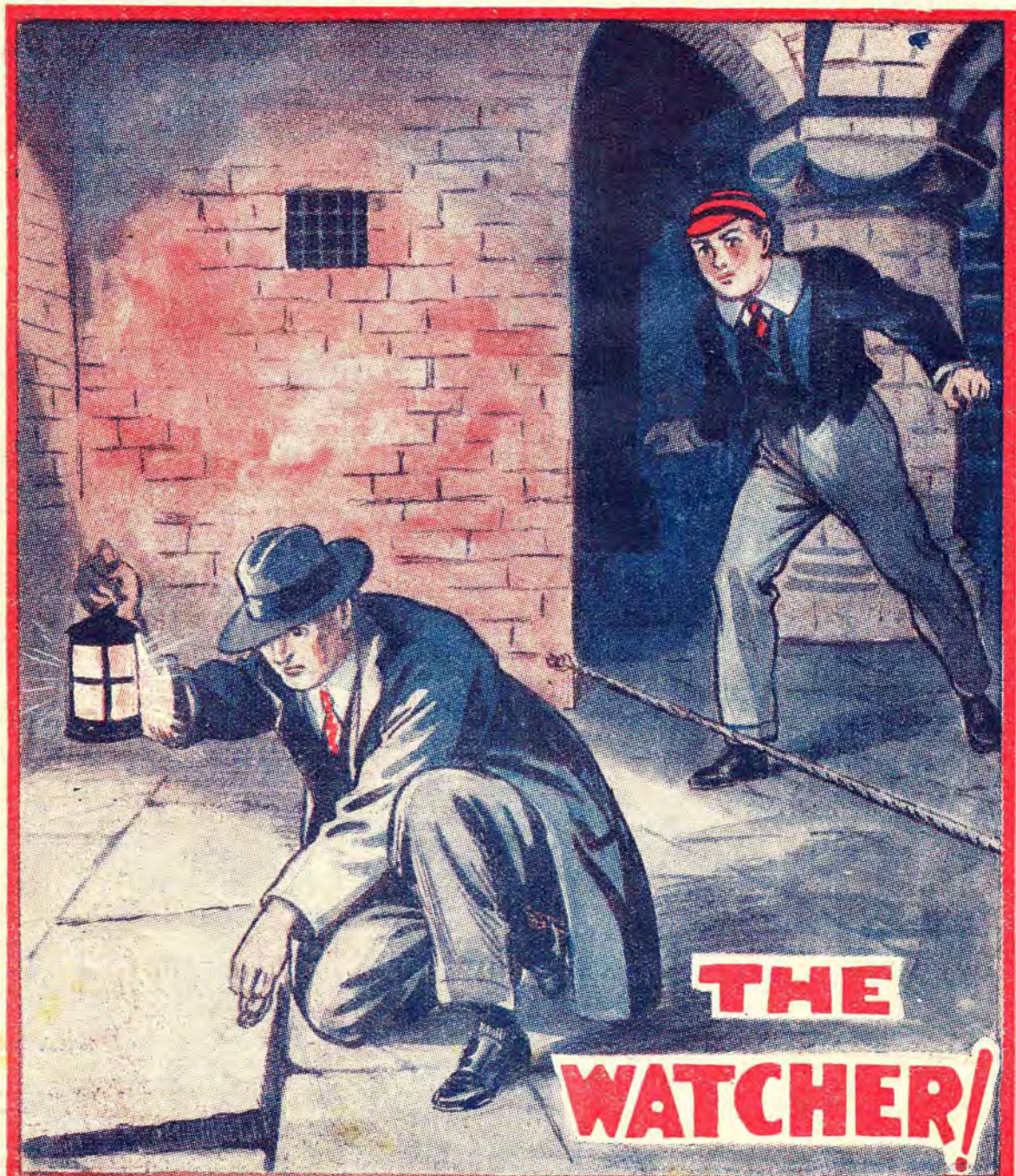


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**THE
WATCHER!**

HERE'S A THRILLING LONG YARN OF MYSTERY AND ADVENTURE

The NOBBLING of



DETECTIVE FIGGINS!

That's how Figgy thinks of himself!
But Tom Merry & Co. think of him as
DEFECTIVE FIGGINS!

CHAPTER 1.

An Unexpected Visitor.

FIGGINS & CO. were sitting in a row on the top bar of the stile in Rylecombe Lane, when Tom Merry came up the lane from the direction of St. Jim's.

It was a cold, but fine, Wednesday afternoon—a half-holiday at St. Jim's. Tom Merry came up the lane with his hands in his pockets and his hat on the back of his curly head, whistling cheerily. He stopped at the stile to turn into the footpath in the wood, and found himself face to face with Figgins & Co.

Figgins & Co. filled up the stile as they sat there in a row, cracking and eating walnuts. They did not offer to move.

"I say, I want to pass, you know," said Tom Merry, looking from one to another of the Co. and waiting for one of them to move.

Figgins looked at him casually.

"Can't be did," he replied, with a shake of the head. "You see, as we belong to the New House, which is the Cock House of St. Jim's, we can't possibly make way for a measly School House bouncer."

"Impossible," said Kerr, the Scottish partner in the Co. "It would be infra dig, you know. Sorry, kid, but you'll have to go round."

"It's only about a mile and a half to go round," Fatty Wynn remarked thoughtfully. "And it will be good exercise for you, Merry. You fellows in the Shell need a little exercise to improve your form on the football field, you know."

Tom Merry smiled. He hadn't any intention of going a mile and a half round to save Figgins & Co. the trouble of shifting off the stile; but the New House trio were evidently determined not to move. The only thing was to move them!

"Now, don't be asses!" said Tom Merry, in a tone of mild remonstrance. "I mean, don't be bigger asses than you can help. Of course, it's no good expecting a New House kid not to be an ass at all. You can't help being what you were born."

Figgins grinned.

"You're not going to make me get off this stile to lick you, Tom Merry," he said. "We're resting here, and we're not going to move. You can talk till you are black in the face, but we're not shifting."

"Then I shall have to shift you."

"Right-ho! We're waiting!"

The New House Co. were ready. Tom Merry looked at them rather dubiously. It would be no easy task to drag them off the stile, especially Figgins, who was in the middle, and whose long legs rested upon the lower step.

"Come on!" said Figgins invitingly. "I'm waiting to be yanked off this stile. I'm ready to be yanked off. In fact, I'm especially eager to be yanked off."

"Look here, Figgy—"

"Shan't! You've no right to expect anybody to look at a chivvy like that. Take it away and bury it."

"I'm coming over that stile."

"You may be, Merry, but my opinion is that you are not," said Figgins. "I may be mistaken, but I don't—Oh! Ow! Ooooooh!"

Tom Merry suddenly charged with outspread hands. Figgins received a sudden push on the chest and went

FEATURING FERRERS LOCKE AND THE CHUMS OF ST. JIM'S!

"NOBBLER JIM!"

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

flying backwards over the stile with his long legs in the air.

He plumped down on the grass on the other side, and in a moment Tom Merry had given Fatty Wynn a push that sent him to join Figgins. Kerr, more quick to move, jumped down into the lane to lay hold of Tom Merry.

But Tom was not to be laid hold of. The step of the stile being clear, he leaped over into the footpath, leaving Kerr on the wrong side of the stile.

Fatty Wynn was gasping like a codfish, and Figgins was just rising to his feet in wrath. Tom Merry gave him a push in passing which sent him sprawling across the fat boy of the New House, and then ran lightly up the footpath, with a merry laugh.

Tom was out of sight in a moment, and Figgins & Co., having picked themselves up and sorted themselves out, glared after him.

"My hat!" said Figgins. "I—I wasn't looking exactly for that, you know."

"Let's chase the beast!" said Kerr. "Come on! We'll run him down and give him a lesson to teach him not to stick his paws on the fellows belonging to the New House."

"Right-ho!" said Figgins, who was always ready for a House row. "Come on!"

"Excuse me," said Fatty Wynn, "I don't feel much inclined for running. I'm hungry, too. I think I'll stroll down to the tuckshop in Rylcombe."

"You greedy biped, you've been scoffing nuts for the last quarter of an hour," said Figgins.

"Yes, I know; but eating nuts always makes me hungry, and—"

"Oh rats! Go and feed, then! You wouldn't be much good in a hard run, anyway."

And Figgins and Kerr started down the footpath at a good pace, leaving Fatty Wynn to walk to the tuckshop in the village.

Figgins and his chum were in deadly earnest. Their dignity had had a fall, as well as themselves, and they meant to impart some instruction of a drastic nature to the hero of the School House.

Tom Merry chuckled as he ran up the footpath through the wood, amid the great trees that were just beginning to lose their grim, wintry blackness.

He was soon aware that the New House juniors were on his track, but he had full confidence in his own powers and little dread of being overtaken.

"I shall have to give Figgins & Co. a wide berth for a time," he murmured. "I was going over to Wayland, but it's no good going there with those bounders sticking to my track. They would run me down on the road. I'll dodge them, and have a stroll round the old castle."

And, having decided this point, Tom Merry left the footpath and plunged into the deep wood, following a track which led up the acclivity to the ruined castle.

The ruins of the ancient castle were a favourite spot for pientes in the summer with the St. Jim's boys, but in the cold weather they were little visited. More than one adventure had the juniors gone through amid those massive relics of a bygone age. On a famous occasion Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of Study No. 6 in the School House had been kidnapped and kept a prisoner there by a gipsy.

Tom Merry came out of the wood close to the huge fragments of masonry which marked the line of the fallen walls, and entered the ruins through an ancient, shattered window.

He looked back towards the wood. There was no sign of Figgins & Co., and he grinned over the conviction that he had thrown them entirely off the track. The next moment he gave a start. There was the sound of a footstep in the ruins.

"My Aunt Matilda! Figgy can't have got ahead of me! Ah, it's not Figgy!"

Tom Merry caught sight of an athletic form standing near the yawning opening that gave admittance to the vaults under the ruined castle. It was the form of a man in an overcoat and a bowler hat, and though the back was

turned to Tom Merry there seemed to him something familiar in the form.

His foot crunched on a stone as he stepped farther into the ruins, and the stranger turned round suddenly, evidently startled by the sound.

Tom Merry uttered an exclamation.

"Ferrers Locke!"

CHAPTER 2.

Figgins & Co. on the Track!

TOM MERRY came quickly towards the stranger as he uttered the name, a look of cordial welcome on his sunny face. Well he knew Ferrers Locke, the famous London detective, whom he had been able to assist in more than one of his cases.

Between the London detective and the schoolboy of St. Jim's there was a firm regard, and Tom was naturally glad to see Ferrers Locke; and he thought instantly flashed into his mind that Locke required his aid again.

But as he ran towards the detective, the latter's expression undeceived him. A cloud had passed over Ferrers Locke's face. He liked Tom Merry, but it was pretty evident that he was not glad to see him at this moment.

Tom Merry halted some paces from the detective, his expression changing.

"Mr. Locke!"

In a moment the detective's face cleared, and he held out his hand cordially to the boy.

Tom took it rather hesitatingly, but Ferrers Locke gave him a hearty grip.

"I won't say I'm glad to see you, Tom!" he exclaimed, "because I'm not—not on your own account, of course, but because I'm keeping my presence in this neighbourhood a secret!"

Tom Merry nodded.

"I understand, sir! I am sorry I came here, but I hadn't the faintest idea—"

"Of course you hadn't," assented the detective. "After all, it matters little, as I know that I can trust you implicitly!"

"I hope so, sir!"

"I am sure of that, Tom! You will mention to no one that you have seen me?"

"Certainly not, sir! But—but—"

"Well," said the detective, with a smile, "what is it, Tom?"

"Can I help you at all, sir?" asked Tom Merry eagerly. "You have found me useful before—you've told me so—and if I could be of use now, I should be glad!"

The detective shook his head.

"Thanks very much for the offer, Tom. I know you mean it. If there was anything you could do, I would accept immediately. But this case is not like the others!"

"Then there is nothing I can do, sir?"

"Nothing, I am sorry to say—except to keep silent as to this meeting!"

"You may rely on me for that, sir!"

Ferrers Locke held out his hand again. Tom Merry shook hands with the detective, and left the ruins. He understood that the detective wished to be left alone there, and that his visit to the neighbourhood of St. Jim's had something to do with the ruined castle. But he asked no questions.

Neither Tom Merry nor the detective was aware that two pairs of eyes were watching them from a thicket that grew in a gap of the old wall.

Figgins and Kerr had not been thrown off the track as Tom Merry believed. They had tracked the hero of the Shell to the old castle, and caught sight of him through the gap while he was talking to the detective.

Figgins recognised Ferrers Locke at once. He dragged Kerr into the cover of a thicket with a hurried hand, and they watched the interview. They were too far off to catch a word that was spoken, but Figgins had little doubt that he could guess what it was about.

"You know that chap Locke," he whispered to Kerr "He's the giddy detective, and he's had Tom Merry to help him in his plans before now. That's where Tom Merry was going when he came by the stile—going to meet Ferrers Locke at this old castle, as he did once before, I remember!"

Kerr nodded assent.

"It looks like it," he agreed.

"They're working up some case again," Figgins said, with a chuckle, "and Tom Merry, in his blessed old innocence, thinks the New House at St. Jim's is going to be left out of it!"

"He's rather mistaken!"

"I should say so," Figgins declared, with emphasis.

"We're taking a hand in this little game. You see, Ferrers Locke, although he has a reputation for being a smart man, has made the mistake of getting Tom Merry to help him instead of us. We don't bear any malice for that, of course, and if we interfere it's simply so that he don't suffer by his bad selection of an assistant!"

"Exactly!" chuckled Kerr.

"We're going to do some giddy tracking ourselves," went on Figgins. "In the end we'll bring about the denouement at the right moment, and astonish everybody! It will put Tom Merry and those School House bounders in their place, and make Ferrers Locke realise that he's got the wrong party to help him!"

"Good!"

"Until we prove to the detective chap that we're quite up to the form of Tom Merry, though, we won't let on to him or anybody that we're looking into the case," said Figgins sagely. "Mum's the word, Kerr—Hullo! Tom Merry's gone. Locke seems to be going to stick up there!"

"Perhaps he—"

"Look! What's he doing?"

"Lighting a lantern!"

Figgins' face grew very excited.

"That means that he's going down into the vaults, Kerr!"

"My hat! We're on the track of something already. But, I say, what about following Tom Merry? He'll get clear!"

"Let him get clear if he likes. Never mind about Tom Merry now. Before we can take part in the case we had better learn what the case is. It will make things easier. Our game is to watch that bounder yonder!"

"Come on, then!"

Figgins and Kerr stole forward farther into the ruins.

Ferrers Locke, having lighted the lantern, had disappeared into the yawning cavity in the flagged floor, where a flight of stone steps led downward into murky gloom.

Figgins and Kerr stopped at the top of the opening and looked in.

From the gloom below came the glimmer of a light.

"Come on," said Figgins resolutely. "Come on! Perhaps he's tracking down some desperate criminal, and may need our help to save him from being murdered. Follow me!"

Figgins stepped quietly on the stair. Kerr followed him with equal caution to the bottom of the steps, and they found themselves in the damp, gloomy vaults.

The light glimmered at some distance.

"Look! He's stopped!" whispered Figgins.

The juniors stopped and watched.

Ferrers Locke had halted in the sixth vault, and dropped upon one knee. He placed the lantern on the ground, and took a knife from his pocket. The glimmer of steel caught the eye of Figgins as the detective opened the largest blade.

"Good heavens!" gasped Figgins. "What's he going to do?"

In his excitement, Figgins ran forward, forgetting that he was shadowing the detective, and that it was important not to make his presence known. He also failed to notice a rope stretched across the vault a few inches from the floor. The detective had placed it there to warn him if anyone tried to come upon him unawares.

The detective sprang to his feet as Figgins caught his foot in the rope and went sprawling.

He caught up the lantern and flashed the light upon Figgins and Kerr, at the same time dropping the knife back into his pocket.

