!" said Figgins. "We know you, my pippin."

"What do you mean? Open this door instantly!"

"Rats!"

"I shall complain to Mr. Ratcliff when he returns."

"Ha, ha, ha! You'll be given in charge when Mr. Ratcliff comes in!"

"Are you mad? Given in charge?"

"Yes, my boy. I know you."

"You know me?"

"Yes, my enterprising burglar, I know you like a book. Ha, ha, ha! We've got you!"

The imprisoned man knocked angrily at the door.

"Open this door instantly!"

"Oh, climb down!" said Figgins. "I tell you we know you, Jim the Nailer!"

"What!"

"We captured you. You won't leave that room till you go to prison, my giddy burglar."

"Is it possible that you mistake me for a burglar?"

"Ha, ha, ha! Quite possible, I should say."

"I am Mr. Ratcliff's cousin!"

"Cheese it! I tell you, you can't take us in!"

"You will be severely punished for this."

"Ha, ha, ha! Keep it up!"

"If you do not instantly open the door I will request Mr. Ratcliff to have you severely flogged!" shouted the prisoner.

"We'll risk it, Jim, my boy!"

"You must be mad! Do I look like a burglar?"

"No, you don't. You're got up well, and you'd have taken in lots of people, but, bless you, I know how to spot a rascal when I see one."

And Figgins & Co. laughed loud and long.

The appeals from within ceased; the imprisoned man doubtless realised that argument was useless. He crossed to the study window and looked out, to ascertain whether there was an avenue of escape on that side. Figgins heard him opening the window.

"I say, kids, stay here and keep watch!" he exclaimed. "I'll go and keep an eye open under the window. He can't get out without breaking his neck, but I don't want to run risks. We must keep him safe till Mr. Ratcliff comes in."

Figgins hurried out of the New House. Mr. Dawkins, as he called himself, was looking out of the study window. He had apparently decided that it was too dangerous to attempt to climb out.

The chums of Study No. 6 were coming round the New House after a visit to the "menagerie." They stopped to look at Figgins and the angry-faced man at the study window high above.

"What's the row?" asked Blake curiously.

"I have been shut up in this study by that rascally boy!" shouted Mr. Dawkins. "I beg of you to inform some master of my predicament!"

"Sorry, sir," said Blake. "It's Figgy's business. Better take it quietly."

Mr. Dawkins muttered something which perhaps it was just as well the youthful ears below did not catch, and closed the window with a slam.

"I say, that's rather a risky wheeze, Figgy," said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!" remarked D'Arcy. "I think it's extremely pwoth that Figgy will get a fearful thwashin'."

"That's all you know," said Figgins loftily. "As it happens, that chap's a burglar, and we captured him in the act of attempting to rob the school."

"Bai Jove! Weally? How surpwisin'!"

"I don't mind letting you into the secret now we've

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done the trick," said Figgins. "Tom Merry met that detective chap yesterday, and he asked him to look out for a rascal called Jim the Nailer, who was coming to try to rob the school. We turned it over in our minds——"

"Impossible!" gasped D'Arcy.

"What do you mean? What's impossible?"

"For you to turn the school over in your mind. You——"

"Ass! We turned the matter over in our minds, and decided that it wouldn't do to leave such a delicate matter in the hands of a School House chap."

"Oh, you did, did you?" said Blake, looking dangerous.

"And I suppose that was what you wanted me to keep Lowther and Manners back for, so that you could shadow Tom Merry?"

"Exactly!" grinned Figgins. "I'm sorry you got into a row. I'll stand a feed next Saturday to make up for that."

"Oh, all serene! I don't mind! It was our luck; still, we'll come to the feed. We never refuse an offer of that kind."

"Yaas, wathah! But are you sure you've got the wight burglah, Figgins?"

"Yes. Ferrers Locke gave Tom Merry his description, and it fits this chap to a hair—sandy beard, spectacles, and all. Then his coming here pretending he was Ratty's cousin, when he knew Ratty was away, proves him up to the hilt."

"I hope you've not made a bloomer. If he's really Ratty's cousin——"

"Oh, you'll see!" said Figgy confidently. "There's Ratty coming in at the gate. I must be off. So-long!"

The chums of Study No. 6 looked at one another as Figgins decamped.

"Well, this will be a feather in Figgins' cap, if it's all right," said Blake. "If it's all wrong, Figgy will go through something soon, and no mistake."

"The chap didn't look like a burglar," said Herries. "My impression is that Figgins has put his foot in it."

"Yaas, wathah! But I say, deah boys, if this isn't the weal burglah, it would be a wippin' ideal for us to catch the genuine burglah, and take a wise out of Figgins & Co., and the Tewwible Thwee," said Arthur Augustus.

Blake slapped him on the back.

"Good wheeze, Gussy. We'll do it!"

CHAPTER 5.

The Wrong Man!

THUMP, thump, thump!

The spectacled gentleman in Figgins & Co.'s study was getting impatient. His appeals for rescue from the window having failed, he had taken to thumping on the door. The Co., watching outside, thought this rather a singular proceeding for a captured burglar. No doubt the man was desperate.

Thump, thump, thump!

"Here he is, sir!" It was the voice of Figgins. The New House chief was coming up the stairs, with Mr. Ratcliff at his heels. The Housemaster was looking amazed. "You can hear him making a fearful row, sir."

"I—I don't understand this, Figgins. A burglar, you say!"

"Yes, sir. A fearful criminal from London. He's wanted by the police. He came here to rob the House, and we captured him as neatly as anything, sir!"

"If you have the facts correctly, Figgins, you have acted in a most meritorious way. I can hardly believe, however, that a burglar would dare to enter the school in broad daylight. Did you actually catch him in the act of committing a robbery?"

"N-n-no, not exactly, sir. He—he was just going to."

"I think there must be some mistake somewhere. In case of accidents, however, it would be better to have help at hand. Monteith, will you come this way, please?"

Monteith, the head prefect of the New House, was going downstairs. He stopped as Mr. Ratcliff called to him.

"Figgins says that he has caught a burglar and shut him up in his study," said the Housemaster. "I cannot understand this at all."

"Some practical joke, I suppose, sir," said the prefect, looking at Figgins. Monteith had had his rubs with Figgins in the past, but they were on a better footing of late, the prefect being much more popular than he had once been.

"Not at all, Monteith," said Figgins. "It's a fact, honour bright."

"We had better see into it," said the Housemaster. "Come this way. If it should turn out to be a joke, Figgins will have reason to be sorry for it."

Figgins' spirits were somewhat damped.

This was not the way in which he had expected his feat to be received. He reflected, rather bitterly, that Mr.

Railton of the School House would have been much more pleasant about it. He led the way silently towards the study, whence the thumping noise proceeded.

"By the way, Monteith," said Mr. Ratcliff, "are you aware whether anyone has called to see me during my absence from the school?"

"I am not aware of it, sir."

"It was very unfortunate," said the Housemaster. "I was expecting my cousin to come and see me, and I went to meet his train; but he appears to have changed it, and so I have missed him. If he came by an earlier one, he ought to be here before this."

Figgins turned pale.

"I haven't seen him, sir," said Monteith.

Thump, thump, thump!

"By Jove, the chap in there is getting excited!" exclaimed Monteith. "I'll open the door, sir, and all of you stand ready to stop him when he rushes out."

"Yes; very good!" said Mr. Ratcliff hesitatingly.

He was not a fighting man, but he could not decline. After all, a master and four boys should be able to deal with any burglar.

Monteith unlocked the door and threw it open.

A furious figure appeared in the doorway.

"How dare you shut me up like this!" roared Mr. Dawkins. "I will complain to the Head! You shall be flogged! You shall be— Ah, Horace!"

Mr. Ratcliff stared at him.

"Henry!"

Mr. Dawkins came out of the study.

The Housemaster shook hands with him mechanically. Figgins & Co. prayed for the floor to open and swallow them up.

"You!" said Mr. Ratcliff faintly. "Is it possible that the juniors had the unspeakable audacity to lock you up in a study—you, my cousin—my visitor? Is it possible?"

"Yes, it is possible!" said Mr. Dawkins, with a glare at the unfortunate Figgins. "These three boys did it. They pretended to show me into your study, and showed me in here, and suddenly locked the door on me, and refused to let me out!"

"My aunt!" murmured Monteith.

Figgins & Co. could only gasp.

"Bless my soul!" ejaculated Mr. Ratcliff. "Is it possible? I can scarcely believe my ears!"

"It is only too true! They declared that they believed me to be a burglar—why, I cannot possibly comprehend. I have never been told that I resembled a burglar in appearance. The whole affair is most astounding."

Mr. Ratcliff gritted his teeth.

"It is a practical joke!" he exclaimed. "Figgins, stand forward!"

Figgins came forward unwillingly.

"Did you know this gentleman was my cousin, on a visit to me, when you shut him up in your study?" demanded Mr. Ratcliff, in a voice of thunder.

"N-n-n-no, sir!"

"Why did you play this extraordinary trick?"

"We—we thought he was a burglar, sir!"

"Figgins, it is bad enough to play such an insolent trick upon a gentleman, without adding to the turpitude of your conduct by a barefaced falsehood!"

Figgins flushed.

"I am not telling falsehoods, sir. I suppose I was mistaken; but I have never been called a liar before."

Figgins spoke with spirit, too much to please the incensed Housemaster. He reached out and gave the junior a savage box on the ear.

Figgins reeled against the doorpost.

"You will remain indoors, now," said Mr. Ratcliff. "I will deal with this matter later on. You will all three be severely caned. I have a great mind to take you, Figgins, to the Head for a flogging!"

The Housemaster and his visitor walked away, and Figgins & Co. went into their study. They stared at each other in silence and dismay for some minutes.

"Well, here's a pretty kettle of fish!" said Figgins at last. "We've made a ghastly muck of it, and no mistake!"

"My hat!" said Kerr. "There's no doubt about that! Come to think of it, we did jump rather suddenly to the conclusion that he was the burglar."

"It was all his own fault. What the dickens does he mean by going around with a sandy beard and a pair of spectacles if he's not a burglar?"

"Fancy his being old Ratcliff's cousin all the time!" said Fatty Wynn. "He's as big a cad as Ratty, I think. He might have spoken up for us, and got us off, as it was all a mistake. After all, we never hurt him."

Figgins nodded gloomily.

(Continued on page 12.)

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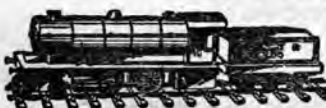
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THE "BIG NINE" AT ST. JIM'S!

(Continued from page 11.)

"Oh, they're a pair!" he said. "We're in for a fearful licking, and no mistake! Never mind, I suppose we can stand it. The worst of it is that we crowded to Tom Merry and Blake about having captured the burglar, and they'll have the grin of us."

"Have you told Blake about the detective and Jim the Nailer?"

"Yes. You see, I thought we had got the man, and there was no need to keep the secret any longer," explained Figgins.

"Well, it can't be helped now, and it's no use crying over spilt milk," said Fatty Wynn. "Now that Blake's in the secret, I expect he'll have a try to capture the burglar. It will be a take-down for us if he should succeed. We have two rivals now—Blake as well as Tom Merry."

"Can't be helped," said Kerr. "As for the licking, we can stand it. And we'll stick to the trail like gum, and there's no reason why we shouldn't be successful next time, if Jim the Nailer really turns up at the school at all."

The caning came off in due course, for Mr. Rateliff never forgot a thing like that. Figgins & Co. bore it philosophically. Their ardour was not in the least damped, and long ere the smart had left their palms they were making fresh plans for the capture of Jim the Nailer.

CHAPTER 6.

Kerr Has a Bright Idea.

"I SAY, Figgins!"

Figgins looked round suspiciously at the sound of Tom Merry's voice. It was the morning after that brilliant capture which had turned out so badly for Figgins & Co.

Tom Merry came up to him with a face very concerned.

"I say, Figgins, I thought I'd better tell you—"

"What's the matter?"

"Your burglar's escaped."

Figgins coloured.

"Thought you'd like to know," said the obliging Tom.

"He's got away, and he seems to have chummed up with your Housemaster. I've just seen them walking together in the quad."

"Oh, ring off!" said Figgins crossly. "I know it was a ghastly frost. It was all Ferrers Locke's fault."

"How do you make that out?"

"What did he want to describe the chap for as he did? I found a man who fitted the description, and he looked suspicious; he was so beastly respectable—"

"Ha, ha, ha! Hard cheese on an amateur detective!"

"The chap had a sandy beard and spectacles, and—"

"But a chap may have a sandy beard without being a burglar, and I've known fellows to wear spectacles, and yet to be perfectly honest," said Tom Merry gravely.

"Oh, don't rot! You chaps haven't captured anybody anyhow!"

"No, we're waiting for the right man to come along."

"That's the idea!" exclaimed Monty Lowther, bursting into melody.

"We shall not want our Figgins there to tell us what to do,

When the right man comes along!"

"You're awfully smart," said Figgins disdainfully. "I'm open to bet you a thick ear each that we shall be the ones to capture the real burglar!"

"Well, if you keep on as you've started," said Tom Merry, "you're bound to succeed. If you capture everybody who comes to St. Jim's—"

"Rats!" said Figgins. "Do get off that subject!"

"Seriously, Figgys, we'll both do our best to lay the rascal by the heels," said Tom Merry, "and we'll keep mum on the subject. Have you told anybody?"

"Only Study No. 6, and they've agreed to say nothing."

"Good! That means three parties of rival detectives in the field, for Blake is sure to take a hand," said Tom Merry thoughtfully. "So long as we keep it dark, and don't give the rascal a chance to take warning, it won't hurt. We'll all go ahead, and see who gets there first."

"Right-ho! Two to one on the New House!"

"Done!" said Monty Lowther gravely. "All the wrong parties you capture not to count."

Figgins sniffed and stalked away.

The capture of Mr. Rateliff's cousin was a sore point with him, and with the Co., and the School House youngsters did not seem inclined to give it a rest.

"I beg your pardon, sir—"

Figgins looked round. George Cuffe, Taggles' new assistant, was touching his cap to him. Figgins had noticed the man before, and had not much liked his oily ways. Mr. Cuffe's clean-shaven face was very soapy in its expression.

"Hallo!" said Figgins. "What do you want?"

"I accidentally heard something, sir—something about capturing a burglar—"

"Like your cheek, then!"

"Yes, sir. I stand corrected. But if you please, sir—"

"Not so many sirs! What the dickens do you want?"

"I—I am rather nervous, sir. Is there any danger of a burglary being committed in the college, sir? If so, I should like to communicate with the police. I—"

"Oh, go and eat coke!" said Figgins contemptuously.

"There's no danger."

"But—but the burglar, sir!"

"There wasn't any burglar. It was all a mistake."

"Oh, I see, sir! I quite understand, sir," said Mr. Cuffe, looking considerably relieved. "You do not think there is likely to be a burglary in the college, sir? You have no reason to suppose there is going to be a burglary? I am very nervous, sir."

"There's nothing to be nervous about. Get along, do!"

And Figgins walked off.

"But, sir, I should like you to assure me—"

"Cuffe! Where are you, Cuffe? Do you hear, Cuffe?"

It was the voice of Taggles.

George Cuffe turned instantly in the direction of the voice. He appeared to be greatly in fear of his chief's wrath.

"Yes, sir! I'm coming, Mr. Taggles, sir!"

"Then be quick!" roared Taggles. "What the dickens

Potts, the Office Boy!



do you mean by hanging about the quadrangle, you lazy rascal, when I told you to wash down the Head's trap?"

"Pray forgive me, sir! I—"

"None of your blarney, my man! You're a lazy 'ound, that's what you are!"

"Yes, sir! Quite so, sir! You are quite right, sir!" said the submissive Mr. Cuffe.

"Took you in out of charity, I did," continued the virtuously indignant Taggles. "This is 'ow you repays me—wasting your time talking to the young gentlemen in the quadrangle, instead of washing down the trap according to horders!"

"I am very sorry, sir—extremely sorry, sir!"

"That's all very well," said Taggles morosely. "That don't mend matters, that don't. I've caught you lazing before. Says the 'Ead to me, says he, when I tells him I'm hard done by—which I am, and that's the 'onest truth—he says, says he, I can look out for an assistant, says he, and I took you on."

"And it was very kind of you, Mr. Taggles, sir!"

"Yes, it was kind of me. Took you on, I did, out of the kindness of 'eart, because I took pity on yer, and you came on trial without wages to start with. I give you a trial out of pure kindness of 'eart."

"And kept the screw for yourself, you old rascal!" murmured Mr. Cuffe.

"What's that you're saying?"

"I say I never met a kinder-hearted and more generous man than you are, Mr. Taggles."

"Well," said Taggles, thawing a little, "perhaps I am. I've suffered for my generosity many a time, and it's a wonder it 'asn't 'ardened my 'eart. But it 'asn't. I give you a trial out of sheer kindness."

"I hope I've given satisfaction, Mr. Taggles!"

"Well, you ain't!" said Taggles. "You're lazy! That's what you are! My fault for taking you without a character. You're lazy! Hain't I found you nosing about the Head's library when you ought to be at work? And now here you are talking to Master Figgins, instead of washing down the Head's trap as hordered!"

"I'm very sorry, sir!"

"That's all very well, but—"

"Oh, let him alone, Taggy!" exclaimed Figgins, in disgust. "Blest if you don't go on like a rotten slave-driver out of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin'!"

"You mind your own affairs, Master Figgins, and I'll mind mine!" said Taggles, with dignity. "I think I can manage my staff without—"

"Ha, ha, ha! Good old staff!" grinned Figgins. "I say, Cuffy, you're a giddy staff! Ha, ha, ha!"

Cuffe grinned, too, as he walked away. Taggles bestowed a glare upon Figgins and beat a retreat. He never came off best in a worthy encounter with that lively young gentleman.

The subject of that unfortunate capture was not allowed to drop. When Figgins & Co. came into the Fourth Form class-room Blake whispered to the New House chief:

"I say, Figgy, you don't mind my asking—"

"No; what is it?" said Figgins.

"Caught any more burglars?"

Figgins turned red and went to his place.

When school was over it was just as bad. Figgins & Co. met the Terrible Three, and Tom Merry anxiously inquired whether Figgins had made any additions to his collection

of burglars. Figgins & Co. walked away simmering with wrath.

"We shall never hear the end of that," said Figgins, "until some new wheeze turns up. Jim the Nailer doesn't seem to be coming here to be captured. We shall have to take a rise out of those School House bounders somehow."

"I've been thinking," Kerr remarked thoughtfully.

"If you've got a scheme get it off your chest, old chap!"

"We've made a bloomer," said Kerr, "and a bad one, and those kids won't let it rest. It occurred to me that the Terrible Three might make one as bad, with a little assistance from us."

"Go on, kid," said Figgins, interested at once. "What's the wheeze?"

"You know," said Kerr modestly, "that I'm a pretty good hand at disguising myself."

"Jolly good!" said Figgins heartily. "There isn't anybody in the New House Dramatic Society who is a patch on you!"

"That's so!" said Fatty Wynn. "You've made up as Herr Schneider and as Mr. Lathom good enough to take in the School House kids, and you couldn't do more than that."

"Well," said Kerr, "Tom Merry is looking for a chap with a sandy beard and spectacles, just as we were. We found one, and I don't see why he shouldn't find one, too!"

Figgins uttered a delighted exclamation.

"Kerr, old man, you're a giddy genius! Come here and let me slap your back!"

"No, thanks!" said Kerr hastily. "I'll take the will for the deed. I really think this would be a rather good wheeze, if it works out well."

"Oh, it will work out all right!" Figgins said confidently. "But about the props? Have you got the things you want?"

"All except the spectacles," said Kerr. "I can't use the same I used as Mr. Lathom, or they might be spotted. I can easily get some in Rylcombe. I'll buzz down there on my bike now, if you think the idea's good, Figgy."

"Good? It's first rate!" said Figgins. "My hat! I see a prospect of making the Terrible Three look bigger asses than they ever looked before, which is saying a lot!"

"Then I'll be off!" said Kerr.

And a few minutes later Kerr was spinning on his bicycle down the lane towards Rylcombe. Figgins and Fatty Wynn watched him start. As soon as he was gone they strolled away to the New House. A voice floated to them from the School House side.

"Any more captures yet, Figgins?"

Figgins did not turn his head.

"They can go on crowing now," he murmured. "It will be our turn soon, Fatty."

"What-ho!" said Fatty.

CHAPTER 7.

Study No. 6 on the Track!

JACK BLAKE uttered a suppressed exclamation.

"I say, kids, come and look here!"

Blake was sitting at the window of Study No. 6, which was open, for the evening was a warm one for November. Darkness lay on the quadrangle under the ancient elms, but here and there the yellow glow from a lighted window streamed out into the night.



Blake had caught sight of a slinking figure in the gloom below. There was no light in Study No. 6, the juniors having been talking earnestly on the topic of Jim the Nailer, and none of them having yet taken the trouble to light up.

"What is it?" asked Herries, coming nearer to the window.

"Hush! Look!"

Blake pointed. Herries looked out of the window, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy looked over his shoulder. The figure Blake had seen was still visible, slinking along in the shadow of the trees. The light from a window fell upon it for a moment, and then revealed a little man with a sandy beard and spectacles.

"Goodness gwacious!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, startled.

Blake poked him in the ribs.

"Quiet, you ass! Don't give the show away!"

"Please don't be so beastly wuff, Blake! You have cweased my waistcoat!"

"Gr-r-r! I say, kids, what do you think of that? If that's not Jim the Nailer, I'm a double Dutchman!" said Blake, in a whisper.

"Looks like him!" said Herries excitedly. "But I say, we don't want to make a bloomer like Figgins & Co."

"No; but we're right this time. It's not old Ratty's precious cousin, because he went away from St. Jim's this afternoon. Besides, this fellow is smaller. Now, it's not likely that another chap with a sandy beard and spectacles would come to St. Jim's, unless it was the one we are looking for."

"That's right enough!"

"Besides, what's he slinking about like that for? An honest man wouldn't want to go around like a frightened dog, would he?"

"I suppose not," assented Herries.

"Yaas, wathah! I weally think you are wight, Blake."

"Thank you, Gussy! If you think I am right, I must be right. When you bring your mighty brain to bear on a subject—"

"Oh, don't wot, Blake, pway!"

"Well, that's Jim the Nailer!" said Blake, with conviction. "You see, he dodged in just before locking-up, and I suppose he's going to hide somewhere till it's safe to start his burgling operations. My hat, this will be a sell for Tom Merry, and for Figgins, too, if we capture the burglar!"

"If!" repeated Herries. "There's no if about it. There's the burglar, and we've only got to track him across the quad and capture him. We can do it without help!"

"Suppose he's got a wevolvah," suggested D'Arcy. "It would be feahfully wisky work if he's got a wevolvah, deah boys!"

"If you're funky—" began Herries disdainfully.

"I'm not funky, deah boy, but I weally think that we ought to take pwopah pwecautions. I will go and bowwow Mr. Wailton's gun!"

And the swell of the School House started towards the door.

Blake caught him by the collar and jerked him back into the chair just in time.

"You'll borrow nothing, fathead! Do you want to give the show away, image?"

"I object to bein' chawactewised as an image," said Arthur Augustus with dignity. "And I weally considah that is strictly necessary to bowwow Mr. Wailton's gun!"

"You ass! Do you think he would lend it to you?"

"Yaas, wathah, if I explained to him that we were goin' to captuah a beastlay burglar!"

"Ass! If he had a suspicion of the fact he'd keep us in. We've got to keep this thing dark. Don't be a fathead! If you leave my side for a single instant, I'll slay you!"

"I wefuse to—"

"Now dry up! Now, come along, kids, and let's track down the enterprising burglar!"

"But, weally, Blake, considahwing the feahful wisk of tacklin' that despewate wuffian, I think we ought to bowwow Mr. Wailton's gun!"

"Oh, cheese it, and come along!"

"He may have a welolvah and blow our bwains out!"

"He couldn't blow yours out till you grew some. Come along, and dry up!"

The chums of the Fourth hurried out of the School House, Blake keeping his arm linked in Gussy's, for it was evident that the swell of St. Jim's still had a lingering desire to fetch the Housemaster's gun.

"He was going towards the gymnasium," whispered Blake, looking round for the vanished burglar. "The

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Terrible Three are in there, I believe. Hallo! There he is!"

The enterprising burglar was in sight again.

The big door of the gymnasium was open, and the light streamed out from it. In the light appeared for a moment the slinking figure of the burglar.

"Collar him!" yelled Blake.

The three chums bolted at the burglar.

The bearded, spectacled ruffian gave a gasp of alarm and swung round, staring towards the three figures launching themselves at him from the dusk. Then he broke into a run.

"After him!"

The burglar had escaped the rush and the clutching hands. He darted away into the dusk, and after him went the chums of Study No. 6 at top speed.

Tom Merry looked out of the gym.

"Hallo! What's the row here?"

No one replied, but he heard Blake's voice in the distance.

"After him! He's doging round the New House! He's the man, right enough! Don't let him get away!"

Tom Merry's eyes sparkled.

"I say, Manners! Monty, come here!"

His chums joined him in a moment.

"Those kids from Study No. 6 are chasing somebody!" muttered Tom. "Looks to me as if they're after our burglar, or else another mare's-nest. We'd better look into it!"



The burglar jumped back and something flashed in his hand. T to t

And the Terrible Three started in pursuit of the pursuers. Meanwhile, the burglar was speeding away through the gloom of the quadrangle.

The chums of the Fourth followed him fast, losing no time and finding him again, never far from the track.