The expression on his face showed that he was angry.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

He rapped out the words sharply.

Figgins gasped for breath.

"I—I thought—"

The detective looked at him more closely in the lantern light.

"I think I know you now. You are Figgins of the New House at St. Jim's?"

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"That's me!" said Figgins. "I—I thought—"

"How came you here?"

"Oh, we—we came, you know," said Figgins. "I—I saw you put down the lantern and open that knife, and I wondered what—"

The detective stared at him, and then, to Figgins' amazement, burst into a hearty laugh that rang in peal on peal, of echoing through the deep vaults.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins looked at Kerr, and Kerr looked at Figgins.

The chief of the New House juniors turned very red.

"You see, sir, I—that is—we—you—we—" said Figgins haltingly.

"Hem! Do I strike you, then, as a lunatic or an imbecile?"

"Oh, no, sir! I thought—that is to say—I didn't think—"

"No, I don't think you could have, Figgins."

"The fact is, sir, I didn't stop to think," said Figgins.

"I was startled, and—and that's how it was, sir. Now I find it's all right, I'll buzz off. Come on, Kerr!"

"But I wish to know—"

But Figgins and Kerr were off. Figgins pretended not to hear the detective, and the New House chums scrambled up the winding stone stairs and escaped into the ruins again.

Ferrers Locke was left alone in the vaults.

"He was going to ask questions as to how we came in the vault," chuckled Figgins, as they left the ruined castle by the path through the wood. "I think I avoided it rather diplomatically. Of course, we couldn't tell him lies, and we didn't want to give it away that we're on to the little game. It was best to hook it."

"He may suspect something, though," said Kerr doubtfully.

"Well, that can't be helped. We must be awfully careful, that's all. Hullo! Here's Fatty!"

Fatty Wynn was strolling through the wood as Figgins and Kerr came out into the footpath. He had a smear of jam on his plump cheek and a satisfied smile all over his visage, which showed that the visit to the tuckshop had been duly paid.

"Hullo! Filled up to the chin?" asked Figgins.

"I've had a little feed," said Fatty. "Not much, as money is tight. Only half a dozen of Mother Murphy's little pork-pies, and a pudding, and a cake, and a dozen jam-tarts. Are you coming back to the school? I shall be ready for tea when we get in. I was coming to look for you."

Fatty Wynn glanced at Figgins curiously.

"What's happened? You look as if something had."

"We're on the track," said Figgins mysteriously.

"You're what?" asked the puzzled Fatty.

"You don't deserve to be taken into the thing," said Figgins, "as you spent the time in gorging instead of joining in. But I suppose you'll expect it."

"Yes, rather," said Fatty Wynn emphatically. "If you think you're going to leave me out of anything that concerns the Co., Figgins—"

"Oh, keep your wool on, and I'll explain!"

Fatty Wynn listened with intense interest while Figgins explained.

"It's as plain as anything," he said, when the New House leader had finished. "Ferrers Locke is down here to look for some fearful criminal, and he's looking for him in the vaults under the old castle. Tom Merry is helping him as he was before. He got that knife out to defend himself if he was attacked."

"But he was kneeling, and had put the lantern down," said Kerr.

"Perhaps he was going to sharpen the knife on a stone."

"Well, that's possible. Anyway, I know what we're going to do," said Figgins. "We're going to watch Ferrers Locke, and find out the game. Then at the psychological moment—"

"At the what?" demanded the Co. together.

"The psychological moment," said Figgins importantly—"in the nick of time, you know—we shall chip in and catch the criminal—if there is one—or find out the secret—if there is a secret—or recover the stolen jewels—if there are any. In short, we shall do the trick, whatever it is, and cover ourselves with glory."

And, with this happy prospect in view, Figgins & Co. strolled homeward towards St. Jim's in the growing dusk of the winter afternoon.

Meanwhile, let us take a glance at Ferrers Locke, left alone in the dark vaults beneath the ruins of the old castle.

After satisfying himself that Figgins and Kerr had

really gone, Ferrers Locke returned to the spot where he had been interrupted.

He placed the lantern on the ground again, and took out the knife. Then he began carefully to scrape the earth away from a rusty iron ring deeply set in one of the huge flagstones that floored the vault. The cavity in which the ring was embedded was filled to a level with dirt, so that the ring would have escaped any but the most careful search.

The ring once cleared, Ferrers Locke caught it in his hand, and, with exertion of his great strength, pulled up the stone to which it was attached.

He flashed the lantern into the opening revealed below. In the darkness the dim outline of a flight of stone steps was revealed.

The detective's eyes flashed.

Taking the lantern in his right hand he stepped into the opening and descended the stone stair. It led into a small

CHAPTER 3.

On the Football Field!

"TOM!"

Tom Merry heard his name called as he came into the gates of St. Jim's, after the excursion to the old castle, and the unexpected meeting with Ferrers Locke.

Manners and Lowther, his chums of the Shell, were coming towards him.

"Hallo!" said Tom Merry. "Anything on?"

"Yes, rather! Come and look at this chap Bullivant."

"Whom may he happen to be?" asked Tom Merry carelessly, as he walked with his chums towards the football ground.

"He's the new groundsman," said Lowther. "Kildare discovered that he could play footer, and asked him to play in a practice match with the First Eleven."



Tom Merry suddenly charged with outspread hands, and catching Figgins full on the chest, sent him flying off the stile. Another hefty push sent Fatty Wynn to join his leader on the ground!

chamber, not more than twenty feet in circumference, dark and damp and slimy.

The detective's keen eyes examined the slimy stone beneath his tread. His eyes sparkled as though he had found something of which he was in search.

He flashed the light round and round the cell. It had doubtless been used as a prison cell in ancient times, for there was a rusty iron staple in the wall with a fragment of chain still attached to it. It might have served, too, as a hiding-place for hunted fugitives in troublous days.

The detective examined it thoroughly, and a disappointed look came over his face.

After ten minutes he reascended the stairs, and closed the flagstone down. Then he flattened down the ring in its cavity, and covered it with earth to restore its former appearance, so that it appeared not to have been disturbed.

Then, with slow steps and a thoughtful brow, he quitted the vaults, and emerged into the ruins.

"Oh, yes, I remember noticing him on the ground! Can he play?"

"Can he?" exclaimed Manners. "Just look!"

The chums of the Shell found it rather difficult to get a front view. There was a big crowd round the ropes on the Sixth Form ground. It was not usual for such an honour to be accorded to a practice match of the First Eleven, and Tom Merry understood that something unusual was going forward.

The First Eleven of St. Jim's was picked wholly from the Sixth and Fifth Forms, though on a memorable occasion a Shell boy—Tom Merry—had played in it. Kildare was the captain, and Monteith, the head prefect of the New House, was his right-hand man. Darrell, Rushden, Drake, Baker, and the most athletic fellows in the Upper Forms were in the team. It was a fine Eleven, and well upheld the honour of St. Jim's at home and abroad.

A big match was coming off shortly, and Kildare was

endeavouring to get his team into first-class form, and he was now playing them against the strongest scratch eleven he could make up.

Mr. Railton, the Housemaster of the School House, had consented to captain the scratch eleven, which consisted of the rest of the members belonging to the Sixth with one exception, to strengthen it.

The exception was Bullivant, the new groundsman, whose abilities in the football field had come to light.

Kildare, anxious to make the game as hard as possible for the First Eleven, had asked Bullivant to play in Mr. Railton's team, and the new groundsman was proceeding to astonish the natives.

Kildare's team were in red shirts, and Mr. Railton's in blue. There was a wild mixture of blue and red on the half-way line as the Terrible Three came up. There was a roar from the crowd.

"He's off!"

"Bravo, Bullivant!"

"Good for you!"

Tom Merry caught a glimpse of a short but active and athletic figure tearing up the field, dribbling the ball in masterly style. He pushed forward to get a better view, and his elbow came into the aristocratic ribs of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of the School House.

D'Arcy turned an icy look on the hero or the Shell.

"You pushed me, Tom Mewwy!"

"Did I?" said Tom. "Well, Gussy, why don't you take the hint and get out of the way?"

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the kind."

"But I want to see the game."

"Yes, wathah, and so do I! Go somewhere else, Tom Mewwy, and don't bothah me! You are a wuff boundah, and I wefuse to get out of the way."

And D'Arcy turned his head away, adjusted his eyeglass, and watched the game.

There was a sudden roar.

"Goal!"

Bullivant, with halves and backs all round him, and the goalkeeper watching him like a cat, had kicked for goal and scored.

"That's the third goal to Bully!" said Jack Blake, looking round. "That chap plays football like a cherub."

"Ever seen a cherub play football?" asked Monty Lowther.

"Oh, rats! You've missed something, Tom Merry, by not seeing this match. It's nearly over now—only another ten minutes. I'll wager that groundsman chap has seen a lot of professional football in his time. He plays a splendid game."

"Make room for a chap to see," said Tom Merry. "Shift, you bounders!"

"I wefuse to shift, for one!" said Arthur Augustus. "I shall—Ow! You have twodden on my toe, Lowthah!"

"Dear me!" said Lowther. "That's bad!"

"Ow! You have twodden on my othah toe, Mannahs!"

"Horrid!" said Manners. "What I don't see is why you put your toes under my feet. That's not the proper place for your toes!"

"You wotah! I believe you did it on purpose! If I weally was sure I should give you a feathul thwashin'!"

"Now, Gussy," said Tom Merry, "don't get ferocious, but go and take a run!"

"I wefuse to take a run!"

"Oh, make room for those Shell kids!" said Blake. "You're taking up room enough for two, Gussy."

"I wefuse to make woom! It is a question of dig with me. Pway do not push me in that wude mannah, Hewwies!"

"Rats! Make room, then!"

"I wefuse! I distinctly wefuse!"

But a shout was going up over a fresh piece of good play, and the Terrible Three, losing patience, shifted Arthur Augustus and crowded to the front. Bullivant was away with the ball again. The First Eleven seemed unable to handle him; but this time Rushden, in goal, saved with great skill, and the attack was baffled.

Tom Merry looked curiously at the new footballer.

Bullivant, the groundsman, could not be called good-looking. He had a square jaw and small, deep-set eyes, with a shifty expression in them. But there was no doubt that he could play Soccer. He was far and away the finest forward on either side—ahead even of Mr. Railton.

"Jolly good!" said Tom Merry. "That's real footer, and it's hard practice for the First. They won't have to face players like that when they meet Redclyffe. But I say, Bullivant is a bit rough, isn't he?"

He glanced at Darrell, who had been sent spinning by a rough charge from the groundsman. On a League football field nothing would have been thought of the charge, but it was a little out of place on the St. Jim's ground. Darrell

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was not the fellow to complain, however, though he looked rather dazed when he got on his feet again.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, looking over Tom Merry's shoulder in his interest in the game, forgetting his resentment against the Terrible Three. "I wegard him as a wuff bwute, you know. I didn't like him when I first saw him, but I admit that he can play footer, and he can certainly wun like anything!"

"He's used to a harder and tougher game than we play here," said Blake. "He's above the weight of a schoolboy team, and he doesn't hold himself in as Mr. Railton does. But he plays jolly good footer. Bravo!"

The juniors cheered and clapped as Bullivant was seen to break away through the First and streak like lightning for goal.

Rushden did his best, but many a League footballer would have failed to stop the rapid shot that came in for a corner of the net. Rushden missed it by inches, and there was a roar.

"Goal!"

The match was finishing. The scratch match, which had been looked upon as a walk-over for the First Eleven, ended in a defeat for them by five goals to two, and of the five four had been kicked by the groundsman.

When the teams, pretty hot and flustered from a hard and fast game, came off the field, Bullivant was at once surrounded by a crowd of admirers.

Mr. Railton went into the pavilion with Kildare.

"That chap plays up wonderfully well, sir," the captain of St. Jim's remarked.

Mr. Railton nodded.

"Wonderfully! I should advise you to call upon him often in practice matches. But he must be told to be a little less rough. He certainly plays splendidly."

That was the opinion of all at St. Jim's.

The Terrible Three were discussing the groundsman and his fine play as they walked away from the football ground. It was growing dusky in the quadrangle as Figgins & Co. came in at the gate and nearly ran into Tom Merry and his chums.

"Hallo, Figgy!" said Tom cheerily. "How long did you look for me?"

"Oh, we just looked," said Figgins evasively. "You had a run for it, though."

"Not much of a run. You New House bounders couldn't catch a lame dog."

Figgins & Co. looked inclined to renew the war on the spot. But Fatty Wynn pulled Figgins by the arm.

"Don't start rowing now, Figgy! It's tea-time, and there's bacon and eggs to cook in the study. Come on, and don't waste time."

"Right-ho!" said Figgins. "We'll make you open your eyes soon, Tom Merry, and you'll see that the New House will come in first."

And Figgins & Co. walked disdainfully away, with their noses in the air.

Tom Merry cast a puzzled glance after them. He did not quite "catch on" to Figgins' last remark.

"What was Figgy driving at, Tom?" asked Lowther curiously.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"Blessed if I know! He's mighty mysterious about something, but I don't get on to it. Perhaps he was talking out of his hat."

"Well, come in!" said Manners. "There's kippers for tea, and I'm hungry."

And the Terrible Three went in, and were soon busily engaged in getting tea, prepared to enjoy it after the keen winter afternoon spent in the open air.

CHAPTER 4.

The Fourth Form Alliance.

FIGGINS & CO. went into the New House. There was a shade of thought on the brow of the great Figgins, and he did not reply to the remarks made by the Co. on the subject of tea. Fatty Wynn was surprised. Tea was a most important subject, and here was Figgins not taking the least interest in it.

"I say, Figgy!" he bawled in his leader's ear.

Figgins started out of a brown study.

"Eh? Have you been talking? What is it?"

"I asked you if it would n to a dozen tarts from the shop. We've got bacon and eggs, but we shall want something to finish with. You could run and get something from Dame Taggles while I'm doing the cooking."

"Certainly," said Figgins. "I was thinking—"

"So was I—about tea."

"Yes; but I was thinking about the matter we have

In hand. You see, Ferrers Locke is down here for some special purpose connected with the ruined castle. Tom Merry isn't likely to let us into the secret; he won't let Blake into it, either. Now, Blake is just the fellow to help us."

"We don't want any School House rotters in it!" said Kerr.

"Well, no; but Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy are as much up against the Terrible Three as we are," argued Figgins. "We don't really want to make a House row of it, but to take down those bounders in the Shell. Blake and his lot are in the Fourth, the same as we are, and it's the Fourth against the Shell. See?"

"Yes, I see; but how can Blake help us?"

"Why, in the first place, D'Arcy was shut up in the old castle once, and knows a lot about the place; then Blake, being in the School House, will be able to keep an eye on Tom Merry, and see where he goes, which, of course, we couldn't do, being in a different House."

"There's something in that," said Kerr thoughtfully; "only, you know those School House rotters. If we let them into it, they'll take the lead."

"I know; but we'll clearly have it understood from the first that this is a thing run by Figgins & Co., and if they won't agree, they can keep out of it. They can come into the Co. or not, as they like. See?"

"Well, that's not a bad idea! What do you think, Fatty?"

"Oh, any old thing will do for me, as long as you let us have tea!" said Fatty Wynn, almost tearfully. "Look here! If you're going to jaw, I'm going to cook the bacon and eggs."

"Wait a minute!" said Figgins. "We'd better have Blake and his lot over to tea, I think, and so we'll have some sausages as well, and some fried spuds. You cut over to the School House, Kerr, and ask them, and I'll go to the tuckshop. You can go and start the cooking if you like, Fatty."

"Well," said Blake, as he started on a plate crammed with bacon, sausage, and fried eggs, half an hour later, "I must say that you chaps do things well sometimes in this study. You are doing us really fine, Figgins, old boy."

"Glad you like the feed," said Figgins modestly.

"Yaas, wathah! Especially as it comes at such a time, you know!" D'Arcy remarked.

"By the way," said Figgins, handing round the cups of tea, "I had a little matter to discuss with you chaps, and thought this would be a good opportunity."

"Discuss away, old fellow," said Blake. "I'll discuss the tommy!"

"Are you willing to join us in a little game up against the Terrible Three?"

"Yes, rather. They've been altogether too cheeky lately," said Blake. "Tom Merry called me a kid to-day. Me! He's two months and seven days older than I am, but he looks younger. He puts on that rot because he's in the Shell, you know. I've been thinking that we ought to stop rowing for a bit and put those Shell bounders in their place, for the honour of the Fourth Form."

"Hear, hear!" said Herries.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "Do you know, Mannahs had the astoundin' cheek to tread on my foot to-day, and Lowthah twod on the othah. It was not an accident, you know, but they did it on purpose, the howwid beasts. It not only considerably hurt my toes, but it has left distinct twaces of scowatches on my shoes. I weally think it is high time those three wascals were put in their place, deah boys!"

"Good!" grinned Figgins. "I see you're all of a mind on the subject. The question is, are you willing to join the Co.—for this wheeze, of course—and follow my lead?"

"Oh, I thought you were going to ask me to take the command, Figgy!" Blake remarked, in a casual way.

"Did you?" said Figgy. "Quite a mistake. It's the other way round, that's the only difference. What do you say?"

"I weally don't see how we could follow the lead of a New House Boundah without an infwaction of our dig!" D'Arcy remarked thoughtfully.

"That's so," said Blake. "Tell us the wheeze, Figgy, and we'll show you how to work it. You ought to be satisfied with that."

"Thank you for nothing," said Figgins. "We'll keep it to ourselves. 'Nother cup of tea?"

"Thanks. But I say, about that wheeze—"

"Oh, never mind that! We can manage it alone."

"Now, don't be obstinate, Figgy. What's the good of letting a good wheeze go to the dogs-for want of a guiding hand—"

"Try these tarts; they're ripping!"

"Thanks, I will. If you like to let me have that wheeze, I—"

"Pass along your cup, D'Arcy!"

"Yaas, wathah, deah boy!"

"Well," said Blake, looking round, "I never came across such an obstinate bounder as Figgins; but if the mountain won't come to his Whiskers, his Whiskers must go to the mountain. Figgy, old man, I accept the terms."

"You'll follow the Co.?" asked Figgins, highly delighted.

"Yes, for this once only, mind! When we've pulled the Terrible Three off their perch, we are off again—that's understood."

"Right-ho, that's agreed! Positively for one occasion only!" grinned Figgins. "Herries and D'Arcy say the same?"

"Right-ho!" said Herries, with his mouth full of jam-tart.

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy, setting down his teacup. "I am willin' to follow Figgins' lead, if necessary, to bwing those boundahs to their senses, you know. Lowthah and Mannahs twod on my feet—"

"And now, what's the wheeze?" demanded Blake.

"You are intewwuptin' me, Blake."

"Well, leave off talking, then," said Blake, "that's simple enough."

"I wese to leave off talkin'. I was sayin' that Lowthah and Mannahs twod on my feet—"

"I'll tread on your head if you don't shut up. Now, Figgins, if you haven't been gassing, expound that wheeze, old son."

Figgins forthwith expounded. At the name of Ferrers Locke the chums of Study No. 6 were all keen attention. They listened with the keenest interest to the recital of the adventure in the ruined castle.

"Well, what do you think?" said Figgins, in conclusion.

"Plain as your face," said Blake. "I mean, nearly as plain, nothing could be quite so!"

"Oh, get on, and don't rot!"

"Well, it's perfectly plain that Ferrers Locke is down here for something or other, and that Tom Merry is in the little game, as usual," said Blake. "The horrid bounder hasn't said a word about it to me. He's going to play it on his little lonesome—I don't think! We're going to join in."

"Yaas, wathah! It seems to me like Tom Mewwy's feahful cheek to think of wunnin' an affair like this without our help, you know!"

"That's the idea!" said Figgins. "It's a Fourth Form alliance to put those Shell bounders in their place. I'm the leader, that's agreed, and you're the Co. You'll have to do the scouting business, and keep an eye on Tom Merry's movements. You can easily do that, being in the School House. Then you can keep me informed."

"Good! We'll put our heads together over this, and come out strong in the denouement," said Blake, with a chuckle. "We'll teach Tom Merry that he's not quite so horrid sharp as he thinks he is, and open Ferrers Locke's eyes to the fact that he's employing the wrong assistant. Locke is a decent fellow, and I shall be glad to do him a good turn by bringing this affair to a successful conclusion for him."

So it was agreed. Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy stayed in Figgins' study after tea for a long time, talking over the plan of campaign, and did not leave till there was barely time left to get the evening's preparation done.

Figgins & Co. escorted them down to the door, and the ancient rivals parted on the most affectionate terms.

(Continued on the next page.)



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CHAPTER 5.

A Surprise in the Fog!

"KEEP alongside, Gussy, or we shall lose you," said Blake.

It was thick mist in the quadrangle. The afternoon had been fine, but a mist had settled over the countryside after dusk, and when the chums of Study No. 6 left the New House to return to their own quarters, they found it impossible to see more than a quarter of a yard before their noses.

Blake promptly passed his arm through that of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Keep close, kid! You have a perfect genius for getting lost in the fog, and I don't want to have to hunt round the quad for you the rest of the night and fish you out of a drain. Beastly thick, isn't it?"

"Thick as your head," said Herries.

"Yaas, wathah! Pway welease my arm, Blake! I object to bein led about as if I was a helpless person. Pway welease me!"

"Rats! I'm not going to get you mislaid in this fog!"

"I wepeat that I object—"

"And I repeat that I don't care a rap—"

D'Arcy jerked his arm away and scuttled off into the mist.

"Follow me, deah boys," he called out. "I will show you the way. You will pwobably get lost if you lose sight of me!"

"After the silly image!" said Blake. "He'll get himself lost somewhere!"

The juniors hurried after D'Arcy.

But the swell of St. Jim's had disappeared into the thick mist, and they had almost immediately lost sight of him. Blake plunged on, and caught sight of a moving form in the mist. He ran towards it and grasped it by the shoulder.

"Got you at last!"

There was a startled cry in the fog. A clenched fist, as hard as iron came crashing into Blake's face, and he staggered back and measured his length on the ground. The dim form vanished in the fog.

Blake gave an involuntary cry. Herries nearly stumbled over him, but just saved himself. He stooped, and helped Blake to his feet. Blake was looking dazed.

"What was it?" exclaimed Herries in amazement. "I didn't see!"

"Neither did I!" gasped Blake. "I caught hold of somebody—I thought it was Gussy—and he gave me a fearful one on the nose. Phew! It wasn't Gussy—it was a man, and a jolly strong man to hit out like that!"

Herries uttered an exclamation of amazement.

"But whom could it have been? Why should he hit you?"

"Blessed if I know," said Blake ruefully. "I suppose I startled him. But it was a beastly, cowardly thing to do. Lend me your handkerchief. My nose is bleeding!"

Blake mopped the flowing "claret" from his nose. He was hurt, and he was amazed. Herries was staring at him in open-mouthed astonishment.

Who was the individual who had been dimly seen in the fog in the quadrangle, and who had struck so savage a blow when Blake tapped him on the shoulder?

"It must have been somebody belonging to the school!" said Blake, sniffing. His nose was paining considerably. "I'd like to know whom, unless—my word!—unless it was a giddy burglar!"

Herries gave a start.

"I shouldn't wonder, Blake! A thief might take the opportunity of sneaking in the school in the fog, and then your tapping him on the shoulder—"

"It would naturally startle him," chuckled Blake. "He might think for the moment that it was a policeman!"

"I say, we ought to look into it, you know! Dr. Holmes and his wife are away this evening, and it would be a good chance for a burglar to burgle the Head's house!"

"A bit early in the evening for a burglar. I should think!" Blake said thoughtfully. "But I think it's quite possible some rascal has dodged into the school in the fog, and is looking round for anything he can pick up. We'll speak to Kildare about it!"

They groped their way to the School House through the mist. D'Arcy was not to be seen. Blake and Herries were quickly in the School House, and they went straight to Kildare's study, where the captain of St. Jim's was at work. Kildare looked up in surprise at Blake, who was holding the crimson handkerchief to his nose.

"Been in the wars, Kildare," said Blake, with a grin. "Thought I'd tell you about it, and see what you think, if you've got a minute to spare!"

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"Go on," said the captain of St. Jim's, laying down his pen.

Blake explained the occurrence in the quadrangle. The captain of the school looked very thoughtful.

"You have no idea as to whom it was?" he asked.

"Not a bit! I thought it might be some rascal lurking round in the fog to steal something, you know, and he hit out when I touched him on the shoulder!"

"It is quite possible, Blake! I am glad you told me. I will speak to Mr. Railton about it," said Kildare.

"Right-ho, Kildare! We leave it in your hands!" said Blake. "If you need any advice or good counsel, you've only got to come along to Study No. 6. Come on, Herries!"

And the Fourth Formers went to their own quarters.

They found Arthur Augustus there in a very sad state. The swell of the School House had just come in, and he was covered from head to foot with mud.

Blake and Herries stared at him.

"My hat!" ejaculated Blake. "Have you started as a mud-collector in your old age, Gussy? Where did you get all that from?"

"It is weally your fault, Blake, and I'm quite cwoiss!"

"How is it my fault, image?"

"If you had not insisted upon showing me the way, I should not have wun off! I caught my beastlay foot in somethin', you know, and flopped down in a beastlay wotten puddle, and you see the results!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Yes, I see it! Lovely!"

"Pway don't wegard it as a laughin' mattah! My clothes are in a shockin' state, and I am vewy cwoiss! I must go and clean myself immediately, and I shall pwobably not have time to do my pwepawation!"

"Then you'll have to find time to-morrow to do a hundred lines, I expect," chuckled Blake. "That will instruct you not to be such an obstinate ass, Gussy! Go and scrape yourself clean. Hallo, Tom Merry! What are you doing with that face?"

Tom Merry put his head into Study No. 6.

"I've heard you've been in the wars," he remarked. "You've got a lovely nose on you, Blake. How did it happen?"

"That's my business," said Blake loftily. "I don't intend to take any cheeky kids out of the Shell into my confidence, Tom Merry."

The hero of the Shell stared at him.

"Well, there's no very deadly important secret about getting a buff on the nose, I suppose," he remarked.

"There may not be," said Blake, "and again there may be. I'm not giving anything away! I may be on the track of a thrilling mystery, and I may not be. You'll see!"

"I can see that you're off your rocker!" said Tom Merry. Blake smiled disdainfully.

"Perhaps you'll see something else if you live long enough!" he said, with a sniff of superiority. "Don't bother me now, Tom Merry. I'm busy, and I can't be bothered with troublesome young children!"

"Well, of all the giddy lunatics—"

"Oh, travel!" said Blake.

Tom Merry travelled.

Still in a state of wonder, he sought out Manners and Lowther.

"There's something on in Study No. 6," he said. "Blake has got a buff on the nose, and Gussy is smothered with mud, and they're deadly serious about it. We shall have to keep an eye on these youngsters!"

Meanwhile, Kildare had gone to speak to Mr. Railton. The Housemaster listened with great interest to his report of what had happened to Blake in the misty quadrangle.

"If you think there is likely to be anything in the idea of a burglary, sir," the captain of St. Jim's suggested, "we could have a watch kept to-night!"

Mr. Railton nodded decidedly.

"I think it is quite probable, Kildare. You may not be aware that there have been four or five burglaries in the neighbourhood during the past fortnight, each carried out with such consummate skill that the police have absolutely failed to find a trace of the perpetrator!"

"I have heard something of that, sir!"

"The thief has carried off a great quantity of valuable property; especially securities and plate," said the Housemaster. "St. Jim's is just the place he might visit. The school plate is worth considerably over two thousand pounds, and it is well-known. It would be a good prize for a burglar. That the rascal is still in the neighbourhood seems almost certain, though the police have failed to find a trace of him. I shall certainly remain up to-night, Kildare, in case of accidents!"

CHAPTER 6.
An Alarm in the Night!

CRASH!

Tom Merry started from his sleep.

Crash!

It was night—black, foggy night—at St. Jim's. Twelve had boomed from the clock-tower, and the vast buildings were plunged in darkness. Tom Merry was sleeping soundly, dreaming that he was kicking goals by the score, when the sudden, terrific crash rang through the silence of the night, and startled him from his slumber.

"What—what was that?"

Tom Merry started up in bed.

"No, it isn't!" howled Tom Merry. "It's me! I mean—I'm Tom Merry!"

"What did you run into me for, then, fathead?"

"What were you in the way for, imbecile?"

"Who are you calling a——"

"I say, let's get on!" exclaimed Lowther, who was at Tom Merry's heels. "It must be a burglar! And I heard Mr. Railton's voice calling."

"Right-ho!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Come on!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The juniors dashed on. They raced along the corridor, which gave access to a passage leading into the hall of the Head's house.



"OW!" There was a startled cry in the fog as a clenched fist caught Blake full in the face and sent him staggering across the quad!

Several other fellows had been awakened at the same time, and there was a buzz of startled voices in the Shell dormitory.

Tom Merry sprang out of bed and dived into his trousers. In a twinkling he was out of the dormitory.

There was a shouting in the darkness, and a jingling as of falling glass. A light flashed in the gloom.

The disturbance proceeded from Dr. Holmes' house; Tom Merry could hear that. He dashed down the stairs, and made for the broad corridor which led into the Head's quarters.

There was a yell in the darkness as he ran into a dim form.

"Collar him, Herries! It's a burglar!"

It was the voice of Jack Blake.

The chums of the Fourth had evidently been awakened at the same time, and had come out of the Fourth Form dormitory in time to run into Tom Merry in the dark.

Lights flared before their eyes, and they saw the door wide open, and Mr. Railton straining his eyes into the thick fog. The Housemaster was fully dressed.

There was a stained glass window on either side of the door, and one of these was smashed through the centre. As Tom Merry looked at it, two or three loosened fragments of glass tinkled down upon the floor.

"My hat!" gasped Blake. "I was right. It was a giddy burglar! See! Railton spotted him, and he bashed through the window to escape."

"Looks like it," said Tom Merry. "Must have had a nerve."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"What did you know about it, Blake? You said——"

"Never mind what I said," said Blake mysteriously. "I know what I know. I'm not taking kids out of the Shell

into my confidence, as I said before. You know how to keep your own little secrets."

Tom Merry stared at him.

"I haven't any little secret. What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing!" said Blake loftily. "Only there's nothing to be got out of me, that's all."

Mr. Railton turned his head at the sound of voices. The Housemaster had evidently been considering the advisability of pursuing the escaped burglar; but he realised that it would be useless in a thick fog, where he could hardly see his hand before his eyes.

He closed the door.

The juniors had been first upon the scene, but others were quickly arriving. Kildare came up at a run, half-dressed, with a cricket-stump in his hand. Dr. Holmes came downstairs in dressing-gown and slippers. He stared at the lights, the broken window, and the crowd of boys in amazement. Then he understood.

"Ah, you were right, Mr. Railton! There has been an attempt—"

"Yes, sir," said the Housemaster quietly. "I was on the watch in the room, and the burglar entered from the door. How he came into the House without making a sound I cannot understand. He went straight towards the safe, which proves that he knew exactly where to look for the valuables. Then I sprang upon him, but—"

"But he escaped you."

"I am sorry to say he did. He was a powerful fellow, and I hardly expected to meet a man who was more than my match, as I am not a weakling. But he threw me off, and ran, and went through the window with a single spring, carrying all before him."

"Good heavens!"

"I am sorry he has escaped. And it is useless to hunt for him in the fog; but the plate is safe, that is one comfort."

"One comfort!" echoed the Head. "It is everything! I cannot say how thankful I am, Mr. Railton. I owe more than I can say to you, and to this junior, who was the first to put us on our guard."

And he patted Blake's shoulder.