Blake could have called for help, and soon had the rascal surrounded, but he did not intend to do anything of the kind. The chase was leading him close to the New House, and a call for help would probably be answered by New House juniors. Blake did not mean to let the New House have any hand in the capture of Jim the Nailer.

"Come on!" panted Blake, "we're gaining on the beast!"

"Wait a minute, deah boys!" gasped D'Arcy. "Stop for me! I've drowped my eyeglass!"

Blake snorted.

"Come on, you howling fathead! Come on, I tell you!"

"But I've weally drowped my beastlay eyeglass. I—"

Blake did not stop to listen.

The pursuers were clearly gaining on the burglar, and had they been a little more suspicious, they might have guessed that he was allowing them to do so.

And the chase had led them far from the gym, and they were drawing near the building where the boys kept their pets—a very dark and secluded corner of the extensive school grounds.

Still, in the starlight, the running figure could be seen, dodging and running, hardly ever for a moment out of sight.

"We've got him!" panted Blake. "He doesn't know this place, kids. There's no way out in this direction, and we shall see that he doesn't double back!"

"Right-ho!" panted Herries. "We've got him!"

"Look out for his wevovah, deah boys!"



Merry struck out with his cricket stump and a knife clattered

Swish came the water upon himself, and he gave a wail of anguish.

There was a clattering of falling buckets and a sound of scrambling feet, as if unseen persons were hastily descending from a roof.

Then came a shout of laughter from the darkness.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Who's Cock House at St. Jim's?"

"We are! We are!"

"Hear us smile!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Blake rubbed the water out of his eyes.

"Figgins & Co!" he gasped.

"Ha, ha, ha! Have you caught that giddy burglar?"

Ha, ha, ha!"

Blake gave a groan.

"Taken in—taken in and done brown! Fooled, diddled, dished, and done!"

His comrades were silent. Their feelings were too deep for words.

CHAPTER 8.

The Capture of Kerr!

TOM MERRY came up, panting, with Manners and Lowther at his heels. Blake and his chums had turned to go back to the School House, and Tom Merry caught sight of them clearly in the light of the stars. He uttered a startled exclamation.

"My hat! Where have you been?"

"Under a tap, I should say," remarked Monty Lowther. "Is that a new idea of yours, Blake, taking a bath with your clothes on?"

"Oh, go and eat coke!" said Blake crossly. "We've been done!"

"My waistcoat!" murmured D'Arcy. "Oh, my waistcoat! It's howwibly soiled! I shall nevah be able to wear it again—nevah!"

"I'm drenched!" growled Herries. "Oh, I'll make Figgins sit up for this, some time!"

The chums of Study No. 6 went their way, leaving the Terrible Three in convulsions.

"I don't know exactly what's happened," remarked Tom Merry, "but it's funny! Blake thought he was going to catch a burglar, and he caught a shower-bath! Hallo, what's that?"

A figure flitted by in the gloom.

Monty Lowther uttered an exclamation.

"Jim the Nailer!"

In a twinkling, the three had dashed towards the flitting figure.

"He's running! Stop him!"

The burglar was running his hardest, in earnest this time. But he was cut off from escape by the wall of the New House, and in a moment or two the Terrible Three cornered him, and he was grasped by three pairs of hands.

"The burglar!"

"Jim the Nailer!"

"We've got him!"

"Hurrah for us! Bring him along!"

"You silly asses!" came a gurgling voice. "I'm not Jim the Nailer! I'm Kerr!"

"Kerr!" ejaculated Tom Merry.

"Yes, confound you! Let me go!"

"Wait a bit!" said Tom Merry. Kerr had been dragged down, and the hero of the Shell proceeded to sit upon his chest to secure him. "I'm not so sure that you are Kerr. You'll have to explain yourself. What's this rig of yours?"

"He's got up to imitate Jim the Nailer," said Manners. "I suppose he's the giddy burglar that Blake and Herries and Gussy were chasing."

Kerr chuckled.

"Is that so, kid?" demanded Tom Merry severely.

"Yes, it is," said Kerr. "We got this up for a joke on you kids, only Blake popped in at the wrong time. I was going to let you spot me, you see, and lead you into a little trap; but Blake got it instead."

"Oh, I begin to see!" said Tom Merry. "You led them a dance, to where Figgy & Co. were waiting on the roof of the menagerie, with buckets of water ready to drench them."

"That's it!" grinned Kerr. "I didn't want to disappoint them, you know. I thought they ought to catch something. They got it instead of you."

"Where are Figgins and Wynn now?"

"Blessed if I know. I ran on, to get rid of this rig while they were soaking Blake. I've lost them in the dark."

"And we've found you," said Tom Merry, shaking his

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"Rats!"

They dashed on. The fugitive had disappeared at last, passing behind the menagerie as if to seek a hiding-place in the dark shadow there.

"Come on!" yelled Blake.

Right on dashed Blake and Herries, and close behind came Arthur Augustus. The juniors were too excited to think of the risk.

They passed the corner of the building, and paused for a moment in the dense shadow; and then, through the gloom, came a sudden sound of swishing water!

Swish! Slosh!

Blake gave a fearful yell as a flood descended upon his head, drenching him from crown to sole, and he staggered back, gasping and spluttering.

At the same moment came a similar drenching shower upon Herries, who started spluttering and gasping as if for a wager.

"My word!" gasped D'Arcy. "What the—how the—o-o-coch!"

head. "What do you think of this yarn, kids? Pretty steep, I call it!"

"Fearfully steep!" said Manners and Lowther, taking the cue. "It's pretty hard to swallow a tale like that. It's very cute of him."

"Yes, very cute indeed; but he can't take us in."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Kerr. "I've told you the truth!"

Tom Merry shook his head solemnly.

"I'm afraid I can't quite believe you, Jim the Nailer. If you could make us believe that you were Kerr, of course we should let you go."

"I am Kerr. You know I'm Kerr!" howled the prisoner. "I don't know anything of the kind. I've only got your word for it, and I'm not going to take the word of a burglar!" said Tom Merry obstinately.

"I'm not a burglar! I'm Kerr!"

"Nonsense! You're Jim the Nailer! I know you by your beard!"

"It's false; it will come off."

"That only makes the case blacker against you, if you're in disguise, my man!" said Tom Merry sternly. "I remember now, Mr. Locke said that the rascal would probably be clean-shaven. Yes, the beard does come off," he went on, jerking it from the prisoner's chin. "That proves the charge against the villain! He's the burglar, right enough!"

"I'm not! I'm Kerr! I'm not—I—"

"It's no use, my man, you're known," said Tom Merry. "Bind his hands, chaps! He's a fearfully desperate character, and he may have a revolver or a dagger in his pocket."

"Let me alone, I'm Kerr. You know I'm Kerr—"

"His necktie will do very well, as we haven't any hand-cuffs. Tie it tightly; he's a fearful desperado, you know, and if he gets loose there may be murder done!"

Kerr's wrists were fastened securely together. Then his ankles were bound with a whipcord Tom Merry happened to have in his pocket.

"There, I think he's safe," Tom Merry remarked, rising. "We've succeeded, after all, chaps. Blake tried, and Figgins tried; but we've done the trick and laid the burglar by the heel!"

"I'm not the burglar—you know I'm not! You know I'm Kerr!"

"Now we'll go and fetch the police," went on Tom Merry. "We won't try to carry him away. He can remain here safe enough till we get the police."

"I'm Kerr! You know I'm Kerr—"

"Surprising how he keeps that up, when he knows he can't pull the wool over our eyes!" said Tom Merry, in wonder. "What a fearful fabricator!"

"You—you beast! You School House cads! Let me go!"

"Yes, we'll let you go to prison," said Tom Merry. "That's where you ought to have been long ago, Jim the Nailer! Come on, kids, and we'll get the police on the scene. They've wanted that fearful criminal for a long time."

And the Terrible Three walked off.

Kerr wriggled and squirmed on the ground. He could roll about, but he could not get loose. He had to wait till someone should come for him. In spite of what Tom Merry had said, he did not think that the police would come.

Outside the New House the Terrible Three found Figgins and Wynn, evidently waiting for Kerr to turn up. They stopped to speak.

"I say, Figgins, have you lost anything?" asked Tom Merry affably.

Figgins stared at him.

"Why, I thought—we thought—that is—"

"Ha, ha, ha! You made a little mistake! It was Blake, Herries, and Gussy who were on the track of the burglar, and they got it in the neck instead of us."

Figgins broke into a chuckle.

"Well, it's up against the School House, anyway," he said comfortably. "You've been done, and it's much the same to us. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But haven't you lost anything?"

"Lost anything!" said Figgins. "No, not that I know of. What are you driving at, Tom Merry?"

"Oh, I thought you might have lost a burglar, or a partner in the Co.," said Tom Merry carelessly. "If you haven't, it's all right. So long!"

Figgins caught him by the arm.

"Do you know where Kerr is?"

"How should I know?" said Tom Merry, in astonishment. "But if you've mislaid a burglar, you will find one yonder, tied up all ready to be taken to prison."

And the Terrible Three marched off, laughing.

Figgins and Wynn looked uncomfortably at each other.

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"Better look into this," said Figgins shortly.

Fatty Wynn nodded, and they hurried in the direction indicated by Tom Merry. In the gloom it was not easy to see anything, and Figgins called out his chum's name.

"Kerr—Kerr! Where are you, Kerr?"

"Here!" came a snapping voice. "Here, you silly asses! Come and let me loose!"

Figgins hurried towards the spot, and stumbled over a sprawling figure, and came down with a bump across Kerr. "Look out!" yelled the unfortunate burglar. "Look out, fathead! I'm not a beastly cushion!"

"I didn't see you," said Figgins apologetically. "My hat! Who tied you up like this?"

"Tom Merry, of course! Get me loose, for goodness' sake, and don't stand there chattering like a parrot!" said Kerr.

Figgins seemed to swallow something. He took out his penknife and cut Kerr loose, without a word. The discomfited burglar rose to his feet.

"Well, you are a silly ass!" he said. "You've cut my necktie to ribbons!"

"Have I?" said Figgins. "Sorry—you didn't tell me it was your necktie! Don't be ratty, old chap! All's fair in war, you know, and we have to take things as they come!"

"Right-ho!" said Kerr. "I didn't mean to be ratty! But this has been rather a ghastly frost. We've given Blake the kybosh instead of Tom Merry; and then Tom Merry— Oh hang! He's been one too many for us again!"

CHAPTER 9.

The Right Track at Last!

THE Terrible Three entered the School House and went up to their study. Tom Merry caught a gleam of light under the door.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed. "Somebody's in our quarters! We never left a light burning." He pushed open the door and entered. "Hallo, there! Who—why—what are you doing here?"

"I came here to speak to you, sir," said George Cuffe meekly—for the intruder was the soft-mannered, new assistant of Taggles. "I did not find you here—"

Tom Merry stared at him.

"So you had the thundering cheek to light the gas, and wait here for me?" he said.

"I—I wanted to speak to you very particularly, sir."

"What about?" asked the hero of the Shell, eyeing him. He had noticed Cuffe once or twice before, and had not liked him, the man's soapy manners rather getting on his nerves.

"I have found a ten-shilling note, sir," said Cuffe, holding out the note between his finger and thumb. "I picked it up where you young gentlemen had been talking, and I thought it must belong to you."

Tom Merry went through his pockets.

"It's not mine!" he said shortly.

"Nor mine!" said Manners. "I've got two bob, and I haven't lost ten out of that! Is it yours, Monty?"

"Nix!" said Lowther shortly.

"I am sorry to have troubled you, young gentlemen," said Cuffe, in his soft voice. "I was sure it belonged to one of you, and I could not rest till I had restored it. Please excuse me! Good-night, gentlemen!"

"Good-night! You had better take that ten-shilling note to Mr. Railton."

"Yes, sir! I will certainly do so, sir!"

And George Cuffe departed. Tom Merry stood in the doorway watching him down the passage. Then he came back into the study and closed the door. There was a strained expression upon his face, and his chums watched him curiously.

"What's the matter, Tom?" asked Manners.

"Nothing, only—"

"Only what? What are you thinking of?"

"I don't trust that fellow! I've been thinking. Listen!"

Tom Merry held up his hand for silence. In the dead silence a faint creak came from the passage without. The chums did not need telling what it was. It was the faint sound of a stealthy footstep, and they knew that Cuffe was creeping back to listen at the door, just as well as if they had seen him.

Manners made a wrathful step towards the door, but Tom Merry signed to him to stop. He began to speak in a rather loud voice, as if he wished the words to reach the ears of the man he knew had an ear to the keyhole.

"I say, chaps, don't say a word about seeing those bank-notes in Mr. Railton's desk. It's awfully risky of him to leave them there without locking the desk, you know, and I really think he should take more care of them."

Manners and Lowther stared at Tom Merry as if they thought he had suddenly taken leave of his senses. This

was the first they had heard of banknotes in the House-master's desk.