The junior turned scarlet with pleasure, especially as he saw the eyes of the Terrible Three turned upon him in wonder and amazement.

"Go back to bed now, boys," said Dr. Holmes. "I do not think anything is likely to be seen of the scoundrel again to-night; but a watch shall be kept."

The juniors returned to their quarters.

Tom Merry tapped Blake on the shoulder.

"I say, Blake, what was the Head driving at? What had you to do with it?"

Twenty clamorous voices seconded Tom Merry's inquiry, and Blake could not very well refuse information. And, besides, he was willing to take all the glory he could get.

He explained about the adventure in the misty quad, and about his own remarkable sagacity in putting the Housemaster on his guard.

"Well done!" said Tom Merry. "Pity one of us wasn't in your place."

"Why?" demanded Blake.

"Oh, we should have captured the burglar and made an example of him! But I dare say you did as well as a kid in the Fourth Form could be expected to do."

"If you want a thick ear, Tom Merry—"

"Pway don't start waggin' one another now, deah boys! My feet are gettin' howwibly cold, and I am goin' to bed."

And the juniors returned to their beds. Tom Merry was very thoughtful as he tumbled in. He had heard of burglaries committed in the neighbourhood of Rylcombe, and now there had been an attempt at the school. Was there any connection between these crimes and the presence of Ferrers Locke in the neighbourhood?

The next morning the attempted burglary was the topic of discussion all over the school. Blake found himself a lion, from having had something to do with it. He suggested to Figgins the propriety of the latter's resigning from the leadership of the Co. in his favour, but Figgins did not seem to see it in that light.

The police came over from Rylcombe, and Inspector Skeat inspected the safe which had not been robbed, and the room where the Housemaster had seized the burglar, and the window through which the latter had escaped, and he made copious notes in a fat pocket-book. Then, assuring the Head that the police would not be idle in following up their clues, and that the capture of the burglar was a question of only a few days, perhaps even hours, the portly inspector and his myrmidons departed.

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There was another visitor that morning who possessed a far greater interest for the boys of St. Jim's. It was Ferrers Locke. The famous detective called to see the Head, and Tom Merry, who caught a glimpse of him crossing the quadrangle, had no further doubt that it was the mysterious burglaries that had called the detective down from London.

Yet why Ferrers Locke should have been found on that occasion at the ruined castle far from the scene of any of the burglaries, was a puzzle to the hero of the Shell.

Ferrers Locke did not stay more than a quarter of an hour at the school, nor did he seek Tom Merry. Tom understood that this was a case in which Ferrers Locke could expect no help from him. The burglar had visited St. Jim's, but his hiding-place was not likely to be anywhere near the school, and so Tom could render no aid.

Figgins & Co., of course, observed the visit of the detective. They had not the slightest doubt that he had communicated with Tom Merry, and Figgins was more keen than ever on the track of his mare's-nest.

"We've only got to keep an eye on Tom Merry," he remarked, "and we shall soon have the whole thing at our finger-tips. But mum's the word!"

CHAPTER 7.

On the Track of Tom Merry.

THE fog had cleared off with the morning, and the day turned out fine.

Kildare, who had to lead his team to battle with Redclyffe First on Saturday afternoon, had determined upon some hard practice for them while the weather gave him the chance.

As Tom Merry left the Hall after dinner the captain of St. Jim's beckoned to him.

Tom Merry came up smiling. He was always ready to do anything for Kildare, the most popular fellow in the school.

"Run over to Taggles' lodge and ask Bullivant if he can play for us for about half an hour, Merry," said Kildare. "Tell him I sent you."

"Right you are, Kildare!" said Tom cheerily.

He crossed the quad to the porter's lodge. Bullivant, the new groundsman had his quarters in Taggles' comfortable little house. Tom was received with a suspicious brow by Taggles, who had had many a rub with the hero of the Shell.

"I've got a message for Bullivant, Taggy," said Tom. "Is he here?"

"Which he is," said Taggles, "and here he's likely to be."

"Anything the matter with him?" asked Tom.

"No; only he's got a cold, that's all."

"A cold! Not a bad one, I hope. He was all right yesterday, and he was playing up on the footer field like a giddy International," explained Tom Merry.

Taggles sniffed.

"Ho sez it's a bad one. When I has a cold I does my work. But that doesn't suit Mr. Bullivant. Ho, no! My hidea is that he's a lazy 'ound. He won't let anybody do nothin' for him, anyway. Cold! Precious little cold he's got! How did he catch a cold in a warm bed, hey? And I know he went to bed all right last night."

"Can I see him?" asked Tom Merry, who did not quite know what to make of Taggles' statements.

"No law agin it that I know of," said Taggles. "You've only got to go up the stairs and knock on the first door."

"Thank you, Taggy, old son."

The porter grunted, and Tom Merry went up the stairs, and knocked at the door.

A voice bade him enter, and he went in.

Bullivant was in bed. At the first glance he looked very much like a man with a bad cold. His head was bound up so that his face was nearly covered, only his deep-set eyes and the tip of his nose showing amid the wrappings. But he was sitting up in bed, propped on the pillows, and did not seem to be taking much care to avoid the draught. The atmosphere of the room was thick with tobacco fumes, and the invalid had a pipe in his hand.

Tom Merry coughed a little.

The deep-set eyes of the invalid glittered upon him.

"What do you want, Merry?"

"I've got a message from Kildare." Tom Merry smiled a little. "He wants you to turn out for a little practice. But I suppose you can't?"

"Of course I can't!" The man's voice was husky, yet it did not sound exactly as if he had a cold, Tom thought. "You see how I am?"

"Yes, you look pretty rotten."

(Continued on page 12.)

SEE WHAT'S IN—



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

HALLO, chums! All merry and bright—and looking forward to next week's Extra Special St. Jim's story? That's the stuff! You won't be disappointed, either. The majority of you know that next week's GEM will contain a double-length story of Tom Merry & Co., for I "spilt the beans" a couple of weeks ago. To those who missed the announcement, however, a few words are necessary. It was on account of the overwhelming popularity of the extra-long school story we published in the Christmas number of the GEM that shoals of letters poured into this office from all over the world asking for

LONGER TOM MERRY YARNS.

What did I do but get down to brass tacks right away. If GEM readers want extra-long school stories, they shall have them, I said to myself. So next Wednesday's GEM, which will contain one of these double-length stories, will be eagerly awaited by my thousands of readers. If, when you've read it, you feel that you would like a similar length Tom Merry story

EVERY WEEK,

drop me a line—a postcard will do—and I'll see what can be done. Meanwhile, stand by for

"THE TREATY OF ST. JIM'S!"
By Martin Clifford,

which shows those old rivals, Tom Merry & Co., Figgins & Co., and the Grammar School heroes in a glorious adventure. To make room for this super treat, I have had to hold out the usual Rookwood yarn and the "Sky Raiders" story; but these will appear the week after next. The adventures of Poits the office boy, the Eastwood Shield feature, and this page of news will be included in next Wednesday's GEM, so be sure and order your copy in advance. That there will be a rush to secure it goes without saying, so the wise reader will order it from his newsagent to-day

SKIDS—PAH!

"Hold on a minute, old son," said the driver of the car. "The roads look mighty greasy to-day. I must fill up with sand." The motorist's companion wondered whether his pal had got bats in the belfry. He had watched him fill up the petrol tank, seen him replenish the oil, and was eager to start out on his journey despite the greasy roads. But sand? Who ever "filled up" with sand? The wondering traveller was soon enlightened, for his pal told him that he had just had the latest anti-skidding device fixed to his car.

Quite a simple contrivance, really, consisting of a box filled with fine sand or gravel which filters along special spouts that direct the sand to fall under the rear wheels of the car. The inventor of this anti-skidding apparatus is firmly convinced that if his device is fitted to cars, the dangers of skidding will soon be a thing of the past. It will be interesting to see whether the motoring public agree with him.

ROWING THE ATLANTIC.

Crossing the vasty deep in "impossible" craft seems to be the fashion these days, and the latest attempt in this direction shows a German by the name of William Wiszt setting out from Lisbon on the first stage of a trip to New York in a fifteen-foot rowing boat! If it's thrills he is seeking, this daring sea rover won't be disappointed, but perhaps he has been spurred on by the success of the Frenchman, Alain Gerbault, who single-handed sailed his tiny yacht, Firecrest, round the world, and emerged safe and sound from innumerable dangers in a long journey which covered forty thousand sea miles. For seven hundred days the young Frenchman remained at the tiller of his yacht, but he accomplished what he had set out to do—namely, to encircle the world. How long William Wiszt will take to reach New York in his rowing boat it is impossible to say, but if he is successful he will certainly have some rare yarns to spin when he sets foot on land again.

LUCKY CAT!

It was a ten-year-old cat of which the owner, an American, was extremely fond. But the old cat was in pain. The cause of all the trouble was its teeth. So the owner got down to the job of removing them. But that's not the end of the story, for a dentist was called in after that, and to him was given the task of fitting pussy with a special set of false teeth! Can you beat it?

HEARD THIS ONE?

Prison Warden (to new arrival): "Why aren't you asleep yet?"
Convict (burglar): "Give a bloke time to get used to sleeping at nights, can't yer!"

'GAINST EUROPE'S CRACKS!

How would you like to have won over seven hundred trophies at the age of fifteen? A hefty record, isn't it, yet young Miss Hance, who seems to "have a way" with horses, has done the trick. She "sat" on her first live horse at the tender age of four, but it was not until she was nine that she took up riding seriously. Since then she has gone from triumph to triumph, as the collection of seven hundred trophies, which includes

championships, proves. This crack British girl rider is untroubled with nerves, and the thing that excited her most when she was entered in the recent International Horse Show, at Berlin, was the thought that she was going abroad for the first time in her life—and that she would make the trip by aeroplane!

WHO WANTS A POLICE STATION?

Just recently people walking near the big police station quite near to the Royal Mint, in London, wondered whether their eyesight was playing them tricks. For, displayed prominently to view was the notice "TO LET"! No, it was not a joke. The authorities really wanted to get rid of this formidable-looking building, which has been labelled "POLICE STATION" for more than thirty-five years. Inside are the cells, dormitories for the staff, white tiled walls and passages, and truncheons—and the charge-room. The truth is, however, the place has not been used as a "pukka" station for many years. Doubtless it will finish up as a warehouse, for it is extremely unlikely that anyone would want to adopt it as a permanent residence. Still, if anyone particularly wants to live in a real police station for keeps, here is a golden opportunity.

CHEAP POPULARITY!

A Manchester reader wants me to explain how the term "Playing to the Gallery" originated, and what it really means to-day. In the old days of theatre-life, people who patronised the gallery were reckoned to be very boisterous in their method of showing either approval or disapproval. Timid actors therefore made it their business to curry favour in the eyes of these noisy folk, and were sometimes forgetful of the fact that there were other people in the theatre who had a right to be entertained too. Thus the expression is used to-day to denote the winning of popular approval in a cheap way.

FOX HUNTING UP TO DATE!

A certain wily fox who roamed the outskirts of Gloucester recently, set up a new method of hunting. Before he was beaten, this particular fox swam a river and bolted for a near-by house. The hounds followed; but they were baffled when the house was reached, for the fox had dived for a chimney and climbed up it. Someone hit on the idea of lighting paper in the grate; but even this did not dislodge the fox, so as a last resource the local sweep was sent for. With the sweep doing his stuff at one end of the chimney, and the owner of the house "coaxing" Master Reynard from the roof, he was at last forced to emerge. The hounds got him very quickly after that; but surely this is the first occasion on record that a sweep has been called in to end a fox hunt!

A TRUE STORY!

He was an enthusiastic follower of Chelsea football club but he mistrusted footer crowds, so when the famous London team played their cup tie with Tranmere Rovers, he told all his friends that he was leaving his gold watch and present on medal at home. Alas, whilst this footer fan was yelling "Up the Blues," a member of the burglar fraternity calmly rifled his home and pocketed the said watch and medal! Not even the decisive win Chelsea made against Tranmere consoled this footer fan.

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THE NOBBLING OF "NOBBLER JIM" !

(Continued from page 10.)

"I caught a cold in the night, I suppose. I feel beastly. I'm wrapping myself up to try to get rid of it."

"Do you think you'll improve it by smoking?" Tom gently suggested.

"Oh, hang! I must do something!"

"Very well, I'll tell Kildare you can't come," said Tom Merry. "Anything I can do for you?"

"Nothing, thank you, sir," said the man civilly.

Tom returned to the School House, and made his report to Kildare.

The captain of St. Jim's looked concerned.

"I'm sorry to hear it," he said. "He was in such fine condition yesterday, too. Well, I suppose we must do without him."

The St. Jim's First put in their practice without the aid of Bullivant. But Kildare was not the only fellow to feel sorry for his illness. The new groundsman's fine football had appealed to most of the St. Jim's fellows, and all were sorry to hear that he was laid up.

"I wonder if we could do anything for the poor fellow," said D'Arcy. "Do you think he would like me to go in after school and wead to him, Blake?"

"Better go and see," grinned Blake.

"It would only be chawitable," said D'Arcy. "Of course, I don't want to catch his beastly cold, you know."

"You'd better not, or you'll get fired out of this study," said Herries warningly.

"Oh, wats! If I catch a cold, I shall expect you chaps to nurse me through it. I weally think I will go and see Bullivant after school, and see if I can do anything for him."

And when lessons were over for the day, Arthur Augustus made his way to Taggles' lodge, and ascended the stairs to Bullivant's room. He tapped on the door, but there was no reply.

"I suppose he's asleep," murmured D'Arcy. "I think I had better have a look at the poor fella, and if he's all right, I'll leave him."

And he turned the handle of the door. But the door would not open; it was evidently locked on the inside.

D'Arcy tapped again on the panel.

"Are you asleep, my poor friend?"

"What do you want here?"

It was an angry voice from inside.

Arthur Augustus started. That was hardly the tone of voice in which an invalid should have greeted a sympathetic visitor. But D'Arcy remembered the irritating effects of the 'flu upon the temper.

"I have come to see you, Bullivant, to see if I can do anything for you," said D'Arcy. "I should like to wead to you if—"

"I don't want you to!"

"Well, the beast might be a little more civil about it, anyway!" murmured D'Arcy. "If he were not ill, I should feel quite crows. Is there anything I can do for you, deah boy?" he called aloud through the door.

"No, there isn't!"

"Vewy well. I cannot wegard your mannahs as gwacious, but I suppose you are feelin' wotten and iwwitable. Good-bye!"

There was no response, and D'Arcy descended the stairs. Taggles met him with a sour grin.

"Well, what do you make of the invalid, Master D'Arcy?" he asked.

"He seems to be in a vewy iwwitable fwame of mind."

"Yes, he do," said Taggles. "I'd hev looked arter him. But, bless you, he don't want me in his room, he don't! Rude as you like. Take up his meals, shove 'em on the table, and clear out! That's the programme. Ill! Not he! He doesn't cough, or sneeze, or sniff, and them wrappings is humbug. He's malingering, that's what he is. Doesn't like work this cold weather. Ho, no! That's what his complaint is. If he's got the 'flu, what's he up and dressed for? And I know he is, 'cause he's got his boots on. I've heard 'im moving about over me 'ead. 'Flu! Ho, no! It's all gammon!"

How much of Taggles' growling was justified, D'Arcy had no means of ascertaining. He returned to the School House, and found Blake talking to Tom Merry on the subject—very important to them—of jointly hiring a car on Saturday to convey them over to the Redclyffe ground to witness the First Eleven match.

"Well, how's the giddy invalid?" said Tom Merry. "Have you seen him?"

"No, I have not had that pleasuah," said D'Arcy. "I am beginnin' to think that he isn't so beastly ill, aftah all, you know. It's wotten bad form to be suspicious, but one can't help seeing things, if one is a weemarkably deep fellow like me."

"Rather!" said Blake. "But what can you see this time?"

"Taggles thinks the boulder is malingering," said Arthur Augustus, and he proceeded to give details.

Tom Merry's eyes sparkled indignantly.

"I say, that's beastly of him, if Kildare wanted him to play!" he exclaimed. "I never liked the fellow's looks, but I should have thought such a splendid footballer would be a decent fellow. Well, you never know. But Taggles is a grumbling old ass though, and he may be doing Bullivant injustice; more likely than not, in fact."

The school clock boomed out.

"Hallo, I must be off!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "I'll speak to you again about that bus on Saturday, Blake!" And the hero of the Shell hastened away.

Blake's eyes were blazing.

"Did you hear that, Gussy?" he whispered. "He must be off—he's going somewhere—it's to meet the detective, of course!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Keep an eye on him while I buzz off, and fetch Figgins. He won't see you in the mist if you're careful. We could manage better without Figgins, as a matter of fact, but we must keep to the compact!"

Blake ran off. Tom Merry had gone out into the quad.

In the grey shadow the hero of the Shell could be dimly seen, and D'Arcy hurried on his track.

Tom Merry went straight to the gate, and D'Arcy followed him. The time for locking up was not yet, though it was close at hand.

Potts, the Office Boy!



Tom Merry went out into the lane, and D'Arcy hesitated whether to follow him farther or to wait for Blake.

"He's gone towards Wylcombe," murmured the swell of St. Jim's. "Of course, he's gone to meet Fewwers Locke. We shall be able to overtake him in the lane!"

Meanwhile, Blake had burst into the New House, and rushed like a whirlwind up to Figgins & Co.'s study.

The Co. were just having tea, and Figgins had raised his teacup to his lips when Blake hurled the door open and came tearing in.

Figgins jumped up in alarm, and the tea went with a gush over his chest. It was hot tea, and Figgins gave a yell.

"Buck up!" shouted Blake. "I—"

"You howling idiot!" roared Figgins. "Look what you've done!"

"Rats! What does that matter? I—"

"I'll show you whether it matters!"

"Ass!" bawled Blake. "We're on the track! Tom Merry has just gone out to meet Ferrers Locke!"

The news calmed Figgins at once.

"Oh, I see!" He mopped his waistcoat with his handkerchief. "Are you sure?"

"Of course I am, fathead. Come on!"

Figgins snatched up his cap.

"Come on, kids. Don't stop for your coats!"

"I say, Figgy," said Fatty Wynn anxiously. "Better finish tea first—it's cold, and—"

"Come on!" roared Figgins, in a tone that made Fatty Wynn jump.

There was no further demur. The juniors hurried out of the study and dashed into the quad. Down to the gate they went with a run, and found Arthur Augustus turning back to meet them.

"Where is he?" gasped Blake.

"Gone down towards Wylcombe," said D'Arcy. "I thought I had better wait for you, dear boys. Where's Hewwies?"

"Blow Herries!" shouted Figgins. "We've not time to stop for him! Come on!"

He ran into the lane.

"Wait a minute!" shouted Blake. "I'm going to fetch Herries. He's not going to be left out!"

But Figgins & Co. were gone.

"I wogard that as wotten!" said Arthur Augustus. "It is vewy unweasonable of Figgins not to wait for Hewwies. I will go and look for—"

But Blake had dashed after Figgins & Co. After all, there was no time to be lost.

Arthur Augustus remained undecided for a few moments, and then he followed Blake.

Down the lane went the five juniors in hot haste on the track of Tom Merry.

CHAPTER 8.

Figgins Does Some Shadowing!

THE mist was thickening in the lane. Figgins ran on, his long legs covering the ground in good style, and the Co. panted after him. Fatty Wynn, fat and full up with bacon and eggs, soon dropped out of the race. Blake passed him like a shot and joined Figgins and Kerr.

"Seen anything of the bounder?" asked Blake.

"No!" grunted Figgins. "I suppose he really came this way?" He halted, and peered round in the mist. "Or was Gussy acting the giddy ox as usual?"

"I object to that remark!" came a voice out of the mist. "I wogard it as extwemely obnoxious, Figgins!"

"Oh, you're here, are you?" exclaimed Figgins, as D'Arcy came panting up, his eyeglass dangling at the end of the cord. "Are you sure Tom Merry went towards Rylcombe?"

"Yaas, wathah, and—"

"But was he running full pelt?"

"No, he was just walkin' along, you know, deah boy!"

"Then we ought to have passed him before this. He must have left the road!"

"Very likely!" said Blake. "It stands to reason that he wouldn't go to the village to meet Ferrers Locke. He's in the wood somewhere." And Blake peered dubiously towards the misty wood that bordered Rylcombe Lane.

"We're close by the stile," said Figgins. "It's a straight run to the old castle. Perhaps Tom Merry has gone there to meet the detective, same as he did before!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I'm going to see," said Figgins resolutely. "We've lost him here, anyway! I'm going up to the castle to see if he's there!"

"Yaas, wathah! Shadow the boundah, Figgins," said Arthur Augustus encouragingly. "Get on his beastly twack, you know, deah boy. Of course, the shadowing business is done bettah by a chap on his lonesome. I'll buzz off back to the coll!"

"Good!" said Fatty Wynn, coming panting up. "You'll manage it better alone, Figgy!"

Figgins sniffed.

"Quite right," he replied. "When I'm shadowing, I don't want a lot of noisy kids at my heels. You fellows wait for me to help me over the wall in case I'm back after looking-up! So-long!"

Figgins vaulted over the stile, and disappeared into the mists of the footpath.

"Well," said Blake, "if he wants to go alone, I'm not the chap to follow him; and it's cold and foggy, and there's a comfy fire at home! Let's get back!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The juniors turned back towards the school.

Figgins, alone but undaunted, tramped through the footpath under the old misty trees. Figgins was in a determined humour. He was going to take a hand in the little game, as he put it, if he burst a boiler over it. Tom Merry had quitted the lane, and what so likely as that he had gone to the ruined castle? Certainly, he had met Ferrers Locke there before.

So to the ruined castle went Figgins through the misty wood. The great masses of shattered masonry loomed up through the fog, and Figgins gave a start as he entered the broken arch of the gate and saw a glimmer of light ahead in the mist.

He was right. Someone was there; and who was that someone? The ruins were sometimes used for shelter by tramps in the summer, but in bleak winter they were deserted. Someone was there in the damp mist—who was it?

Figgins pressed forward cautiously, silently.

The light was carried by someone who was picking his way among the ruins towards the yawning cavity which



SKITTLED!

gave admittance to the vaults below. The light was very necessary, for in the thick mist it was quite possible to step into some cranny or crevice and break a limb or two. The light served another purpose now; it illumined a face—and the face illumined was one Figgins knew well.

"Ferrers Locke!" Figgins muttered the words to himself.

There was no sign of Tom Merry. The detective was evidently alone. But that did not matter to Figgins; he was on the track.

Ferrers Locke moved cautiously, with the hurricane lantern held before him, through the ruins, and Figgins followed. The detective halted at the opening, and quietly descended the stone stair into the vaults.

Figgins waited till he was gone, and then followed.

Was Tom Merry awaiting the detective below ground? Figgins' heart was beating as he descended the steps. Down in the dark vaults he caught the glimmer of the detective's lantern. The vaults were black and misty, chilly as the tomb. The chill smote Figgins, and he shuddered; but he pressed on in pursuit of the moving light.

The detective stopped.

Figgins drew a deep breath. The detective stopped at the same spot where he had stopped before, and put the lantern on the flags. Then he took out a knife and opened it.

Figgins kept well back in the shadows to watch.

The detective stooped and scraped the dirt away from the iron ring, and lifted the flagstone from the floor, revealing the black cavity below.

"My hat!" gasped Figgins. "So that's the little game!"

He pressed forward to the opening.

Ferrers Locke went down the steps into the little stone chamber below, taking the lantern with him. Figgins, looking down from the top of the steps, saw him flash the light round the cell, apparently examining the walls; not a crevice or cranny escaping his eager gaze.

What the object of his search was Figgins had not the faintest idea, unless he was looking for some concealed opening.

From the top of the steps Figgins watched breathlessly, forgetting that if the detective should chance to look up, his face would inevitably be revealed in the light. And look up Ferrers Locke suddenly did.

Whether Figgins had made some slight movement, or whether his eager, hurried breathing had caught the detective's keen ear—certainly Ferrers Locke's suspicions were awakened, and he glanced quickly up.

Figgins popped back out of sight instantly.

Had the detective seen him? Figgins crouched in the blackness and wondered. Ferrers Locke did not come up the steps; he remained in the cell for several minutes longer, and then Figgins heard his steps. From the darkness the junior watched for his reappearance. Ferrers Locke's head came into view, and the lantern glimmered through the vaults. The detective's face was clearly seen in the light, and it was quite calm and expressionless.

Figgins drew a deep breath of relief. The detective could not have seen him.

Ferrers Locke stepped from the opening, and laid the lantern on the flagstone. He did not look once in the direction of Figgins. He took out his watch and gave a sudden start as he looked at it, as if he had overstayed an appointment and suddenly became aware of it.

"I must go instantly," he muttered. "I can return and replace this stone later."

He hurried away, forgetful of the lantern, and Figgins heard his footsteps die away in the direction of the opening into the ruin.

Figgins' heart was beating hard. He listened intently, waiting till the detective's footsteps had completely died into silence, and then ran forward to the raised stone.

Ferrers Locke, if his muttered words were anything to go by, would not be back for some little time, and there was a good chance for Figgins to explore the cell, and for a guess as to what had interested the famous detective there.

Figgins picked up the hurricane lamp the detective had fortunately left behind, and descended the stone steps. He found himself in a little cell of stone, with blank walls, formed of huge blocks set closely together, scarce a cranny showing between them even after the lapse of long centuries.

Figgins wondered what the detective had sought there. Surely he must have been looking for a secret opening. But why? Why should Ferrers Locke come down from London to seek for a secret passage under the ruins of the ancient castle of Rylcombe? It was an amazing puzzle, and Figgins gave it up.

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He flashed the light over the walls, and scanned them closely. He could hardly expect to discover what had been invisible to the keen eyes of the detective, but he put it to the test.

Suddenly he started. There was a sound above—a vague sound which made him look up. What he saw as he looked up made the blood run cold in his veins. The huge block of stone which had been raised from the cavity was descending into its place.

Figgins gave a yell.

"Stop!"

But the stone did not stop.

Thud! It dropped into its place, and the cavity was



Perched precariously on top of the trolly-work Tom Merry his eyes so staggered him that

closed. Figgins, with the perspiration breaking out on his brow, dropped the lantern, and dashed up the steps. He shoved the stone above; he beat on it with his fists; he shouted. But there was no reply, and the stone did not move. Figgins was a prisoner.

CHAPTER 9.

The Detective's Quest!

"TOM!"

Tom Merry looked round in the mist, and ceased his cheery whistle.

He had been over to Wayland to make some purchases which could not be obtained in the little village of Rylcombe, having a pass from Kildare which enabled

him to stop out after locking up. He was returning by the path over the hill, intending to pass the old castle, and take the footpath through the wood to Rylcombe Lane. But for the mists of the winter evening the ruins would have been visible on his left as he came towards the wood.

His name suddenly spoken made him halt, and he glanced at the figure, dim in the mist, that came striding down the path from the hill.

"Mr. Locke!"

"I knew you by your whistle, Tom," said the detective, as he shook hands with the hero of the Shell. "You are out late."

"I've got a pass," said Tom. "I've been over to Way-

outside your sphere. You saw nothing of the burglar last night at the school, I suppose?"

"No, sir; he was gone before we got down. Mr. Railton was the only one who saw him."

"And he did not really see him, as he was masked."

"Yes, the rascal knew how to take care of himself."

"It was a bold action to hurl himself through the window like that," Ferrers Locke remarked musingly.

"It was his only chance, Mr. Locke. Mr. Railton was close behind him, and the whole school would have been about his ears in a minute or two more."

"He must have been badly cut, I should say."

"That he was," said Tom Merry. "I saw the glazier refitting the window this morning, and I looked at some of the fragments on the old pane. There was blood on some of them."

"Yes, I observed that myself, when I came up to the school," Ferrers Locke said, with a nod. "I should say that the burglar was badly cut about the head and face, and perhaps hands, and he can hardly appear in public without showing the traces of his injuries."

"He will have to lie low for a bit, then."

"Yes. According to Mr. Railton's description, the rascal made straight for the safe. He must have known the lie of the land pretty accurately."

"It looks like it."

"That means, Tom, that he had either been over the ground before, or had obtained a plan of the building. Have you noticed anything like a suspicious character hanging round the school?"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"I can't say that I have, sir. The burglar certainly seemed to know a lot about the place. He must have been hanging round some time before; but I never happened to see anything of a suspicious ruffian—"

Ferrers Locke laughed.

"But the man I have in mind may not have been a ruffian, Tom. I think I will explain some of the circumstances to you. Although the case lies outside your scope, you or your chums may have seen something of the scoundrel as he had undoubtedly visited the school. You have heard of the mysterious burglaries that have taken place of late in this neighbourhood?"

"Everybody has, Mr. Locke," said Tom Merry.

"Exactly. Well, I was asked by Scotland Yard to look into the matter, and before coming down here I gave the matter a great deal of thought. The robberies were carried out in a wonderfully clever manner, and not a trace of a clue was left behind for the police. But this circumstance was in itself a clue. There was only one criminal I knew of who was capable of such raids—an accomplished rascal known as Nobbler Jim. I made some investigations, and learned that Nobbler Jim, having had some rubs with the police, had disappeared from his usual haunts, and the date of his disappearance was only a few days before the date of the first of these mysterious burglaries. I concluded that Nobbler Jim had decided to rusticate a little in this quiet country, and improve the shining hours by a series of robberies in the wealthy houses hereabouts."

Tom Merry listened with keen interest.

"The work, wherever the robberies have occurred, has betrayed the skilled hand of Nobbler," went on Ferrers Locke. "I am sure of my man. But where is he? That he is not staying at any of the inns hereabouts I am certain, unless he is in a very skilful disguise. Where is his plunder stored? He has carried off plate to the value of many thousands of pounds, and much of it is bulky. He must have a secret place for hiding it. I immediately thought of the ruined castle as a place where a thief might find some secret cranny to conceal his loot. I searched the castle and discovered a moving flag, raised by a ring, and the traces upon it convinced me that it had been lately raised."

"Then you knew—"

"I knew that I was on the track; but in the stone cell below, though I found marks of recent feet in the slime, I found nothing else. The cell was evidently not used for habitation, and if there was a secret hiding-place in it, it was unknown to me. If the secret place is indeed there, Nobbler probably discovered it by accident, or he may have had a confederate who has worked this neighbourhood before, and made the discovery and imparted it to him."

"Then, when I met you at the ruined castle—"

Ferrers Locke smiled.

"You know now why I was there, Tom. I have been frequently on the watch there, and have several times visited the cell in the hope of finding some fresh clue. I am more than ever convinced that it is used by the thief, for the traces are unmistakable; but the secret receptacle for his plunder baffled me. If I could find it, probably the greater part of the proceeds of many robberies would be recovered."

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Merry looked into Bullivant's bed-room. The sight which met that nearly lost his balance and fell!

land to get some films for Manners, and some other things I can't get in Rylcombe. I'm going back now."

"Then I'll walk with you through the wood," the detective remarked.

They entered the dim, misty path together.

"Have you been successful, sir?" Tom Merry asked, looking up at the detective. "I don't mean to be curious," he added hastily. "Don't think that. Only, of course, I should be glad to hear that you have succeeded."

"I quite understand, Tom. No, I have not succeeded yet, but—a gleam came into Ferrers Locke's eyes—"I shall not give up till I have done so."

"I am sure of that, sir."

"I wish you could help me, Tom, as you have done before," said Ferrers Locke. "Unluckily, this case lies

and I might happen upon one clue to the whereabouts of the thief himself."

"Very likely."