"It would be a temptation to anyone hard-up," went on Tom Merry, in the same key. "I saw a bundle of banknotes and a heap of loose silver, and it won't be paid away in the House account till to-morrow. It's not safe, especially as that rascal, Jim the Nailor, is supposed to be in the neighbourhood."

There was a faint gasp outside the door.

"Let's go down to the Common-room, chaps," went on Tom Merry.

A faint creak, but louder than before, showed that the listener outside had taken the alarm at the words, and scuttled off down the passage in time to escape being seen. Tom Merry gave him time to get clear, and then opened the door. Wondering greatly, Manners and Lowther followed Tom from the room, and down the stairs. They entered the Common-room, and drew into a corner by themselves.

"Now, just explain yourself, you mysterious boulder!" muttered Monty Lowther. "Are you right clean off your rocker, or what is it?"

"I'm not off my rocker," said Tom. "I'm on the track."

"On the track of what?"

"Jim the Nailor!"

His chums gave a simultaneous whistle.

"Tom, you don't mean to say that you think—"

"Look here," said Tom quietly. "You know what Ferrers Locke said. The rascal intended to rob the school, and he was most likely to get a job of some kind here, as as some sort of servant, very likely."

"Yes; I know that, but—"

"Well, this fellow Cuffe has been here only a few days. He's new here, and he is a suspicious character. That was a yarn about finding a ten-shilling note, and coming there to give it back to us. It was too thin for anything. Of course, it was the first excuse that came to his mind when we found him in our study."

"But what do you think he was doing, then?"

"Looking for valuables. He knows I have a good deal of money; and there's my gold watch, he's seen me wear that sometimes. He was either going to steal or to ascertain where the things were kept so as to be able to take them when he was ready. I heard Blake say the other day that D'Arcy had lost a five-pound note, and had not found it yet. Gussy's awfully careless with his money, but it looks suspicious to me."

Manners and Lowther nodded.

"But, I say, Tom, Locke said he was a little man, with a sandy beard and spectacles."

"I know he did, but he said, too, that he would most likely shave off his beard, for disguise, and that the spectacles were only a disguise themselves, and would be left off," said Tom Merry. "This description fits Cuffe very well."

"My hat! It would be curious if it were true."

"We can't be sure, of course. But what did he want to come back and listen at our door for, if his presence there was as innocent as he makes out? He wanted to make sure whether we suspected anything."

"I suppose that's it!" said Manners thoughtfully.

"That's it right enough! That's why I told that yarn about money in the House-master's desk, and mentioned that Jim the Nailor was known to be in the neighbourhood. You see, if he thinks himself in danger here, he'll clear out, and if he thinks there's an easy haul to be made in the House-master's room, he'll go there first to collar it."

"I suppose so, but—"

"After what I said—and he heard—I believe that if he's Jim the Nailor he will clear out of St. Jim's to-night, after robbing the House-master's desk," said Tom Merry firmly.

"But, I say, that's not a thing we want to bring about."

"Yes, it is! So far as I know, there's nothing of value in Mr. Ralston's desk, so he doesn't stand to lose much," said Tom Merry coolly. "And we shall be there, ready for him; and if he gets away—well, I shall be surprised."

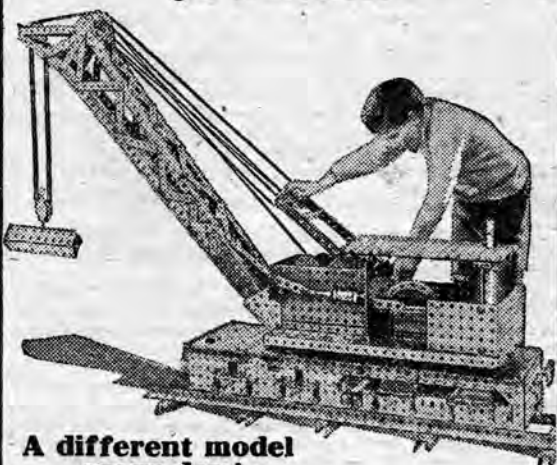
"Joye! I see the idea! But if he's not Jim the Nailor?"

"If he's not Jim the Nailor, we shall have our watch for our pains," said Tom Merry. "But it's my firm belief that he is. His listening at the door is proof enough. And I happen to know that Taggles took him on without a character. He's twitted him with it lots of times before us when he's been annoyed with him. And my belief is that Taggles has made something by taking him on like that, without thinking that Cuffe may be a rascal who has his own purpose to serve."

"Taggles is ass enough for anything, and the Head left that matter in his hands," Lowther remarked. "It's likely enough."

(Continued on page 18.)

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"Anyway, we shall see to-night. If he's Jim the Nailer, it's pretty certain that he'll put his plan into execution to-night, isn't it, as he knows his presence is suspected in the neighbourhood?" said Tom Merry. "He may wonder how we know anything about Jim the Nailer; but he can't doubt the fact."

"That's right enough! He'll bunk, and he's pretty certain to try the burglary game before he bunks; especially that remarkably easy job at the Housemaster's desk!" grinned Lowther.

"That's my belief! Now, after lights are out, when the dormitory is asleep, we're going to watch in the Housemaster's study, or near it. He's pretty certain to rob the Head's house, too, but we can't prevent that if he goes there first, and so long as we catch him it makes no odds."

"Good! If he's Jim the Nailer, we'll have him."

"But mind, mum's the word! We're going to make this capture! We three are enough to handle any burglar that ever burgled!"

"I should say so! Study No. 6 and Figgins & Co. are dead out of it! We'll take a cricket stump each in case he kicks up a fuss."

"And some rope to tie him up with," added Manners.

"But mind, not a whisper! If we're on a false scent, and anybody knew we were watching all night for a burglar that never came—"

"Ha, ha, ha! We should never hear the end of it!"

"Figgins and Blake have both discovered mare's-nests," Tom Merry remarked. "But there's no reason why we should give them the laugh of us. It was like their cheek to think that they could handle a job like this, and they will look pretty green in the morning when we hand Jim the Nailer over to the police."

And the Terrible Three kept the secret with terrible earnestness. The more they thought over it, the more they were certain that they were on the right track, and that Cuffe was, in reality, Jim the Nailer, and the temptation was strong to let study No. 6 know all about their success. But they resisted it. There would be time in the morning for a triumph over their rivals, if the enterprise worked out successfully, and they mastered their patience to wait till then. Not a word passed their lips on the subject, and when they went up to the Shell dormitory none of their Form-fellows had a suspicion of what was in their minds.

No one noticed that they concealed a cricket stump each under their mattresses, to arm themselves with when the moment came to sally forth on the burglar hunt. Knox, the prefect, saw lights out, and after the usual buzz of talk the dormitory sank into silence and slumber.

But the Terrible Three did not sleep. They had far too important a matter in hand to think of slumber. They lay awake, and listened for the boom of the clock-tower, which was to be the signal for rising. Eleven strokes boomed out, and the chums of the Shell waited with what patience they could for another weary hour to pass.

They were extremely sleepy, and once or twice Manners and Lowther nodded off, and woke up again with a start.

Twelve at last struck from the school tower.

Boom!

The last stroke died away, and seemed to leave a deeper silence than before.

Tom Merry rose from his bed.

"You awake, you chaps?" he whispered.

"Ye-e-es," murmured Monty Lowther sleepily. "I'm wide awake."

Manners snored. He had really gone off at last. Tom Merry shook him by the shoulder.

"Get up, lazybones! No noise, now!"

The three chums rapidly dressed, putting on slippers instead of their boots, and then took the cricket stumps from their hiding-places. The rest of the dormitory was sleeping soundly. Tom Merry opened the door quietly, and they stole out, and the door closed without a sound.

St. Jim's was sleeping. At midnight the latest to retire was in bed, and not a single light gleamed from a window of the School House. All was dark and silent as the Terrible Three, with beating hearts and tense nerves, descended the gloomy stairs to the Housemaster's study to take up their vigil for the night.

CHAPTER 10.

The Capture of Jim the Nailer!

CREAK!

Tom Merry started, and nudged his companions. The stroke of one had boomed out from the clock-tower, and the silence of the night had not been broken otherwise. The Terrible Three, hidden in an alcove

(Continued on the next page.)

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in the passage near the door of the Housemaster's study, watched and waited.

"Quiet!" whispered Tom Merry tensely. Creak, creak!

The sounds were faint—would have been imperceptible in the daytime, but in the dead stillness of the night they were perfectly audible to the straining ears of the juniors.

Someone was stealing along stealthily past the alcove. The chums, keeping back in the darkness, caught a momentary glimpse of a dim form flitting by.

They held their breath for a moment. All doubts were gone now. Whether the man was Jim the Nailer or not, it was perfectly clear that he was not upon an honest errand. Tom Merry looked out of the recess after him.

He heard a faint sound at the door of Mr. Railton's study. The door was locked, which was the reason why the juniors had taken up their watch in the passage. The sound was quite explicable to Tom Merry. The thief was picking the lock.

A glimmer of light fell into the dark passage. The study door had swung open, and the pale starlight that glimmered through the window within passed fugitive rays out into the passage.

Tom Merry touched his companions lightly. "Come on!"

Grasping their cricket stumps, the chums of the Shell stole on tiptoe along the passage. They reached the Housemaster's study, but the door had closed again.

A glimmer of light came from under it, stronger than the starlight. The marauder had lighted the gas, turning it up just sufficient for his work.

The chums stepped into the room, and the burglar turned his head. A piece of black crepe masked his face. His eyes gleamed with sudden terror. He stared at the boys, and made a wild spring for the door; but they were in his path in a moment.

"Surrender!"

He started back from the brandished cricket stumps. His hand went to his breast, and reappeared with something in it that glimmered and flashed in the dim gas-light. Tom struck fiercely, and the scoundrel gave a cry of pain as the stump cracked on his wrist, and a knife went with a clatter to the floor.

They were upon him the next moment. He went down heavily, with the three juniors on top of him. The crepe was torn from his face, and the clean-shaven countenance of George Cuffe was revealed. He struggled desperately, but in vain.

"Got him!" said Tom Merry, with much satisfaction. "Surrender, you silly chump, or you will get hurt!"

"Let me go—let me go!"

"Yes, I can see us doing that!" grinned Tom. "We've been looking for you for a long time, Jim the Nailer!"

The man gasped as his name was uttered.

"Let me go! I will give you—"

"Rats! You're our prisoner."

Cuffe made a desperate effort to break loose. But the chums of the Shell pinned him down, and, in spite of his struggles, he was secured, and after a few minutes, as he lay gasping and exhausted, his wrists were bound together with the rope Tom Merry had thoughtfully provided himself with.

Tom sprang to his feet, breathing hard.

"My hat! That was a tussle! But we've got him!"

"We've got something else, too!" grinned Manners.

"Look here!"

"By Jove! What a haul!"

In the struggle all sorts of property had been scattered on the study floor from the capacious pockets the burglar was provided with for carrying his loot in—money, gold and silver, several watches, a roll of banknotes, silver spoons and forks by the dozen, and many other articles of value lay dispersed on the floor.

The thief had evidently been busy in the other parts of the school buildings before he came into the School House for the final coup in Mr. Railton's study.

"Lucky for the Head we were on the spot," remarked Tom Merry. "Some of these things belong to the school, and there would be a fearful row if they were lost. Hallo! Here's somebody coming at last!"

Mr. Railton's face appeared at the door. The Housemaster held up a candle and stared into the study in blank amazement. He had a poker in his other hand.

"Wh-what has happened?"

Tom Merry turned up the gas. In the blaze of light Jim the Nailer could be seen lying bound upon the floor, scowling like a demon and grinding his teeth with helpless rage.

"We've caught a burglar, sir," said Tom Merry. "Stopped him from bunking with a fearful lot of loot, sir! He's Jim the Nailer!"

"Merry, I see what you have done, though I cannot quite understand this. You have run a great risk, my boys."

"It was great fun, sir. This will be one up for the School House, and Figgins & Co. will have to sing small."

Mr. Railton took a closer look at the prisoner.

"But this—this Cuffe—George Cuffe! I should never have dreamed—"

"He's Jim the Nailer, sir," said Tom Merry—"an awful rascal! I'll put a few more turns of the rope round him in case of accident."

Mr. Railton smiled as Tom Merry proceeded to wind the rope round the hapless burglar and knot it.

"That will do, Merry. I will wake Taggles, and have this rascal taken to the police-station at once! I will not run any risk with him. You may go to bed, and you shall give me a full explanation in the morning."

St. Jim's was all agog with the news the next morning. Jim the Nailer—for he had confessed his identity—had been lodged in Rylcombe's police station overnight, and Taggles had been called before the Head, and he had received a lecture on his carelessness which made him uncomfortable for a long time.

The news of the capture had been wired to Scotland Yard overnight, and early in the morning Ferrers Locke was in Rylcombe. He came to St. Jim's, and paid a visit to Tom Merry. "I knew I could rely upon you, Tom," he said. "You have done well—amazingly well! The rascal is Jim the Nailer, right enough—in fact, he has confessed it. Now I want you to tell me the whole story."