"If the burglary at the school had succeeded, I should probably have had the scoundrel," Ferrers Locke continued, "for my belief is that he would have conveyed his loot there, and placed it in concealment before returning to his hiding-place. I was on the watch for him, but he did not come. Mr. Railton saved the college plate; he also, I think, saved Nobbler Jim from arrest."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Then Blake takes rather too much credit to himself over that business," he remarked. "But you will have him yet, sir."

"I hope so. Unfortunately a case I cannot neglect is calling me back to London. I am determined not to abandon the pursuit of Nobbler Jim, yet if I have to leave the case for a time all may be lost."

"That is a bit rotten," said Tom Merry. "I wish I could help you, Mr. Locke."

"Unless you have, as I suggested, seen the rascal lurking about the school, I am afraid you cannot," the detective replied. "As known to the police, Nobbler Jim is not a common criminal. He had a good education, and fell to want owing to dissipation, and then took to robbery for a living."

"He is a man of medium stature, and usually wears a beard, but that he would probably discard while in the country. He is of a sporting turn, and spends most of his ill-gotten cash on betting, horse races, and football matches. He has played football himself, in his time, as a professional in a big club, and was kicked out for taking a bribe to lose a match."

"If he came round the school looking for information, he

might come in the guise of a pedlar, to get into talk with the servants, or a beggar, or a gardener, looking for work. He has tried all those dodges to my knowledge. Does anything come into your mind now?"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"I am afraid I can't think of anybody I've noticed, sir, but I shall keep my eyes open."

The detective smiled.

"No, Tom, I am afraid this is a case in which you cannot help," he said. "I only wish you could. If I could get information as to Nobbler to-night, it would save me from a very great difficulty. But I suppose I must not hope for it. In case of anything turning up by chance, however, you know where to find me—the Red Lion, in Rylcombe. I see we are at the end of the footpath. By the way, you did not mention anything to Figgins about meeting me?"

"I gave you my word not to, sir."

"Yes, I remember. Then Figgins must have been watching."

"What makes you think so, sir?"

"Only the fact that he was shadowing me in the ruined castle this evening," said Ferrers Locke, with a smile.

Tom Merry gave a pump.

"Figgins shadowing you?"

"Yes; he shadowed me into the vaults, and there, unfortunately for himself, gave his game away. I tricked him into the cell and shut him up there."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It will be a lesson for him," smiled the detective. "But I think you may as well mention to his chums that he is there, and they may go and let him out; or perhaps it would be better for you to go, as the existence of the cell should be kept a secret for the present."

"I'll certainly go, sir. There's a short cut through the wood to the castle. But, I say, if Nobbler Jim uses that place to hide his loot, mayn't he go there, and—"

Ferrers Locke shook his head.

"So long as his face is cut up, Nobbler Jim will be lying low," he said, "and in any case he would only visit the ruins at night in order to be safe in doing so. I intended to leave Figgins there only for half an hour or so. I shall pay a visit to the ruins again after I have had some dinner, to have another look for the secret, and to remove any traces Figgins may have left."

The detective shook hands with the hero of the Shell.

"Good-bye, Tom; and I wish you could get some information for me, but I don't think it will turn out so. Give my kind regards to Figgins, and tell him to do his shadowing a little more carefully next time."

"Ha, ha, ha! Certainly! Good-bye, sir!"

They parted, the detective striding down the lane towards the village, and Tom Merry turning into the short cut through the wood to get to the old castle, to release the unfortunate shadower from his predicament.

CHAPTER 10.

Tom Merry Makes a Discovery!

F IGGINS thumped and thumped on the hard cold stone till his knuckles were sore. He gave it up at last and descended the stone steps into the cell again.

He had been very startled at first by the closing of the stone, but it had not taken him many moments to realise the truth.

The upraised flagstone had been turned back, and could not have fallen into its place by accident. It had been closed purposely, and Figgins knew that it must have been closed by Ferrers Locke.

Figgins snapped his teeth at the thought of how easily he had been taken in. Of course, the detective had seen him looking down into the cell, but had not allowed him to see it. His muttered words, his pretended departure, had been part of the game. He had trapped Figgins to give him a lesson, and Figgins had tumbled into the trap as easily as any unsuspecting baby.

"The rotter!" murmured Figgins. "Hang him! It serves me right for being such an ass! My hat! How Blake would cackle if he knew this. The question is, how long does the bounder intend to keep me here? I shall be late for calling-over if I don't get out soon."

Closed as the stone was, the air in the cell was fit for respiration, showing that there was some slight opening to admit it. Figgins tramped to and fro on the cold stones to keep his blood in circulation. It seemed centuries to him, when his watch indicated that half an hour had elapsed since his imprisonment in the cell.

At last came a sudden sound in the heavy stillness, and Figgins gave a start of relief. The stone, which could not be raised from below, was moving, under a steady pull from above.

Figgins watched it like one fascinated.

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The cavity opened, and a face looked down upon him—the face of Tom Merry!

Figgins gritted his teeth.

Tom Merry's was about the last face he wanted to see just then.

"Hallo!" said Tom, laughing. "Getting tired of it, Figgys?"

"Rats!" said Figgins crossly. "It's nothing to grin at, that I can see. I suppose it was Ferrers Locke shut me up here?"

"Exactly! He sends you his kind regards, and advises you to do your shadowing a little more carefully next time."

Figgins turned red.

"You're not bringing up the lamp," said Tom Merry, as the New House chief ascended the stone steps.

"Blow the lamp!" said Figgins.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you're looking for a thick ear, Tom Merry, you've only got to go on cackling!" said Figgins wrathfully.

"Ha, ha, ha! Keep your wool on, Figgys! It strikes me as funny, that's all. You New House kids are really too funny to live. Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry was doubled up with laughter.

Figgins regarded him with a stony stare for a full minute, and then, as the School House boy was still laughing, Figgins let out with his left.

Tom Merry received it on his nose, and sat down with startling abruptness on the hard, cold floor.

"Ha, ha, ha!" howled Figgins. "There's some more for you to cackle at. Ha, ha, ha!"

And Figgins dashed away towards the stairs leading to the open air.

Tom Merry scrambled to his feet in wrath.

Figgins' laugh rang back from the gloom, but Figgins was gone.

Tom Merry rubbed his nose ruefully.

"The horrid rotter!" he muttered. "I'll dot him on the boko when I meet him again. But now I'm here, I think I'll have a look at the cell."

He descended the stone steps. The lamp was standing beside them, and as Tom Merry stooped to pick it up, something caught his eye on the floor—the mark of a thumb in the slime of one of the flagstones!

Tom Merry gave a jump.

"My hat!"

His face went pale with excitement.

He remembered all that Ferrers Locke had told him of the suspected existence of a secret recess in the underground cell.

Moving the lamp a little to one side, Tom Merry pressed his thumb to the print on the slimy stone, taking care to stand clear of the stone as he did so.

It was well that he did.

The pressure was followed by a slight scraping sound, and he knew that his thumb was pressing upon a bolt in the stone, and the next instant the stone revolved on a pivot, and revealed a dark cavity in the floor.

"The secret!"

It was the secret, undoubtedly, and Tom Merry had discovered it by a wonderful chance. The cavity was about three feet deep and two wide, and in the bottom of it lay a sack. The bulging sides of the sack showed what it contained.

The neck of it was not fastened, and it was easy for Tom Merry to look inside. A glimmer of shining metal met his eye.

Gold and silver plate, vases, ornaments of all kinds, silver spoons by the score, and several bundles which doubtless contained money or valuable securities.

Tom Merry had discovered the hoard of the mysterious burglar! The loot of Nobbler Jim lay exposed to his eye!

For some minutes Tom Merry gazed at the hoard with startled eyes, hardly believing in the reality of the vision.

"My hat! Mr. Locke will be glad to hear of this!"

He closed the stone again, and carefully noted the position of the secret spring. Then he took up the lamp and ascended from the cell.

He closed the trapdoor, and left the vaults. His heart was beating with the excitement of his discovery, and his eyes were gleaming. Ferrers Locke had not been expecting aid from Tom Merry in this case, but he would receive it, all the same!

Tom's eyes were bright as he followed the footpath through the wood, and turned into Rylcombe Lane, to hasten to Ferrers Locke with the news.

CHAPTER 11.

The Failure of Figgins & Co.

Figgins reached St. Jim's after a hard run, but he found the gates closed against him. He did not pull the bell. He hurried to the spot where he had told the Co to await him, and whistled. Kerr's head appeared over the wall.

"That you, Figgys?"

"Yes, what's left of me!" growled Figgins. "Help me over, for goodness' sake! Calling-over yet?"

"No; you're barely in time."

A rope slithered down the wall, and Figgins grasped it and pulled himself over. Then the three New House juniors tore off to the Hall to answer to their names, and, fortunately, were there just in time to answer "Adsum," as Mr. Ratcliff rapped them out.

Calling-over finished, the Co. were anxious to hear an account of Figgins' adventures. There was nothing for it but to tell them, and that Figgins did.

"There's no need to tell the story to Study No. 6," he said. "Blake will only cackle over it. He'd cackle at anything. What the dickens are you grinning at, Kerr?"

"Was I grinning?" asked the Scottish partner in the Co.

"Yes, you were, like a hycna!"

"Well, you see—"

"Yes, I see a silly fathead. If you don't leave off that gurgling, Fatty Wynn, I'll sling you out, so there!"

"It's only something in my throat, Figgins."

"Grr-r-r-r!" said Figgins lucidly. "I say, we've been done this time—"

"You've been done, you mean," said Kerr.

"We've failed," said Figgins, taking no notice of this remark. "But we're not going to give up the game. We'll have another try—Hallo, Blake!"

The chums of Study No. 6 looked in.

"Hallo, Figgys! We've come over to hear what discoveries you've made."

"Haven't made any."

"Didn't you twack Tom Mewwy to the wuins?" asked Arthur Augustus.

"No, I didn't."

"Didn't you see Ferrers Locke?" asked Herries.

"Yes, I saw him."

"Well, what was he like? What was he doing? What did you find out? Did he meet Tom Merry? Hang it, out with the yarn!" exclaimed Blake.

"Right-ho!" said Herries. "Out with it, Figgys!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Figgins turned red. As leader of the Co. he could not refuse to explain, and it was certain that if he was reticent, Blake would guess something. He might question Tom Merry, and learn the truth. Poor Figgins found, as many have found before him, that a secret is hard to keep.

"Come, explain!" said Blake. "If Tom Merry's got the better of you this time, you may as well own up."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Figgins reluctantly explained. He expected that the chums of Study No. 6 would laugh. They more than fulfilled his expectation. They roared. They shrieked.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Blake. "Oh, you giddy shadower, to get shut up in a box!"

"It wasn't a box!" snapped Figgins. "It was a cell!"

"Yes, it was a sell, and no mistake!" said Blake, deliberately misunderstanding. "It was a rotten sell from start to finish."

"If you're going to cackle like a lot of hyenas, you fellows, you'd better get out of this study!"

"Certainly. We beg to withdraw from this rotten Co.," said Blake immediately. "We don't want a leader who gets himself shut up in a bandbox—I mean, a cell! I had a feeling all along that the whole affair would be mucked up if you New House fellows were allowed to take the lead in it, and you see I was right."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We're out of the rotten Co.," said Blake. "The Co. is busted, in fact. Now that Ferrers Locke and Tom Merry know that we're on the track, they'll be careful, and we stand no chance. They'll be on their guard against us, so the game's up. Can't you see that?"

"It ought to be put in the Gazette," grinned Blake. "Failure of Figgins & Co. Great crash in the New House! A very old firm bankrupt!"

"Get out of my study!" roared Figgins.

"Figgins & Co.'s failure! Latest news!" chanted Blake, in the tone of a newsboy. "Great failure and bankruptcy of Figgins & Co.—"

But this was a little too much for the patience of Figgins. He seized a Greek lexicon and went for Blake. The Co. backed him up well, and the chums of Study No. 6 were rushed out of the study.

"Well, I suppose—"

New House juniors came flocking along the passage at the sound of a row, and Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy thought it wisest to retreat. But as they scuttled out of the New House Blake turned in the doorway and yelled back at the top of his voice:

"Latest edition! Startling news! Crash in the New House! Great failure of Figgins & Co.!"

Then he stopped, for the lexicon left the hand of Figgins with deadly aim, and Blake was simply bowled over. He rolled out into the quad, and disappeared in the mist.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Figgins.

The School House trio were gone; but from the misty quadrangle came a chant of three voices in unison.

"Starting bankruptcy! Great failure of Figgins & Co.!" Figgins snorted.

Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy went on towards the School House, chucking.

"We had 'em on toast that time!" said Blake, with much satisfaction. "Figgins won't be so jolly anxious to lead next time. Failure of Figgins & Co.!" Why, that will be a good joke for weeks to come! We'll spread it over the School House, and enant it at 'em in the quad, and bawl it in the passages, and whisper it in the class-rooms. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yaas, wathah! Ha, ha, ha! I wegard the mattah as extremely funny!" Ha, ha, ha!"

The chums entered the School House in high good humour. Tom Merry had just come in and was taking off his coat. Blake grinned at him.

"Where have you been, you boulder?" he asked. "I hear that Figgins has been a-tracking of you like a giddy Red Indian, and found himself caught in a trap."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Yes, that's so. Were you chaps in the game?"

"Oh, we were backing him up a little!" said Blake cautiously. "We knew those boulders would muck it up if we didn't help. They've mucked it up, anyway, though. Figgins & Co. have failed, and we've retired from partnership. We'll join you, if you like, and help you make a success of the thing."

"Thanks!" said Tom Merry politely. "Thanks for nothing!"

"Oh, we don't want to! We know a lot about it already. You've been meeting Ferrers Locke—"



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"Hush! Don't give it away!"

"Right-ho! We'll keep mum!" grinned Blake. "That's understood. So will Figgins & Co., though they've made such a ghastly frost of the business. You look cold."

"It's horrid cold out!" said Tom Merry, with a shiver.

"Come into our study and warm yourself. Manners and Lowther are in the gym, and I expect your fire's gone out. We've a good one, and we've something hot to drink."

Tom Merry accepted the invitation.

The fire was blazing in Study No. 6, and Blake quickly made a glass of steaming lemonade as Tom put his feet on the fender and stretched out his hands to the warmth.

"This is jolly decent of you kids," said Tom Merry, as he sipped the refreshing beverage, and enjoyed the warmth of the fire. "I wish I could tell you about what's going on, but I'm not in it myself, as a matter of fact, only by accident—"

"Why, Figgins thought you met Ferrers Locke specially at the old castle—"

"Ha, ha, ha! That was a little mistake! It was quite by accident. I've just been down to see Ferrers Locke in the village, but that was owing to a discovery I made quite by chance. Figgins was barking up the wrong tree all the time."

"Ha, ha, ha! Just like Figg!"

"Yaas, wathah! It would weally have been bettah for Figgins to leave the leadahship in my hands," D'Arcy remarked. "I suggested it to him, and he only used wude expressions in weply. That was just like Figgins, too."

The juniors chatted as Tom Merry warmed his feet and drank his lemonade.

Arthur Augustus looked at his watch and rose to his feet.

"Where are you going, image?" asked Blake.

"I object to bein' called an image."

"Well, where are you going, anyway?"

"I think I ought to wun in and see that unfortunate fellow, Bullivant, you know, before wetiwin' for the night," said D'Arcy. "He is vewy wude to Taggles, and has no one to speak to, and I think a few words might cheer him up, you know."

"I can't help thinking there's something in what Taggles says about his being only malingering," Blake said, with a shake of the head.

Tom Merry nodded thoughtfully.

"I shouldn't wonder," he said. "I never liked the man's looks; but it's a beastly caddish thing to do to pretend to be ill at a time when Kildare needs him. Kildare has treated him very well."

"He has, rather," said Blake. "Why, he offered to send for Dr. Short, and the fellow refused so snappishly to see a doctor, that Kildare—I heard him say so to Darrell—would have given him a shaking up for it if he hadn't been ill."

Tom Merry's eyes gleamed.

"Why should he refuse to see a doctor?" he exclaimed.