Tom Merry related simply enough the incidents of the capture. He also told of the unsuccessful attempt of Figgins & Co., and Ferrers Locke laughed heartily.

"You have saved the school from a serious loss, Tom, and helped to rid the public of a pest," he said. "I am proud of you. I hope the time may come when you can aid me again in the cause of justice. I know you will be ready and willing."

"Rather!" said Tom Merry emphatically. And they parted.

"You were a horrid bounder not to call us up to take a hand in it," Blake said when he met Tom. "Still, you've done very well. You're not such an ass as you look!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "You are weally not such a fearful ass as you look, Tom Mewwy."

"Thank you!" said Tom. "If I were not a stickler for the truth I would say the same of you, Gussy."

Even Figgins & Co. came round. They were disappointed at first, but they had to, confess that the Terrible Three had done the business neatly enough.

"Well, you've scored this time," said Figgins. "We give you best; but we'll make you sit up soon, you bounders! We'll soon pull you off your perch!"

But for the time, at least, the Terrible Three were at the top of the tree, and in a position to crow without limit over the rival detectives.

THE END.

(School House is Cock House once more! And Tom Merry's the leader! But his leadership is somewhat disputed next week in "JOURNALISTS OF ST. JIM'S!")

Mind you read it, boys.)

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EASTWOOD SHIELD LEAGUE.

Owing to lack of space we are unable to publish a report of St. Jim's match this week, but full results appear below.

RESULTS.

ST. JIM'S 0 ST. JUDE'S 1

Teams.—St. Jim's: Hammond; Figgins, Kerr; Redfern, Noble, Lowther; Talbot, Levison, Merry, Blake, D'Arcy.

St. Jude's: Root; Wall, James; Clarke, Pountney, Lews; Stevens, Lane, Raleigh, Voce, Graham.

ABROTTSFORD 0 GREYFRIARS 7

Hurree Singh, Cherry, Wharton (2), Penfold, Vernon-Smith, Todd.

BANNINGTON GRAM. SCH. 1 ST. FRANK'S 4

Bird, Nipper (2), Tregellis-West, Grey.

CLAREMONT 1 RYLECOMBE GRAM. SCH. 2

Baxter, Gay (2).

ROOKWOOD 3 HIGHOLIFFE 2

Silver, Mornington (2), Derwent, De Courey.

TAKE A LOOK INSIDE—



Address all letters: The Editor, The GEM, The Amalgamated Press, Ltd., Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C. 4.

HERE we are again, chums, and we're all still thinking of Christmas. That's as it should be. For the benefit of those who missed my greeting in last week's Special Christmas Number, here's wishing you

A MERRY CHRISTMAS.

The good old GEM will be on sale to help you make it merry, at any rate. Now to next week's grand programme. In the first place there is a delightful long complete story of Tom Merry & Co., entitled

"JOURNALISTS OF ST. JIM'S!"

By Martin Clifford.

The title will give you a fair idea of what the yarn is about, but you'll never guess the surprises in store. They must come when you get down to reading this topping yarn. There's another

"WINGS OF THE MOUNTED"

episode to look forward to—more thrilling and more exciting than ever. Oh yes, Jimmy Silver & Co. of Rookwood are also included, chums! In

"MUFFIN FINDS THE WAY,"

you will find a rattling fine complete story of laughs and adventure. In *Potts the Office Boy* you will get your usual weekly tonic laugh. Order your GEM in advance; there's no disappointment then. Now for the notebook:

VERY DRY!

A GEM reader who has a lot of uncomplimentary things to say about the English climate wants to know if there is any place he can go to in the wide, wide world where it never rains. That gave me a small job of work to do before I could give him this reply. But here it is. The Atacama Desert of Chili which is situated in South America, sees rain only once a "blue moon," according to the people who know, whilst the Payta Desert of Peru gets its "spot" of rain once in forty years. Life in either of these dry places is very slow, so perhaps my disgruntled correspondent, if he seriously thinks of pushing off from England, would do well to stay and consider the matter afresh. Another item that might upset his ideas a bit—I don't think the GEM ever gets out to either of these isolated spots!

'WARE, BURGLAR!

Ssssh! If that's a burglar you hear in the house, and you have a mind to get out of bed and tackle him with a cricket stump, watch your step. In other words, put on your shoes—don't do any shadowing
THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,245.

stunts in your bare feet. Why? Well, it seems your modern Bill Sykes has a playful habit of sprinkling tin tacks all over the place, knowing that if he is surprised at his work and chased, the chaser, so to speak, will soon have to pack up. That is, of course, if he has nothing on his feet. Another trick is for the burglar gent to pinch your trousers. What for? say you. Well—!

SPANNING THE HUDSON RIVER.

We shall want forty to sixty thousand tons of steel, a couple of million odd rivets, one hundred and seven thousand miles of wire, and twelve million pounds—cash, that last item.

That little lot is enough to make your head ache, yet from it all has now emerged the longest suspension bridge in the world. In one giant span of three thousand five hundred feet it links up the State of New York and New Jersey. Quite rightly is this monster bridge, recently opened and named after George Washington, acclaimed a marvel of engineering.

NOT SO TAME AS THEY LOOK!

Quite recently there have been several cases of animals in captivity turning upon their keepers, and two of the latter at least have had narrow escapes with their lives. The head keeper at Bristol Zoo got off the other day with nothing more serious than bruises and a broken collar bone, the result of a beating he received from the trunk of an elephant. Judy, the elephant in question, was being fed with her favourite dish of milk cobbles. For some reason or other she was off her favourite dish that day, for she disdained the food, pushed her keeper into a corner, and commenced to belabour him with her trunk. The keeper realised that it was the manner in which he was feeding Judy that riled her, so he promptly dropped the bucket containing the food and immediately the elephant released him. Not so fortunate was a Mr. Goddard, the proprietor of a Zoo in Surrey. He advanced towards the cage of Billy the lion, and while he talked to him, rested his hand between the bars. Immediately the paw of the lion snaked out and fastened on that hand. Then commenced a battle of eyes in which the man tried to subdue the animal by sheer dominating will power. All the time the lion was straining to pull the captured hand and arm farther into the cage. The man realised that he was losing the battle, for suddenly the lion sighted the blood on its master's hand, and the sight recalled all his primitive instincts.

It was now or never! Without hesitation the man literally tore his hand away from that fierce, lacerating paw. He was taken to hospital eventually, where another life and death struggle took place—this time between the poison that had resulted from the lacerated hand and the doctors. The doctors won, but it was a narrow shave.

ANOTHER RECORD!

When one attempts to beat an existing record set up by a flying speed merchant who calmly hops from England to Australia in the short time of nine days four hours and eleven minutes, he naturally expects to meet with difficulties. But difficulties in the case of Mr. Charles Arthur Butler only made him more determined. He did beat the record, which had been set up by Mr. W. A. Scott, by exactly one hour and forty-two minutes, but it was a very close thing. For instance, Mr. Butler never expected to be held up by the police at Brindisi for half a day. Having got over that, he most certainly never reckoned with somebody or other messing about with his magneto at Naples and delaying him still further. But more setbacks were awaiting this hero of the air. At Akyab some obliging person helped himself to sixteen gallons of petrol when Mr. Butler wasn't looking, and to crown it all, he was shoved in quarantine at Jask (in Persia) because cholera had broken out at Basra from whence he had just flown. A good many of us would have packed up after these misfortunes. Not so Mr. Butler. He went on and on towards his goal, and did the trick—a praiseworthy effort that was lauded the world over. His feat (or his feet!) will perhaps be remembered best, when other speed merchants have set up still higher records, by the fact that throughout this long and dangerous journey Mr. Butler wore carpet slippers! He liked them for their comfort, he said; and most certainly he was deserving of comfort.

HEARD THIS ONE?

Brown: "Once, old chap, I was mighty pleased to be down and out."

Robinson: "When was that?"

Brown: "After my first trip in an aeroplane!"

SOME THRILL!

We might read with envy the experience of a Mr. Stanley, of Honeybourne, but few of us would care to try our luck in the same way. It transpires that Mr. Stanley was driving a lorry laden with fruit, vegetables, and flowers at Bretforton. The scene was a level crossing. Too late, he saw the Paddington to Worcester express approaching and jammed on his brakes. Crash! At seventy-five miles an hour the express smashed into the lorry. When the carriages had rumbled past, the lorry-driver was still seated in his driver's cabin with one hand on the brake lever and the other on the steering wheel. The entire front of his lorry was gone, however, being literally decapitated by the rushing express. The engine of the latter suffered no greater damage than a hole in the boiler, where a piece of flying metal had pierced it. As a driver Mr. Stanley doubtless has been a witness to many a road thrill, but it is certainly not on the cards that he will ever encounter one to touch the thrill that happened under his nose and left him unharmed.

YOUR EDITOR.

SILVER'S SPLENDID SPOOK!

By
**OWEN
CONQUEST.**



CHAPTER 1.

Getting Rid of Tubby!

"MERRY Christmas, you fellows!"
"Same to you, old bean! Right away, driver!"
"Hurrah!"

The crowded charabanc moved away from the School House at Rookwood amid enthusiastic cheers.

It was the third to leave Rookwood that morning. The school was breaking up for the Christmas vacation. Excitement and cheery good-humour was in the air, and there was an outburst of cheering for every vehicle that passed down the broad drive to the gates.

"Us for the next sharry to the station!" remarked Jimmy Silver of the Fourth. "We'll have to catch the 12.15 from Coombe if we want to make our connection at Bagshot."

"Plenty of time!" said Arthur Edward Lovell. "Not as though your place was a day's journey from the school, Jimmy."

"True enough," grinned Jimmy Silver. "Trains are not too frequent, though, and we'd better catch that one if we can."

The Fistical Four were spending Christmas at Silver's home, the Priory. They were anticipating a very good holiday, and were consequently in great spirits.

"Anyone we haven't said good-bye to yet?" asked Raby, as they descended the steps leading into the quadrangle.

"Here's one, anyway!" chuckled Newcome. "Merry Christmas, Tubby! Don't burst yourself, old fat bean!"

"Kind regards to all at home!" grinned Jimmy Silver, wringing Tubby Muffin's fat paw with such force that the fat junior emitted a squeak of pain. "Mind you have a good time! Good-bye, Tubby!"

"Ow! Thanks very much, old chap!" gasped Tubby Muffin. "No need to say good-bye, though. I'm coming!"

"Eh?"
"It's all right, after all. I'm coming!" said Tubby, cheerfully. "I told you I couldn't come to your place on account of an invitation I had to Mornington's. But I've turned Morny down, now, in favour of you. Didn't like to disappoint you, you know."

The Fistical Four stopped and looked at the cheerful porker of the Fourth with very expressive looks.

"Can't say I remember inviting you to my place,"

remarked Jimmy Silver frankly. "When did it happen? In a moment of delirium?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, really, Jimmy! Don't you remember my telling you I couldn't come to the Priory because of Morny?"

"I remember that, certainly!" grinned the leader of the Fistical Four. "I'm equally sure that I gave no invitation for you to turn down! Try someone else—Smythe, or Hansom, or somebody. Anybody but me!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He, he, he! Lucky I don't take your little jokes seriously, old chap!" said Tubby Muffin. "I'm unconventional myself, though; always ready for a bit of leg-pulling. When do we go?"

Jimmy Silver winked at his chums with that eye which was out of Tubby's range of vision.

"Not quite sure whether

we're fully packed yet, old bean," he said. "Have you packed the fishing-tackle, Lovell—and the hatchets?"

"What the thump—" exclaimed Lovell, in surprise.

"You haven't? That's a pity!" remarked Jimmy Silver, with a shake of his head. "There's the grub, too. We've got a few tins of sardines and a couple of loaves. But do you think that'll last us over Christmas?"

"Ought to be enough, I should think," said Lovell, tumbling to his leader's little wheeze. "After all, you don't expect much grub when you're roughing it."

"Exactly. Anyway, we may be able to trap a rabbit or a bird. Wouldn't be very nice to starve to death on the Yorkshire moors at this time of the year."

There was a sudden gasp from Tubby Muffin.

"Look here, you beast—I mean, old chap!—you're surely not thinking of spending your Christmas camping out on a beastly moor?"

"Why not?" asked the leader of the Fistical Four, avoiding a direct reply to the fat junior's question. "Nice and healthy, roughing it in the open-air, isn't it? Of course, it's a bit bleak just now—"

"Br-r-r-r!" shuddered Tubby Muffin.

"And if we get snow, there's an element of danger—never know when you're going to get buried in a snowdrift or freeze to death!" said Jimmy Silver. "That's just the sort

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,243.

**A most unwelcome visitor
Was frightened by a ghost!
But what was worse was that he
thought
The ghost had been his host!**

of thing to harden a chap, anyway; why not try it, Tubby?"

Tubby Muffin glared.

"You silly ass!" he roared. "Think I'm going to freeze and starve to death on a blessed moor at Christmas-time? Not me! I wouldn't come if you paid me to! Yah!"

With which decided expression of opinion, Tubby Muffin rolled away. And the Fistical Four, after waiting till Tubby was out of hearing, roared.

Having, as they thought, effectively disposed of their unwelcome would-be guest, Jimmy Silver & Co. collected their luggage and lined up for the next charabanc. They were soon speeding down the lane leading to Coombe.

There, a shock awaited them. Raby had remarked, en route, that it would be a wonder if they had seen the last of Tubby. Raby's doubts were justified. As they walked through the barrier on to the station platform, Tubby Muffin himself rolled forward.

The fat junior eyed the Fistical Four with a very suspicious eye.

"I say, you chaps, you're coming this way, then!" he said. "I suppose you'll be going to Bagshot for your train to the North?"

"I thought we left you behind at Rookwood!" remarked Jimmy Silver, rather grimly. "What's the big idea in racing us to the station, Tubby?"

Tubby Muffin grinned.

"He, he, he! I got a lift in Morny's car. I rather fancied you'd turn up here, somehow. Got your tickets?"

"We have. I suppose you've got your usual platform ticket?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, really, you fellows! Matter of fact, I've run short of change so I did have to fall back on a platform ticket. That's all right, though. I can settle up when we get to your station, Silver."

"My station?" hooted the leader of the Fistical Four. "What the thump are you coming to my station for?"

Tubby Muffin coughed.

"I've decided to see your pater, old chap, and warn him of the dangers you'll be exposed to if he allows you to spend Christmas camping out!"

"Why, you silly ass—"

"Here's the train, now," said Tubby, as the local train puffed into the station. "Don't get left behind, you fellows!"

"You—you—"

The Fistical Four followed Tubby into an empty compartment, with feelings almost too deep for words.

Tubby Muffin kept up a cheerful flow of conversation during the short journey to Bagshot Junction. The Fistical Four, on the other hand, said very little.

They thought the more. Jimmy Silver and his chums were wondering what ruse they could adopt to shake off their uninvited guest when Bagshot was reached.

"I say, you fellows, are you sure you're not coming to the Priory before you go North?" asked Tubby Muffin, with a fat wink, as they alighted at Bagshot Junction. "If you are, you might get a lunch-basket in the buffet, before we start out."

Jimmy Silver's face broke into a sudden grin.

"Good idea! We'll admit it, Tubby; just at present we're on our way to my place. You get into the train and keep the seats for us, and we'll get the tuck."

"He, he, he! I say, you chaps, you have to be pretty smart to pull the wool over my eyes! Which is the platform?"

"Over here! Come on, you men!"

Lovell and Raby and Newcome grinned as they noted that their leader was piloting Tubby Muffin to the London train instead of their own, which was waiting at another platform altogether.

Tubby crossed the footbridge and unsuspectingly allowed himself to be dumped into an empty compartment on the wrong train.

"Spread yourself out and stick to the compartment, or you'll lose our seats!" said Jimmy Silver, when he had got the fat junior comfortably settled down. "Now we'll buzz off, you chaps; see you later, Tubby!"

"Better bring two baskets while you're about it," called out Tubby, as the grinning juniors walked away. "Don't be long!"

"We'll do our best. Keep those seats!"

The Fistical Four walked to the end of the platform and waited.

They hadn't long to wait. There was a slamming of carriage doors and a shrill blast on a whistle.

The train began to move off. Jimmy Silver & Co. saw a fat and furious face appear at one of the windows of the train and glare up the platform.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,243.

"I say, you fellows—" they heard Tubby yelling, above the roar of the engine.

"Good-bye, Tubby!"

"Merry Christmas, old bean!"

"Beasts!" came a final howl from the furious Tubby Muffin. Then the train vanished under the bridge, leaving the Fistical Four blessedly alone again.

"Thank goodness!" gasped Jimmy Silver. "Let's hope when he gets to London that he'll find his way to his own place and stay there. Now for our own train!"

"Only just in time! Better hurry!" said Lovell.

They grabbed their bags, which they had thoughtfully left at the end of the platform, and made a rush for their right train.

They had only just time to catch it. There was no time to pick out an empty compartment, and they accordingly dashed for the nearest.

Jimmy Silver flung open the door and jumped in, and the rest of the Fistical Four came tumbling after him.

Only after they had picked themselves up and pulled the door closed did they realise that someone had suffered in their hurried arrival. That "someone," who must have been standing up near the door, was now lying on the floor, yelling with pain and rage.

"Help! Police! Save me!" came a yell from the floor of the carriage.

CHAPTER 2.

Fellow-Travellers!

"O H, my hat! Pick him up, you men!" gasped Newcome.

"Must have knocked him over as we came in!" said Lovell sagely. "Awfully sorry, sir! Are you hurt?"

"Groooh! You—you hooligans! You utterly reckless young scoundrels!" hooted the unfortunate victim of the Fistical Four's hasty entrance. "Pull the communication-cord and stop the train! I'll have you arrested—flung into gaol!"

"Oh crumbs! We're sorry—"

"Do you think that gives me any consolation?" roared the irate stranger. "I am injured—seriously injured! Quite possibly I am maimed for life!"

"Oh, my hat! Draw it mild, sir!" remonstrated Raby. "We knocked you over, but the carriage seat must have broken your fall; you can't be badly hurt."

"If I'm not, it's no fault of yours! Pull that communication-cord, I tell you!"

"'Penalty for Improper Use, Five Pounds,'" said Jimmy Silver thoughtfully, reading from the notice printed near the communication-cord. "I suppose you're willing to stand the five, sir?"

The Fistical Four's fellow-passenger glared.

"There will be no question of a fine; I intend to hand you in charge for assault and battery!"

"All serene, then!" smiled Jimmy Silver, apparently undisturbed at the prospect of being handed over to the care of the law.

He reached up for the communication-cord. But there was another yell from the gentleman before he could carry out the order.

"Stop! On consideration, I will wait till we get to the other end. Leave that cord alone, you young fool!"

Jimmy Silver registered surprise.

"But I thought you said—"

"Leave it alone and hold your tongue!"

"Well, my hat!"

"Nothing like pleasant company for a railway journey!" remarked Lovell reflectively, as he took the corner seat opposite their irascible companion. "You can't beat a man with a pleasant smile and polished manners!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The gentleman in the opposite corner glared. He was a lean, middle-aged man, with an aggressive jaw, a hooked nose, and decidedly aggressive eyebrows. When he glared the cumulative effect was most unpleasant.

"Unless you want to have your ears boxed, young man, you'll stop that talk at once!" he said savagely. "In fact, you'll stop all talk—all of you!"

"Oh, great pip!"

"Does this railway happen to belong to you, sir?" asked Newcome innocently.

"Silence! Not another word from any of you for the remainder of the journey! You'll all sit that side of the carriage. I want to rest my feet on this side!"

"But there are four of us, and only one of you!" gasped Jimmy Silver. "Surely you can't be serious!"

"If you try to sit down on this side, you'll see how serious I am!" snapped the Fistical Four's unpleasant fellow-traveller. "I have an umbrella here; I shall use it

on the first of you young ruffians who attempts to sit near me. Stay over there!"

"Great pip!"

The Fistical Four fairly blinked. They appeared to have run into an amateur Mussolini who wanted things very much his own way.

"Open the window, somebody!" murmured Jimmy Silver. "I begin to feel I'm in need of air."

"What-ho!"

Raby made a move to open the window. At the same moment the man in the corner reached out with his umbrella.

Crack!

"Ow! My knuckles!" howled Raby fiendishly. "You—you—"

"The same thing will happen to any of you who try to open one of the windows!" rapped out the gentleman in the corner. "I want them shut!"

"But you've got your back to the engine; having them open won't hurt you in the least!" gasped Jimmy Silver.

"Surely, sir—"

"Silence! Sit down on that seat, all of you, and remain quiet!"

"Rats!"

That disrespectful monosyllable seemed to leave the Fistical Four spontaneously. Jimmy Silver & Co. were usually polite and respectful to their elders. But they had their limits, and those limits seemed to have been reached.

"Rats, and many of 'em!" added Lovell, to make their meaning unmistakably clear. "We've had about enough of you, old bean; go and take a run!"

"What!"

"Go and eat coke! Go and chop chips!" said Lovell recklessly. "I'll open the window!"

"You disrespectful young hooligan—"

"Here goes!"

Lovell let down the window with a crash.

A moment later the umbrella flashed in the air. But Lovell wasn't sharing Raby's fate. He made a grab at it, wrenched it away from the man's grasp, and placed it on the opposite rack.

"That can stay there till we get out!" he remarked. "Now you sit down and behave yourself!"

"You ruffian—"

"And stop gassing!" added Jimmy Silver. "We're fed-up with the sound of your voice; give it a rest!"

"You insolent young scoundrels, I'll thrash you! I'll—"

"You'll keep quiet unless you want us to up-end you and give you half a dozen with the broly!"

"Hear, hear!"

The juniors were all on their feet, eyeing their unpleasant acquaintance with grim determination. The man in the corner looked at them with quite a ferocious look for a few seconds. Then, with a kind of snort of baffled rage, he dropped his eyes.

The juniors could see they had won.

There was no more trouble during the remainder of the journey. The juniors chatted cheerfully about the holidays, footer, and other topics of interest to them, and the gentleman in the corner buried himself in a book.

By the time they had reached their destination they had almost forgotten his existence.

They were reminded of him then. Rather to their surprise, he got out with them. Visitors were few at the village station, and Jimmy Silver, who knew most of the

local inhabitants, couldn't help wondering who he was and what he was doing there.

Mr. Silver's car was waiting outside the station, with his chauffeur, ready to drive them up to the Priory. As the juniors got into the car they saw their fellow-traveller hail the station hack.

"Come to spend Christmas with relations, perhaps," conjectured Jimmy Silver. "Well, they're welcome to him!"

The Fistical Four then dismissed him from their minds. In the swift-moving car they soon covered the distance between the station and the Priory. The Priory was a fine old mansion which Jimmy Silver's father had taken on a lease some years previously and modernised to give it all the advantages of a newly-built house.

Mr. and Mrs. Silver gave the juniors a hearty welcome, and bade their son's friends make themselves thoroughly at home.



Raby got up to open the window, and at the same moment the other passenger in the carriage leant forward and rapped him smartly on the knuckles with his umbrella!

"Oh, by the way, Jimmy!" said Mr. Silver, as they prepared to go upstairs. "I am expecting someone else to-day—Mr. Dowling, his name is. I want you to make a point of being exceptionally nice and polite to him. I have a somewhat difficult matter of business to negotiate with him."

"All serene, pater. No reason why I should be anything else, anyway," remarked Jimmy Silver. "Perhaps this is the chap, now."

The front-door bell had just rung, and one of the servants went to answer it. Mr. Silver turned to the door and nodded.

"This is the gentleman. Pray remain a moment, my boys, and let me give you an introduction."

The juniors followed Mr. Silver's glance. Then they uttered a simultaneous gasp.

For the gentleman walking into the hall was none other

than the fellow-traveller whom they encountered with such unfortunate results on the train!

CHAPTER 3.

An Unwelcome Guest!

MR. SILVER shook hands with the newcomer. "How do you do, Mr. Dowling? I trust you have had a pleasant journey?" Mr Dowling snorted.

"I would have had but for the intrusion of a pack of young hooligans who invaded my compartment. Young scoundrels! Why, what—what—"

He had just caught sight of the Fistical Four. Mr. Silver smiled and beckoned to them.

"Allow me to introduce my son and his friends, my dear sir—Jimmy, Lovell, Newcome, and Raby, this is Mr. Dowling."

"G-g-good-afternoon, sir!" stuttered Jimmy Silver. "Nice day, isn't it?"

"I was under the impression that it was a most wretched day—just beginning to snow now!" almost snarled Mr. Dowling. "Mr. Silver! You say this is your son, and these his friends?"

"That is so, Mr. Dowling!"

"Then I can only commiserate with you on your guests! These, sir, are the young hooligans I spoke about!"

"My dear sir!" gasped Mr. Silver. "If they have done anything to cause you annoyance, I am most sorry!"

"Bah! We will not discuss the matter! Let us get to business—you have a room where we can talk privately?"

"Pray come to my study!"

And Mr. Silver conducted the irascible Mr. Dowling away.

The Fistical Four looked at each other.

"Well, my hat!" said Jimmy Silver. "If that doesn't take the biscuit! And that's the chap the pater wanted us to be specially polite to!"

"Looks as if we've put our foot in it, certainly," said Lovell, ruefully. "Perhaps we can make it up, if he's staying as a guest over Christmas!"

Jimmy Silver grinned.

"Strikes me it'll be like making it up with a man-eating tiger. Wonder why the pater wants to kill the fatted calf, though! Jenkinson!"

"Sir!" said Jenkinson, Mr. Silver's butler, who had been waiting to show the juniors up to their rooms.