"Because he's only rotting," said Herries. "That's it, and he is afraid of being bowled out if a doctor saw him, as, of course, he would be."

"Looks like it," said Blake. "Well, go and see him, Gussy, and bring your mighty brain to bear on the matter. If he's malingering he ought to be ragged."

D'Arcy took his departure. He returned in about ten minutes, looking very exasperated.

"He refuses to admit me," he said. "He said through the keyhole that he didn't want to be bothered, and that I could cut off! The fearful cheek!"

"Oh, it's a case of malingering," said Blake.

The chums of Study No. 6 got out their books to do their evening preparation, and Tom Merry quitted the study. He was in a very thoughtful mood as he went along to his own quarters.

Manners and Lowther were in the study when he arrived there, trying to persuade the fire to burn.

Manners looked up as Tom came in.

"Got my films?"

"Yes," said Tom, putting his parcel on the table. "I say, kids, what do you think about that fellow Bullivant's illness?"

"He refuses to see a doctor," said Lowther. "He's malingering."

"If he's only rotting he ought to be taught a lesson," said Tom, with kindling eyes. "He ought to be willing to oblige Kildare. Don't you think, kids, that we should look into the matter, and find out the facts, and put him through it, if he's only playing the goat?"

"Not a bad idea," said Lowther. "I wish this fire would burn."

"Oh, blow the fire!"

"I'm blowing it, but it doesn't seem to do it any good!"

"Well, we're going to look into this," announced Tom Merry. "Taggles says the fellow's up and dressed, and that doesn't look like an invalid. It's as easy as anything to get on the trellis of Taggles' lodge and look into his window. I

fancy I could tell whether he is ill or not. What do you say? If he's pretending he ought to be shown up."

"Right-ho!" said Manners reflectively. "Let's show him up."

"Come along, then!"

The Terrible Three left the School House. To cut across the quad unnoticed was easy in the mist. They reached Taggles' lodge. Two windows were lighted—that of Taggles' little parlour and that of Bullivant's bed-room.

"Up you go, Tom!" said Lowther.

Tom hesitated for a moment. He did not like to do anything that savoured of spying. But the thought that the man was repaying the kindness that Kildare had shown him by a mean and contemptible deception nerved the hero of the Shell to the investigation.

He climbed the trellis-work, drew silently close to the window, and looked into the room.

He had a view of the interior of the room, and the next moment he drove his teeth into his tongue to keep back the cry of amazement that rose to his lips.

CHAPTER 12.

Tom Merry Comes Out Ahead.

TOM MERRY jumped from the trellis to the ground, and Manners and Lowther jumped. For a moment they thought he had fallen.

"What's the matter, Tom?" gasped Manners, catching sight of his chum's deadly white face in the mist. Tom was gasping for breath.

"I—I have had a shock, that's all! I'll tell you presently. Come!"

He hurried away through the mist.

His chums, utterly amazed at his strange looks and stranger action, followed him.

Lowther caught him by the arm.

"In Heaven's name, Tom, what's up?"

"Come! I've got to get out—to get to Ferrers Locke! Help me over the wall. Mind, don't stir from this spot till I come back again; don't go near the lodge—promise me!"

"Honour bright!" said Lowther. "Blessed if I understand, though! We'll wait for you here!"

Tom Merry was over the wall in a twinkling.

He dropped into the lane, and dashed away towards Rylcombe. At full speed he went, running as he had never run on the cinder-path, though cumbered now with his coat. With steady strides faster and faster through the dim mist, the hero of the Shell raced on towards Rylcombe.

Almost spent, he reached the Red Lion Inn, and stumbled into a coated figure in the porch.

There was a cry of astonishment.

"Tom!"

It was Ferrers Locke.

"Mr. Locke!" Tom grasped him by the arm, but he tried in vain to speak, in his excitement and breathless exhaustion the words would not come.

The detective understood. He led the boy to the nearest bench, and made him sit down.

Tom sank upon the bench, gasping, his breast throbbing, his heart thumping away like a hammer.

"Don't be in a hurry, Tom," said Ferrers Locke quietly.

"Take your time, and calm yourself. I have just been to the castle, and I found your account quite correct. The loot is in the hands of the police, but the discovery will be kept a secret for the present, in order not to alarm the thief."

"I have found him!"

Tom Merry gasped out the words.

Ferrers Locke gave a great start.

"Are you serious, Tom? Have you found the thief?"

"Yes," panted Tom, "I have found him!"

"Where?"

"At St. Jim's!" Tom calmed himself at last. "I know it is him! Did you not say, a man of medium stature, probably clean-shaven—"

"Exactly!"

"Once a professional footballer—"

"That is true!"

"And he would have his face and head cut by his violent passage through the window?"

"Terribly cut, I should say!"

"Then I have found him!"

Ferrers Locke's eyes were gleaming now. He waited patiently for Tom to speak.

"There is a new groundsman at St. Jim's," said Tom, more slowly. "A chap employed to keep the football ground in order, you know. He calls himself Bullivant. Nobody likes him much, but he was a splendid footballer, and so some of the fellows took to him for that. Kildare treated him very well, and wanted him to play in practice matches. To-day he has been ill—but we knew that he was only pretending. He affected to have a bad cold, and kept his

face and head wrapped up so that only his eyes could be seen!"

"Ah!" It was a quick breath from the detective.

"We didn't suspect anything from that, but a lot of things seemed to point to his cold being only an excuse for not playing; we thought he was a dissembling brute, and looked into it, you know, to see if he was really ill or not!"

"Very right!"

"I looked into his window, and saw—"

"What did you see?"

"He was washing his face, and I saw it—he had just taken the bandages off to change them. His face was horribly cut all over, red and gashed, and some of the cuts bled afresh as he bathed them!"

The detective rose to his feet.

"How did he get hurt like that?" said Tom Merry quickly. "If it was done by accident, why should he conceal it, and pretend to have a cold? The moment I saw his face I knew that he was the man who had jumped through the window with Mr. Railton after him!"

"There is not the slightest doubt on that point, Tom!"

"You feel as sure as I do, sir?"

"Quite! Come, if you are sufficiently rested. I will call at the police station for a couple of constables, and we'll get to St. Jim's as fast as a car can carry us!"

Ferrers Locke's preparations did not take long. In ten minutes a car, with the detective and Tom Merry and a couple of constables in it, was bowling swiftly along the misty lane towards St. Jim's.

Ferrers Locke rang up Taggles, and the car rolled into the quad, and the four at once ran to the porter's lodge.

"Take this constable up to Mr. Bullivant's room," said Ferrers Locke, unheeding Taggles' amazed inquiries. "Obey me quickly!"

Taggles obeyed.

One of the constables, who had received his instructions, went up with the porter to the door of Bullivant's room and knocked.

Ferrers Locke, Tom Merry, and the other policeman, waited in the shadows below the window.

Tom Merry knew what was expected. As soon as Nobbler Jim knew that a policeman was at his door, he would spring from the window—into the arms of Ferrers Locke.

He was right. The light in the room suddenly went out and the window opened. A figure dropped from the trellis to the ground, and two strong pairs of hands gripped it in a twinkling. Almost before the rascal knew that he was seized, the handcuffs were clinking on his wrists, and he was a prisoner.

The policeman turned on the light of his lantern, and it flashed on the face of the prisoner. A ghastly face—cut and gashed with broken glass—convulsed now with fury.

"Nobbler Jim!"

A stream of curses poured from the prisoner's lips.

"Hang you, Ferrers Locke! You've got me at last, but you'll never get the swag! That's hidden where you will never find it!" he yelled.

"You are mistaken," said the detective quietly. "The police have already visited the old castle—the secret is discovered, and the loot is in their hands!"

The rascal seemed stunned by the detective's words, so quietly spoken. He gave Ferrers Locke a dazed look, but uttered no word as he was led away by the police.

Handcuffed, with a stalwart constable on either side of him Nobbler Jim was driven away in the car to Rylcombe Station.

Ferrers Locke touched Tom Merry on the shoulder.

"Come with me, Tom. I must explain to Dr. Holmes, and tell him, too, how much of the credit of this capture is due to you!"

And a few minutes later Dr. Holmes was listening in utter amazement to the detective's explanations.

Tom Merry was looking very well pleased with himself, and things generally, when he came out of the Head's study. He found a group of juniors waiting for him in the passage. Manners and Lowther had waited for him to return from Rylcombe, and did not comprehend in the least what was on the tapis until the arrest of Nobbler Jim enlightened them. They seized Tom Merry by the arms as he came out of the Head's study, and marched him off, and Study No. 6 crowded round with Figgins & Co. from the New House and a host of other juniors eager to hear the tale.

Tom Merry was called upon by the general voice for an explanation, and he gave it in a few quiet, modest sentences. "Hip—hip!" said Lowther. "Of course, it was bound to fall to us to set the matter to rights. I never did like that chap, you know. No wonder he knew the way to the safe—when he was living here in the school all the time!"

"No wonder," said Blake. "And he used to go out of a

night and burgle, and hide the loot in the old castle, and come back here to lie low—the cheek of it!"

"He played jolly good footer, though," said Herries. "I think they ought to let him off lightly on account of that!"

"Rats!" said Blake. "A chap who could play like that ought to have known better than to steal, I should think. And it was Bullivant—I mean Nobbler Jim—who gave me that tap on the boko in the fog. No wonder he was startled when I tapped him on the shoulder suddenly, and hit out. Perhaps he thought it was Ferrers Locke!"

"Yaas, wathah! I weally think gweat cweedit is due to our study for unwavelling this mystewy!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Eh?" said the Terrible Three together.

"What?" ejaculated Figgins & Co., with one voice. And even Blake and Herries looked surprised.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus firmly. "Who was it first suspected that Bullivant wasn't playin' the beastlay game, you know? I did! I thought he was wottin' and waisted suspicion on the subject. Tom Mewwy simply followed out my ideahs. If I hadn't suspected Bullivant of malingering, Tom Mewwy wouldn't have discovered that he was Nobbler Jim, and if—"

"Nuff ifs," said Tom Merry. "Talk about cheek! We did the trick—we three—and the credit is due to the Shell!"

"Wats! The cweedit belongs to the Fourth Form. I admit that Figgins & Co. have made a muck of it—a weally ghastly failure!"

"Rather!" said Blake and Herries. "Of course, Figgins & Co. were no good!"

"Stuff!" said Figgins. "Rot! Bosh! If we hadn't—"

"If you hadn't made asses of yourselves, you wouldn't look such giddy donkeys at the present moment!" said Blake.

"If you want one on the nose, Blake—"

"Scat! Go and do some more shadowing," said Blake. "You're great hands at that, you three. You can shadow Kerr, and Kerr can shadow Fatty Wynn, and you can all three get shut up in a cellar—and—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" howled the School House crowd.

Figgins, with a face aflame, went for Blake headlong, but the crowd surged between, and he was driven back. Blake was laughing too much to defend himself.

Figgins & Co. tried to make their voices heard, but in vain. They were laughed and howled down.

"Look here!" yelled Figgins, the colour of a beetroot now.

"Rats!" said Tom Merry. "What are these New House bouncers doing in a respectable place like this, anyhow? Kick them out!"

Figgins & Co. were gently kicked out. A roar of derision followed them across the misty quad, and as they disconsolately travelled towards the New House, the echo of the School House yell was wafted in their ears.

"Crash in the New House! Bankruptcy of a rotten firm! Figgins & Co.'s failure!"

THE END.

"Don't forget to order your GEM immediately! Next week's issue contains an extra special yarn entitled 'The Treaty of St. Jim's!' It's double-length—it reaches from cover to cover!"

EASTWOOD SHIELD LEAGUE.

FALL OF THE SAINTS!
RIVALS RUN RIOT!

By "OLD BOY."

Rookwood, Wed.

TOM MERRY'S ankle was a burning topic at St. Jim's during the week following the cup-tie with Rookwood. It was not a serious injury, and with the aid of massage it was hoped that it would be fit for the league fixture at Rookwood. But the mere possibility that the team might need a new centre-forward roused wild hopes in the breast of more than one junior footballer.

Study No. 10 was besieged by a constant stream of callers inquiring about Tom Merry's ankle.

Finally Julian and Hammond and Digby travelled with the team as reserves.

Rookwood played the team that had narrowly lost the previous week, and St. Jim's were unchanged, save for Tom Merry. Tom changed with the rest, but at the last moment he felt it better to take no risks, and Blake went into the centre, with Robert Arthur Digby at inside-left. This was better, as Tom said, than playing himself and possibly being a passenger throughout.

Digby certainly played up manfully to justify his inclusion. The first exchanges were even, and both sides showed signs of wear and tear after the gruelling cup-tie of the previous Wednesday. But league points were at stake, and there was no time to slack.

Rookwood, playing quietly and efficiently, slowly gained the mastery, however, and near half-time Jimmy Silver sent Dodd away with a beautiful pass, and Dodd went through like a knife. Figgins tackled him, but Dodd tapped the leather to Lovell, and Lovell returned it as Kerr tackled him. Dodd, with only Fatty Wynn to beat, shot hard for the left hand corner. But the Falstaff went down full length and turned the ball just round the upright for a corner-kick.

Jimmy Silver himself came up, and with him his wing halves, so that Rookwood had seven men in the goalmouth as

Mornington's centre came across. Fatty Wynn made a jump, fisting high in the air, but a charge from Lovell sent him rolling, and the ball pipped off Lovell's hard head straight into the net.

Rookwood showed no signs of losing their first half lead when the game was resumed.

Good as Blake was, he could not quite fill the gap created by Tom Merry's absence, and Rookwood were safe and sure in defence. Jimmy Silver at centre-half had Blake's measure, and when a good centre-half has a centre-forward "bottled" the attack is crippled.

Tom Merry, sitting next to me, looked rather glum as the Rookwood men swept down on the Saints' goal again, and Fatty Wynn was in the thick of matters. First Lovell shot, and as Fatty fisted out, Mornington leaped in and flashed in a drive that was more like a flash of lightning than a shot. Fatty was simply nowhere near it!

"The luck is out, I'm afraid," said Tom Merry. "Our men are a bit stale."

"What they need is you in the centre," said Julian loyally.

"No, Blake's doing well," answered Tom, shaking his head. "We're having an 'off' day, that's all. But there's time yet—if we pull up our socks!"

Unfortunately for St. Jim's Rookwood gave them no time to pull up their socks,

or even to breathe. Two up, Jimmy Silver & Co. played brilliant football, and it was all the visitors could do to hold them at bay.

"Up, men!" gasped Blake, as the referee glanced at his watch.

Figgins cleared with a lengthy punt, and D'Arcy fastened on the ball desperately. He made ground, and swung it in to Blake, who for once caught Jimmy Silver out of his stride and dribbled through.

"Shoot, Blake!"

Tom Merry was almost hopping with excitement.

Blake had the goal at his mercy—but for Rawson. And Rawson, as usual, was coming out. Reeking nothing of himself, Rawson dived directly at Blake's feet. Blake went down in a heap, but not before he had shot.

As he rolled over and over on the ground a roar from every St. Jim's man present told him that he had scored. But Blake did not get up—Rawson's elbow had caught him accidentally, and he was "winded."

By the time Blake had recovered, and the ball was bobbing again, all hope of saving the game had gone. St. Jim's were defending grimly when the final whistle blew—with the score two to one against!

"Good man, Silver!" gasped Blake. "Licked—fair and square!"

"What did I say?" grinned Lovell. "I told you we'd have our revenge!"

As the teams trooped off Tom Merry patted Digby on the back. Digby had played a fine game, and it was no fault of his that his side had suffered defeat.

"Never mind the weather!" sang Monty Lowther untunefully, as the St. Jim's men clambered aboard their charabanc. "The sun will shine another day!"

"Hear, hear! Hurrah!"

"Three cheers for the losers!" sang out Jimmy Silver.

And the cheers were given. Their defeat means that St. Jim's have slid down the league, but that will only make their fight to recover the coveted honour of first place all the more interesting.

RESULTS.