"What's the giddy mystery? Who is this Dowling-bird?"

Jenkinson looked round to make sure that nobody was within earshot.

"He is the ground landlord and lessor of the Priory, sir. The circumstances, I believe, are that your respected father's lease expires on Christmas Day this year."

Jimmy Silver jumped.

"Expires? Then does that mean—"

"It means, sir, that unless Mr. Dowling agrees to a renewal of the lease, your father should vacate the premises on or before Christmas Day!"

"My hat! But I thought it was an understood thing that the pater would have the option of renewing!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver.

"Well, it was pretty obvious from the start that there was something wrong with him!" remarked Newcome. "But let's forget it for a time, anyway. Look out of the window. Snow!"

"Hurrah!"

Snow was falling heavily outside. The juniors cheered enthusiastically.

"Let's get up and unpack, and then we can have a look at the secret passage," suggested Raby.

It was a good suggestion, and the juniors put it into effect. They had seen the secret passage previously—it began behind a hinged panel in the dining-room and wandered round the old house in a most bewildering fashion. The Fistical Four had explored it several times, but it had never lost its fascination.

By the time they had finished their explorations night had fallen. Snow was still falling heavily outside, and in the hall the juniors met Mr. Silver and their old friend Mr. Dowling retreating from the door.

"Quite hopeless!" Mr. Silver was remarking. "Whether you like it or not, my dear sir, you'll have to stay the night."

"I don't like it at all. But I have no choice in the matter, so I will thank you for your offer," grunted Mr. Dowling ungraciously. "Huh!"

The last to the juniors.

"And 'huk! to you, old bean!" remarked Jimmy Silver, in an undertone, as the unwelcome guest went upstairs with his host. "Looks as if we'll have to put up with that old boulder longer than we thought."

"Let's hope the ghost that's supposed to haunt the house gets busy for his special benefit to-night," said Lovell.

The juniors laughed. But, strangely enough, they were to be reminded of Lovell's words in a very striking manner before the night was out.

CHAPTER 4.

Haunted!

TAP!

"Somebody at the door?" asked Lovell.

"Come in!" sang out Jimmy Silver.

Mr. Silver and Mr. Dowling and the juniors were in the library. Raby and Newcome were playing a game of chess before going up to bed, and Lovell and Jimmy Silver were reading, while Mr. Silver and Mr. Dowling talked by the fire.

"Must have been mistaken, I suppose," remarked Lovell, as there was no response to the invitation.

Tap! Tap!

"Better see who it is, Jimmy," suggested Mr. Silver.

Jimmy Silver nodded, and went over to the door.

"Funny!" he remarked as he opened it and looked out. "Nobody here!"

"What!"

Tap! Tap! Tap!

"It comes from the wall, not the door!" exclaimed Lovell, rising. "Over here, I thought!"

Newcome and Raby left their game of chess and joined Lovell, while Jimmy Silver's father and Mr. Dowling looked over interestedly.

"Sounded rather queer to me!" said Raby. "Just as if it came from the bowels of the earth. Why, what the thump—"

"What's up, old bean?"

"What's happened to our chessboard?" demanded Raby.

"We left it on the table, didn't we?"

"We did!" agreed Newcome. "Mean to say, then—well, my hat! It's gone!"

All eyes were turned to the table. The chessboard had vanished as if the earth had opened and swallowed it up!

"Must be a jape!" said Lovell, rather shakily. "Someone's hiding in the room."

"Do ghosts do this sort of thing?" asked Newcome, almost dazedly.

"Well, you read about such happenings in books on spiritualism," Jimmy Silver replied, with a frown. "But it's tosh—must be!"

"Utter nonsense!" snorted Mr. Dowling. "Excuse me, Mr. Silver. I am tired. I will go to bed!"

"You know your way up to your room, then?" asked Mr. Silver. "Very well, Mr. Dowling. Good-night!"

The surly guest grunted a valediction, and walked out.

Shortly afterwards the juniors followed him. They were excited, and, not unnaturally, rather perturbed by the extraordinary occurrences in the library, but they had had a busy day, and felt in need of sleep.

They went to their respective rooms, and were soon fast asleep.

Peace reigned over the Priory.

But the Priory was not destined to remain peaceful all through the night.

It must have been several hours after the events in the library when something happened to bring every sleeper in the house out of his bed.

A scream rang out on the still night air. Then another—a wild, unrestrained howl of sheer terror.

The Fistical Four were out of their beds in a matter of seconds. They appeared simultaneously on the landing outside their respective rooms, clad in dressing-gowns and slippers.

"What was it?" demanded Lovell.

"Goodness knows! Came from one of the bed-rooms! Pater! You're all right?"

Mr. Silver nodded.

"We must find out at once what was wrong. Hallo, hallo—"

The juniors stared. From Mr. Dowling's bed-room had come a groan. As they looked, the door of the room opened and Dowling himself staggered out.

"Help! Help! You are here! Thank Heaven!" he murmured feebly.

Mr. Silver grasped his guest by the arm.

"Mr. Dowling! Was it you, then, who was shouting? Have you suffered from nightmare?"

Mr. Dowling's reply sent a thrill through the gathering. "It was not a nightmare! It was a ghost!"

(So the Ghost of the Priory has appeared! Has it come specially to annoy the Dowling bird? Don't miss next week's ripping story!)

"WINGS" OF THE MOUNTED!

Ahead and all around lies the limitless expanse of the Arctic, but somewhere among the frozen wastes lurk the bad men whom the Flying Policeman has sworn to bring to justice!

By
**ERIC
WOOD.**

CHAPTER 1. Arctic Bound!

"A JOB of work for us, Wings." Hal Rawlings, the observer chum of Jimmy Welford—"Wings" of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police—yelled the news into his phone. The plane was riding through the blue of a near end of winter sky, near the mouth of the Fish River beyond the Arctic Circle. They were going back to Edmonton, having been detailed to investigate rumours of a murder on the Fish. There had been a killing, indeed, but when the flying detachment arrived, the murderer, recognising the Mounted's insignia, had promptly shot himself. He lived long enough, however, to confess, and to express his wonder at the coming of the Mounties. He had killed his man for a gold cache, and, firm in the belief that he was safe, had been waiting for the great thaw to enable him to get out.

It being an old Mounted custom, the chums had their prisoner aboard the plane. They must take back their man, dead or alive. But the news which had just come to Rawlings over the radio altered the matter, for the time being.

"What is it?" Wings asked.

"Message from Edmonton," Hal told him. "Been trying to get us for a couple of days, while we've been down. Says we've got to make for Cape Columbia in Grant Land. Broken off S O S from the Maynard Polar Expedition, whose base is at the Cape. No message received since, although there'd been daily communications beforehand."

"Right-ho!" said Wings Welford, as if he were agreeing to a joy-ride. "We must go down as far as Chesterfield and take in juice. Also, we'll leave the dead man there, and pick him up on the way back. Any details in the message, Hal?"

"None at all," was the reply. "Just an S O S which was broken off when operator had begun to spell out details. 'Mu' were the only letters he got through, and then there was silence."

"Mu," said Wings. "That may mean 'murder.' Let's see, the Expedition's there, ice-locked, in a wooden ship, isn't it?" Rawlings confirmed this. "Engaged on sheer scientific business—not worrying about getting to the Pole," Wings went on. "I say, Hal, they wouldn't send an S O S if it was just a case of one of their crowd committing a murder—killing a colleague, would they?"

"Reckon not," said Hal Rawlings. "Looks to me as if it's something more serious than that. Good job we were up this way, Wings."

"Seems so," Wings agreed, and drove his machine hard, until he taxied to a landing at the fur-trading post at Chesterfield, where was one of the many petrol-dumps put



down in the course of time for the supply of the flying detachment as required in emergency.

The Mounties did some quick tuning up to their machine, refuelled it to capacity, and, having disposed temporarily of their dead prisoner, took the air again.

They were off towards the Pole!

It was some trip. They encountered well-nigh every kind of weather from calm, clean, and crisp, and sunlit, to a howling blizzard which blotted out earth and sky, blinding Wings, and making him rely entirely on his instruments. It was as the plane sped out of the blizzard that the chums realised how near to disaster they had been. Wings had some while before done a good deal of banking and turning in the endeavour to hit a new direction that would bring them out, and it was during this that the amazing thing had happened. Welford had tried for height towards the end, and had wondered why he wasn't getting it. He put it down to the weight of snow and ice in which the machine was smothered. The instruments showed that he wasn't getting height, but was going down. Then, as the plane swung out, Wings knew the reason for it all. They were flying upside down.

Upside down, and with the nose of the machine pointed in a dive for earth, instead of towards the ceiling.

"Goshame!" breathed Wings. "We'd have crashed in a few minutes!" And he put the machine to finish a loop, which brought them up on an even keel. "Sorry, Hal!" he shouted into the phone.

"Don't mensh!" jerked back Rawlings. "But I wondered why my head seemed as if it 'ud bust! Blood pressure!"

"Let's hope we don't meet another blow like that," said Wings; and, fortunately, they didn't.

They swung off the North-West Territory, roared above the litter of islands beyond seventy degrees, skirted Baffin's Island, left Devon Island far behind them, and skimmed low over Ellesmere Island, at the top of which was Cape Columbia, which they reached after a grim non-stop flight.

There were snow and ice everywhere, and, held fast in the ice, they saw a ship. Some distance from it were a number of igloos—snow-houses of the Eskimo type.

Fur-clad men were bunched around the igloos, gazing up at the plane. There were numerous dogs, straining in leash, obviously scared at the thrum of the engine.

"Doesn't look much like trouble down there!" called out Hal Rawlings. "I say, what's happening?" he exclaimed.

Suddenly the gazing figures made wild rushes, and the fliers saw them shoot into cover of the igloos.

"Scared of us?" Wings wondered.

Hal scanned the ice-fields through his glasses; but it was Wings Welford who made the great discovery.

"Look! A plane, Hal!" he barked. "Well east of us! Coming up at a pelt! And she's got skis fitted for landing on the ice."

Hal turned and looked, his glasses enabling him to see even better than Wings had seen. A big monoplane was indeed climbing rapidly, and Hal's glasses revealed to him what he could not mistake—a swivelled machine-gun in the pilot's cockpit.

"It's a fighter, whoever it is," he told Wings. "What can it mean?"

"It means one thing!" snapped Welford. "Those fellows down there heard the other machine, and bunked for cover pronto. What else it means—well, ask me, and I couldn't begin to think, by a jugful. All set for a scrap, in case one's in the offing?"

"Okay with me!" Hal told him.

And Wings, who had been going down, shoved the nose of the plane up again. He banked and turned and went roaring away from the stranger plane.

"Just to see if they'll chase us," he told Rawlings.

They did chase the Service machine, and when he was satisfied at that point Wings swung back again.

As the stranger crossed over the igloos the Mounties saw geyser-like spouts flick up from the ice around, and from the igloos themselves.

"Machine-gun firing down!" snapped Wings. "That's good enough for us, Hal. It's a fight! We'll jump 'em!"

Rawlings grunted back agreement. Like Wings Welford he knew that the Maynard Expedition had no aeroplane. Also, his glasses had enabled him to read the name of the ice-bound vessel, Nor'ard, and the presumption was that the men they had seen were members of the Expedition.

CHAPTER 2.

A Parachute Descent!

FROM the Nor'ard flame and smoke jerked. Rawlings guessed what had happened. The ship was fitted with a harpoon gun, for the Expedition was concerned with whale research work, and had the gun for use in emergency. It was now pointed upwards, and Hal knew it was being fired at the strange plane.

The shooting, however, was ineffectual, and the plane roared towards the Service machine, which was higher up. An effort was being made by the other to climb to at least equal height, but Wings was not having any of that.

Came the moment when Welford had his plane over the other, and Hal Rawlings rapped out a half-drum of bullets,

which bit their raking way into the top wing of the plane as Wings drove full across it. Then Wings banked, turned, rolled, and was driving the length of the machine, he himself spewing bullets from his synchronised gun until it was in the blind spot, while Rawlings sprayed bullets from end to end of the enemy.

Yet the latter held the air, and a man in the rear cockpit was ripping out scores of bullets from his machine. They spat on the under-carriage of the Mounties' machine, drilled holes in it, slashed holes in the wings, and one sang up between Hal's face and the trigger of his gun as he crouched in firing. It sliced a sliver of skin from his nose, which bled as if he had been stabbed with a knife.

"Another inch and I'd have had no nose left," grunted Hal.

He saw the enemy roll out from under, and as it did so both occupants of her, having a free vision, filled the air with hot lead.

Wings Welford gasped. He felt his machine go into a vertical bank, in which it skidded, wobbled wildly, and then nose-dived. Wings fought for control. He heard the sputter of the exhaust, knew he was losing flying speed, and then the engine stopped altogether.

"Petrol feed clogged or bust," he grated; and felt that the end of the Flying Detachment of the Mounted was close at hand. The ice-world was rushing up to meet the plane.

"Your chute—get it!" Wings yelled into the phone. "We're crashing!"

Rawlings had realised this. He slipped his safety belt, and, hating the thought of leaving his chum, but knowing he could do nothing by staying, he threw his legs overside and jumped.

"Thanks be Wings has got plenty of height to play with," he thought, then suddenly gasped as he was pulled up short. He knew then what had happened—he had opened his chute too soon, and it had caught on the tail of the plane. For a moment he hung suspended in mid-air. Then Wings, realising what had happened, rolled the machine over, and Hal dropped clear.

Wings Welford was wrestling with his controls. There had been a danger of the machine going into a nose-dive out of its roll, but by magnificent handling Wings prevented that. Somehow—and he never did know how—he got the machine to a glide instead.

He had seen the stranger sweep away from under when the engine failed. It was as if the fliers were certain the Service plane would crash, and were not inclined to waste any more ammunition on her. But when Wings Welford regained a measure of control over the silent plane the enemy came back, spewing lead as they did so.

They were still beneath Wings, and behind, and the pilot was spraying bullets up and at the tail of the Mounties' machine.

Wings did not dare try any manoeuvring. He had to keep in that glide. Bullets spanged all over his machine, wanged on metal strusses, chipped chunks off the fuselage, flicked flying pieces about Welford—but by a miracle he was not hit, neither was any further damage done to the machine!

Suddenly Wings heard the crash of a gun. He risked a look to his left. Smoke wreathed about the maw of the harpoon gun on the Nor'ard, and he knew that it had fired at the enemy. A quick glance behind and Wings saw that his pursuer was dropping as if out of control.

"Get the blighter, by gee!" howled Welford; and in his excitement almost lost control.

He had to keep a hold on himself and his charge. When he looked round again no more bullets had come plunging into his machine—he saw that the enemy plane was once more under control—and flying away!

A few moments later, and Wings Welford made a soft landing on the ice, and from the igloos men were running towards him, over the half mile or more that separated them.

Wings clambered out of the plane and looked up and around. He saw the belled chute from which dangled the body of his chum. Rawlings also saw him, and wagged a hand. Wings realised that Hal was being carried in the direction taken by the enemy plane, and knew that things might not be too pleasant for him.

"If those guys come down anywhere near him they'll probably go for him," snapped Wings; and jumped back to the machine. Deftly, swiftly, he unshipped Hal's machine-gun and went rushing with it.

As he ran he saw the machine making a landing far ahead of where Hal was floating, much lower now. Welford also saw a figure climb out of the fore cockpit—but not a second one. The man scooped up something and got back into the machine. He did not know it, but was to learn later that the man had got down to secure snow and to

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spend a few minutes in plugging a wound that his companion, the pilot, had received during the scrap, and from which he was in imminent danger of bleeding to death.

But of this Wings was ignorant. He raced on and on, and presently saw Hal bouncing over the ice, finally to flop down with the chute envelope a-smother over him.

Rawlings rolled out from under as Wings came up.

"Say, Wings!" gasped Hal. "I didn't think you'd be able to save the ship that time. Thought I was a gonner, too!"

"Neither did I," Wings admitted. "Get that thing bundled up, Hal—I'm watching that plane. Wonder why it's come down?"

"Dunno!" said Hal, as he began to collect and bundle together the voluminous envelope that had saved his life. When he had finished Wings said to him:

"Feel like having a look-see at that fellow? I've got your gun, and we might be able to do something."

"Okay!" snapped Hal, and, leaving the bundle, trotted off alongside Wings. The going was hard, for they were not shod for ice-travelling. But they didn't have to go far. Before they had been long on the trot they heard the sudden roar of an engine—and then the plane was gliding along the glaring surface.

"Darn it!" growled Wings. "This is a mess! See, he's up, and turning! He'll charge us and spray us with lead."

"And we haven't a hair to cover us," said Hal. "What'll we do?"

"Separate, to begin with!" Wings told him. "Use your revolver if it's any good doing so. I'll use the gun. We'll be stationary targets, it's true, but we'll also be stationary marksmen, which'll be in our favour! Nip!"

Rawlings nipped.

CHAPTER 3.

Maynard Explains!

THE machine came roaring on, low down. A glance over his shoulder told Wings that the pilot seemed a bit bothered as to which to follow of the two running men. Then he suddenly swung round for Welford, who ran as long as he dared towards the distant igloos. Then Wings dropped to his knee and planted the machine-gun. He let it spew its bullets long before the plane was over him—and the effect was to make the pilot swerve to one side.

"Gosh, that got him close!" grated Wings, who went tearing off again. He saw that Rawlings was making rather good progress in the same direction, going in zigzag fashion. "Say, Hal," Wings bawled, "if these guys get either of us the other's got to have 'em! Hey?"

"Sure thing!" came from Rawlings, after whom the pilot was now tearing.

He seemed to have decided that a man without a machine-gun was easier game than one with. But Wings Welford went off at a tangent, covered many yards, planted the gun down, and spattered a stream of lead into the tail of the machine.

To Welford's great surprise the machine suddenly banked, made a half-turn, and went speeding away, without the pilot firing a shot.

"I'll bet his gun's jammed!" snapped Wings—and in that he was right.

He came to his feet and watched the zooming plane until it disappeared—by which time he and Hal Rawlings were surrounded by a bunch of excited men.

"Who's the boss? Where's Mr. Maynard?" Wings demanded, above the clamour.

"Back at the base, sir," someone told him—"dying!"

"Better have the story when we get there!" snapped Welford. "Say, will you people lend a hand to manhandle our machine down to your base?"

Would they!

Over the rough hump-ice the men dragged the great machine. At the base Welford and Rawlings were taken into one of the igloos, where they found a man to whom they were introduced.

"What's happened, Mr. Maynard?" Wings asked; and the amazing story was told.

"Two of my experts," Maynard said weakly—he was wounded in the chest, and seemingly dying—"are Russians, who fled from the revolution. They were, and are, wanted by the Soviet for political crimes. Attempts had been made in the States to kidnap them and get them out of the country, but had failed. It would appear that as the result of the publication of their names as being members of the Expedition, the OGPU, which is Russia's secret police, as you know, determined to try to get them here. That plane appeared, landed, and two men came up. They demanded Alexieff and Radinski, but I naturally refused to

give them up. The fliers did not threaten, but went back to their machine and climbed a little distance. Then they promptly dropped a bomb on the radio station and sprayed us with machine-gun fire. I was struck, and so was Alexieff—he's dead. We naturally dived for cover in the igloos—daren't take shelter on the ship lest the scoundrels bomb it. Our radio man was wounded while he was sending out a message that was broken off."

"It was picked up at Edmonton and relayed to us, sir,"

Wings told him. "That's why we're here."

"Since then," Maynard went on, "we've had to keep to the igloos nearly all the time, because every now and then the machine has come over and spattered bullets at us. Fortunately, the hard snow of the igloos has proved excellent armour against the bullets, and, strangely enough, the fliers haven't dropped any more bombs. The radio's irreparable, by the way. That's all the story."

"A pretty good all!" snapped Welford grimly. "Hal, we'll have a bit of grub and then we'll see what's the matter with the old tub."

What they found when they examined the machine was that the petrol-feed had been broken by a bullet. Having spare parts the chums were able to rectify that, while members of the Expedition maintained a look-out against the possible return of the fliers.

"Now I think we've earned a little sleep," Wings decided when the job was done. "After that"—he shrugged his shoulders—"after that we'll attend to the OGPU's. It ought to be spelt with an H and finish at the G!"

The chums elected to sleep in the plane—and it was a lucky thing for them that they did so.

Also that they kept the motor idling to make a take-off easy, which it would not have been in that gripping cold. Suddenly, men came rushing from the igloos, shouting, screaming. The chums awakened on the instant, and knew the cause of the hubbub. They heard a terrific roar of engines, and, looking out and up, saw a plane coming zooming down towards them at maximum speed.

It was only a matter of seconds before the plane was low down over the already moving Service plane, and a shower as of rain broke down on the latter.

"Pouring petrol over us!" snapped Wings. "Then they'd fire tracer bullets and set us alight, the hounds!"

"And we've got to run for it until the petrol works off!" gritted Rawlings. "Here they come!" he yelled, as the first stream of bullets spat through the air, every fifth one of them, antimony tipped, burning fast and leaving a trail of heavy white smoke.

CHAPTER 4.

Wings Wins Through!

WINGS opened his throttle to the limit and taxied across the rough surface of ice, jumping the machine into the air before the enemy had had time to bank and turn to let fly another spray of bullets after the throwing out of petrol. Now he rolled away from under, and the bullets went wide. Then Welford put the nose of his machine into a wild rushing climb. The way he handled that plane was marvellous as he lured the enemy on, then dodged, then went for the coiling.

"It's trick-flying!" panted Hal Rawlings, who had never seen his chum play such antics. Hal was peering at the enemy plane. "There's only one man in her, Wings!" he bawled into the phone. "Looks as if we killed or wounded the other."

Wings was forcing the machine to capacity—flying away from the enemy, gaining time to allow the petrol to wear off, which would not take long at that wild rush in the crisp cold air.

And all the time he was steadily getting height, while the enemy was also climbing. The pilot of the other machine seemed to realise that his scheme had failed, and that it would be a case of fighting it out with guns. He must get rid of this plane in order to carry on his campaign against the Expedition, as he intended to do. There were twenty men, and he meant to wipe them all out in order to get the two enemies of the Revolution. Also to destroy any witnesses of his crime!

But this newcomer, with the insignia of the Mounted blazoned on its wings, must be first destroyed.

Wings Welford trembled to the ruffian's idea.

"We'll show him!" he muttered, as he brought his ship round in a sharp circle, and then was heading directly towards the enemy. They were on a level now—and it looked, to the horrified spectators below, who had stayed out of their igloos, as if a collision were certain. Both pilots held doggedly on, mopping up the yards between them. Then suddenly Welford went off the route, so blinding

the other pilot whose synchronised gun could not be brought to bear for a brief second or two, in which Hal Rawlings let fly steel-jacketed bullets which raked the other from nose to tail.

Wings banked, rolled, dived, and slid in under the enemy, both his gun and Hal's rat-tatting viciously, bullets tearing holes in the body of the machine. Rolling out from under, Wings enabled Hal to stream in further shots without giving the Russian a chance to return fire. Then the Russian flung his machine into a risky bank, a half-turn that brought his nose round, and his gun spewed bullets into the Service plane.

Wings and the enemy pilot were slinging lead at each other as they rode. Then they had passed, and were even-keeled again, Wings going round in a narrow circle, chasing the enemy.

Climbing as he went he overhauled the other and dived for his tail, knowing the pilot would be "blinded," and would have to go down, or be shot down. The Russian realised this, and tried to roll out; but Wings hung on relentlessly. Every move of the enemy Welford countered—seemed, indeed, to anticipate—and he was driving the fellow down, down, down.

Suddenly the enemy stalled, and Wings only just managed to yank his plane out in time to avoid crashing on to him. Freed, for the time being, the enemy came out of the stall, climbed, turned, and poured lead at Welford. A bullet snarled across Wings' right hand, jerking it off the control, and the plane wobbled, dropped into a dizzy side-spin, and Hal Rawlings stretched over and grabbed the control. He wrenched the machine out of the spin, but she had lost height, and the enemy was above, riding her down now.

Wings wrapped a handkerchief over his reddening hand, took the control again, and flung the machine into a roaring glide that took the other pilot by surprise. Wings got from under and climbed, turned sharply, and—well-nigh brought disaster. His manoeuvre had been so unexpected

that it caught the Russian unawares, and Welford's wing-tip scraped the other's as he was in a bank. The Service machine rocked perilously, but Wings managed to yank it into the level.

The enemy machine, however, was done for. The pilot tried pluckily to bring it out of the spin into which the slight collision had thrown it, but he failed dismally. The plane rolled over on to its back, slipped, and dropped into a tail-spin.

"Gosh, he's a goner!" grated Wings, and then sighed with a brave man's relief over the escape of another. For the enemy pilot came shooting over the side, and a few moments later his parachute-belled out.

While his machine went down, crashing to the ice, burying her nose deep in it, and then bursting into flames.

"It's easy now, Hal!" Wings called into the phone. "We'll just loiter around until he lands, then we'll have him."

They loitered. The pilot parachuted to earth, and as Wings drove the plane towards him, extricated himself from the enveloping folds of his chute. Then the chums saw the fellow standing, waiting for them, hands above his head.

A minute later the Russian was a prisoner. An hour later his comrade, conscious but badly wounded, was at the Expedition base.

"There'll be International complications over this," Wings told Maynard. "I think the best thing to do is for me to take you and one of the prisoners back. Rawlings can stay until I return for him—I'll bring such spare parts as your radio man may want. How'll that suit you?"

"Don't think it's much use taking me back," Maynard said; but Wings insisted, and did so. He also returned, as promised, and in due course got back to Edmonton with Hal and the second prisoner.

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