ROOKWOOD .. 2 **ST. JIM'S** 1
Lovell, Mornington Blake.

Teams—**ROOKWOOD**: Rawson; Raby, Conroy; Erroll, Silver, Doyle; Mornington, Lovell, Dodd, Newcome, Grace. **ST. JIM'S**: Wynn; Figgins, Kerr; Redfern, Noble, Lowther; Talbot, Levison, Blake, Digby, D'Arcy.

ABBOTSFORD .. 2 **BAGSHOT** 2
Fane (2) Putter, Pankley.

HIGHCLIFFE 4 **CLAREMONT** .. 2
De Courcy, Courtney St. Clair, Baxter.

REDCLIFFE 6 **BANNINGTON** .. 0
Mills, Judd (3), Stoker (2).

RYLCOMBE G. S. .. 7 **ST. JUDE'S** .. 0
Tadpole, Gay (2).

Monk (2), Wootton mi., Woolley.

RIPPING COMPLETE ROOKWOOD YARN!

LOOKING AFTER LOVELL!

By OWEN CONQUEST.



Uncle James of Rookwood becomes "Auntie" for the day! He dresses up—and dresses Lovell down!

CHAPTER 1.

Jimmy Silver's Wheeze!

"**E** YES like stars!"

"Eh?"

"Stars!" said Lovell of the Rookwood Fourth seriously. "Stars, jars, mars, bars, cars—"

"What the thump's biting you, old man?" asked Jimmy Silver, rising from the table in the end study where the Fistical Four had been doing prep. "Working out a cross-word puzzle?"

"The fathead hasn't done much prep, anyway!" remarked Newcome. "Dalton'll be after you in the morning, Lovell, if you're not careful. He's kept a pretty good eye on you since he heard about your being spoony over the Head's niece!"

"Don't interrupt!" snapped Lovell, without looking up from the exercise-book on which he was concentrating.

"Stars, tars—"

"Can it, for goodness' sake!" urged Raby, making a sudden grab at the exercise-book that was occupying so much of the lovelorn Lovell's attention. "Anyone would think you were— Oh crikey! That's what you are doing! Poetry, or I'm a Dutchman!"

"What!" yelled Silver and Newcome incredulously.

"Fact!" grinned Raby, deftly keeping off the furious Lovell with one hand while he held out the exercise-book in the other. "Just listen to this:

"Your lips are ruby-red as wine,
Your eyes are like the twinkling stars;
No wonder that for you I pine."

"No wonder that my poem jars!" grinned Jimmy Silver, extemporising a last line on the spur of the moment. "How's that, Lovell? Neat finish—eh?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Cackling idiots!" snorted Arthur Edward Lovell, getting back his exercise-book from Raby at last, and transferring it to his jacket pocket. "I don't pretend to be much of a poet; but I fancy it's as good as any of you chaps could do, anyway, as far as it goes."

"Doesn't go very far, does it, old bean?" said Jimmy Silver. "Seriously, though, Lovell, don't you think you'd do better with Brenda Chisholm with something more snappy and up to date? What about a limerick?"

Lovell rubbed his chin dubiously.

"I should hardly have thought a limerick would have been much good—"

"Rot! It's the very thing! You don't want to lay on the compliments with a trowel—no need to talk about eyes like stars. Just something simple, with a kick in the last line. something like this:

"A certain young lady named Brenda
Has ways that are charming and tender;
So, despite her cross eyes,
My remark won't surprise:
She's the pick of the feminine gender!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Newcome and Raby.

Lovell glared.

"I've told you before that I won't have Miss Chisholm's name referred to disrespectfully, Jimmy Silver! Who said she'd got cross eyes, anyway?"

"Nobody, old bean!"

"But you said—"

"Oh, I said it in the limerick, of course!" assented the leader of the Fourth cheerfully. "That's not meant to be true, though. It's what they call poetic licence!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Lovell grunted.

"All I seem to get from you chaps now is idiotic cackling!"

"And all we seem to get from you is a lot of tosh about Miss Brenda's eyes!" retorted Raby. "We're quite aware that they're rather nice eyes, but there's a limit to human endurance, you know!"

"Oh, rather!"

"No need to rub it in, chaps!" said Jimmy Silver pacifically. "If Lovell's gone potty on Brenda Chisholm, he can't help it, I suppose; it might happen to anyone. Best thing to do is to try to make him see reason and common sense. Now, look here, Lovell, old fellow—"

Lovell frowned.

"Are you going to give me a free sample of reason and common sense?"

"Just that!"

"Then I don't want it, thanks all the same!"

And Lovell, with a brief nod to his grinning colleagues, quitted the study.

Jimmy Silver sighed as the door closed behind him. "Poor old Lovell! To think that we should have lived to see this day, you men!"

"It's the giddy limit!" said Raby disgustedly. "Chap must be off his rocker to get so sloppy over a blessed girl!" "Something'll have to be done about it," said Newcome, with conviction. "The thing is, what?"

Jimmy Silver looked up with a glimmer in his eyes. "I haven't said anything about it so far, chaps, but I did get an idea yesterday. I've been waiting to see if Lovell showed any signs of returning sanity."

"Bout time we gave up all hope of that!" grunted Raby. "What's the wheeze, Jimmy?"

"Briefly, to drag in Brenda Chisholm's aunt and scare the life out of him!" was Jimmy Silver's reply. "If the old girl comes along and gives Lovell a good straight talking to, possibly supplemented by a larruping with her gamp—"

"Wha-a-at?" "It'll probably bring Lovell to his senses quicker than anything. And if Lovell's aunt turns up at the same time and tells Brenda to choke him off, we shall get help from the other side, too!"

"But—but—" "How on earth can we arrange for their blessed aunts to trot along for our benefit?" howled Raby. "We don't even know their aunts; perhaps they haven't any!"

The leader of the Fistical Four smiled. "Haven't you lived long enough to know better than to question the brilliant wheezes of your Uncle James, Raby? I don't mean their real aunts, fathead! Why go to the trouble of raking up real aunts when one of us, suitably disguised, will do equally well?"

"My hat!" "Simple, you see!" grinned Jimmy Silver. "I'll do it myself; it ought to be rather a lark. With one disguise, I can kill two birds with one stone—pretend to be Lovell's aunt when I see Miss Chisholm and Miss Chisholm's aunt when I see Lovell!"

"Great pip!" "Of course, there's just the risk of their finding out. But I can more or less swear each in turn to secrecy, so that they won't find out from each other, anyway. It's only a chance, admittedly. But it might come off."

"Jolly well would come off if only you could pass muster with them as an antique female!" chuckled Newcome. "The question is, can you?"

"Don't see why not. I've done female impersonations before in dramatic society shows, and we've got plenty of props in the box-room upstairs to rig out half a dozen passable aunts, if necessary!"

"True enough!" admitted Newcome. "Well, if you really think you can carry it off, it's a tiptop wheeze. Otherwise—"

"Otherwise, rats!" said Jimmy Silver cheerfully. "I'm having a cut at it, anyway, and we shall see what we shall see!"

Which was undeniably true.

CHAPTER 2.

Enter Auntie!

"READY?" "Ready for anything, old bean!" said Jimmy Silver, replying to Newcome's query. "How do I look?"

The leader of the Fistical Four stepped out from behind the pile of trunks and boxes in the box-room where they were standing and allowed the light from the window to fall on him.

Newcome looked—and gasped. "M-m-my hat!"

Newcome was astonished; and there was good reason for astonishment. Nobody looking into the box-room at that moment could possibly have recognised in the severe old lady who was talking to Newcome the cheery leader of the Rookwood Fourth.

Jimmy Silver had often taken part in amateur theatricals and knew something about the art of make-up and disguise. That knowledge had stood him in good stead on this occasion.

"Shouldn't have thought it possible!" declared Newcome, when he had recovered from his initial surprise. "They'll fall for you like ninespins!"

"Fall, indeed! How dare you use such slangy expressions to a lady?" snapped Jimmy Silver, in a high-pitched, falsetto voice. "Any more of your nonsense, my boy, and I shall rap your knuckles with my umbrella—like this!"

"Chuck it, fathead!" gasped Newcome, in alarm, backing away rather quickly as his disguised leader made a

menacing lunge with the umbrella. "You'll do, Jimmy—take it from me! You're more like an aunt than a real aunt is!"

"Should do, then," grinned Jimmy Silver, speaking in his natural cheery voice again. "Now we'll get busy. Raby's keeping Lovell occupied?"

"They're swopping stars in the study. Be there for hours, if left undisturbed," replied Newcome. "You're going to see Miss Brenda first, then, Jimmy?"

"Right on the wicket! Don't forget to tell Lovell that I've gone out. He might smell a rat if he noticed I was missing for the first time when Aunt Jane trotted in."

"All serene! Kim on, then!" They quitted the box-room, and went downstairs rather cautiously. It would not have done for a strange, middle-aged lady to have been seen on the upper floors of the House.

Luck was with them. They had reached the last flight of stairs, which led down to the Hall, before they encountered a soul.

Then they ran into Bulkeley of the Sixth. Newcome regarded Bulkeley a little nervously. But the disguised Jimmy Silver was not a bit flurried.

"Another of your little playmates, my dear Newcome?" he exclaimed, in a shrill and extremely penetrating voice. "Quite a nice little boy, by the look of him."

Bulkeley stopped dead on the stairs, his expression quite extraordinary. It was a new experience for the great man of the Sixth to be referred to as a "little playmate," and a "nice little boy."

"Hem! A relative of yours, Newcome?" he asked. "It's—its Lovell's aunt, Bulkeley," stammered Newcome. "Naturally, she doesn't know—"

"Naturally," said Bulkeley cuttingly. "Perhaps you'll explain to her later the difference between a Sixth Form man and a fag."

Bulkeley went on his way, frowning. He frowned still more as he heard the "lady" remark shrilly:

"Not quite such a nice little boy as I thought, Newcome." "Well, of all the silly asses—" gasped Newcome, when they were out of Bulkeley's range of hearing again.

"Bit of a nerve, I suppose," admitted Jimmy Silver. "But we don't often get a chance of cheeking the Sixth. And, anyway, it was good practice. Bulkeley didn't suspect for a moment."

"Lucky for you he didn't," grinned Newcome. "Well, we've got through the House all right. Want me to come any farther?"

"No. You go back now, and keep Lovell quiet till I'm ready to see him. Shan't be long."

"Good luck, then!" The disguised junior tripped gracefully down the steps of the House, and headed in the direction of the Head's garden, where Miss Brenda Chisholm, the Head's niece, and the cause of Lovell's eccentricities, was usually to be found after tea.

Newcome returned to the Fourth passage to assist Raby in keeping Lovell engaged till "Auntie" should appear.

Jimmy Silver, feeling quite at ease, despite his unaccustomed habiliments, duly reached the Head's garden, still preserving the mincing gait he had adopted as part of his disguise.

Luck was again with him. Miss Chisholm, sauntering down to the garden gate from the Head's house, had just reached it at the moment when the disguised Fourth-Former approached.

The Head's pretty niece had a surprise a moment later when a shrill voice inquired:

"Miss Chisholm, I believe?" Brenda Chisholm nodded.

"I am Miss Chisholm. What can I do for you?" "You do not know who I am, young woman!" shrilled Jimmy Silver. "Let me introduce myself. I am the aunt of a young man with whom you are acquainted. His name is Lovell."

"Lovell, of course," said Miss Chisholm, still obviously nonplussed. "I suppose he wished you to meet me."

"On the contrary, young woman. He has no idea that I am interviewing you, and I could wish you to keep the fact of this interview from his knowledge."

The Head's niece looked even more surprised.

"Certainly, if you wish it. But I don't quite see—"

"There is no need for you to see," said Jimmy Silver, preserving his shrill falsetto with a noble effort. "All I require from you, madam, is an undertaking to restore him to sanity again."

"R-restore him to sanity?" stammered Miss Chisholm, in bewilderment. "But Lovell is perfectly sane."

"I regret to have to contradict, another lady, madam;

but since you began to exercise your feminine allurements upon him, he has been far from sane."

The Head's niece uttered an exclamation.

"How dare you insinuate—"

"There, there! I didn't mean to upset you!" shrilled Jimmy Silver, inwardly longing to yell with laughter, but not daring to relax for one moment the severity of his expression. "Please make allowances, Miss Chisholm, for an adoring aunt who has the interests of her darling nephew at heart."

"By all means!" said the bewildered girl. "But are you implying that Lovell is—is—"

"Spoons on you!" finished Jimmy Silver. "Yes, madam, I am!"

"Dear me!"

"So you see how serious it is," said Lovell's alleged aunt. "I hope you will take my words to heart, young woman, and choke him off."

Brenda Chisholm tossed her head.

"You talk in a very extraordinary way, and I don't altogether understand. Certainly I had no idea that Lovell was, as you say, 'spoons' on me. But if, as you suggest,

and aggressive-looking female, who held an umbrella at a threatening angle. Evidently it was that umbrella that had caused his shoulder to experience the sensation of having been momentarily dislocated.

Tubby glared.

"Look here—" he began.

"Young man, you look almost devoid of intelligence; but I expect you will own just sufficient understanding to conduct me in the right direction. Take me to Arthur Edward Lovell."

"Well, of the cheek— Whoop!" concluded Tubby Muffin, as the visitor's umbrella came down hard on his fat knuckles.

"Don't talk so much—lead the way!" commanded the aggressive-looking lady. "At once!"

There was a chuckle from the group of juniors round the notice-board where Tubby Muffin had been standing.

"Go it, Tubby!"

"Jump to it!"

"Always be polite to visitors!"

Lovell's visitor glared.

"Since you are all so keen, perhaps you would all like to



WALLOP! The umbrella which had been meant for Lovell missed him by a yard and landed crack on Mr. Dalton's head!

I am the cause of his behaving erratically, I can easily end it—by not seeing him again."

"You understand the requirements of the situation exactly," smiled Lovell's bogus aunt. "Thank you, madam! Good-evening!"

He turned on his heel and tripped off. In point of fact he had to do it. Another moment, and there would have been an explosion of mirth from Jimmy Silver. As it was, he was shaking with suppressed laughter all the way back to the House.

The first half of his mission had now been accomplished. The second, and probably the more difficult, half lay before him.

Jimmy Silver tripped up the steps of the House again to achieve it.

CHAPTER 3.

Awful for Lovell!

"YOUNG man!"

Cecil Adolphus Muffin, better known as Tubby, started, as the shrill appellation fell on his fat ears, and something hard simultaneously struck him on the shoulder.

Tubby wheeled round, to find himself facing a severe

assist," she squeaked. "Take me up to my nephew's room—all of you!"

"What!"

"The whole crowd of you!" shrilled Brenda Chisholm's aunt, alias Jimmy Silver, brandishing "her" umbrella ferociously. "Lead the way, you disrespectful little rascals!"

"Great pip!"

"Look here, ma'am—"

Whack, whack, whack!

It was the umbrella at work. The crowd round the notice-board scattered, yelling.

Most of the juniors escaped, and the aggressive "female's" suggestion that the entire crowd should lead the way was not put into effect.

Tubby Muffin, however, was given no chance of escape. The shrill-voiced visitor grabbed him by the ear and sternly ordered him to march to Lovell's study without delay.

The pair marched upstairs, followed at a respectful distance by a ribald crowd. The demoralised Tubby, his fat ear still in the visitor's grip, rolled along to the end study and viciously kicked open the door.

"Lovell in? Oh, good!" exclaimed the fat junior, as he

recognised Lovell sitting at the table. "Here's some one that wants to see you!"

"You—you want me, ma'am?" Lovell inquired.

The visitor eyed him up and down with a fierce glare.

"Are you Arthur Edward Lovell?" she asked shrilly.

"Yes, but—"

"Then you are the young villain I want." The visitor closed the door with a loud crash, and stalked into the middle of the study. "You, then, are the boy who has had the audacity to fall in love with my niece?"

Lovell jumped.

"Your—your niece? Then you're Miss Chisholm's aunt?"

"Evidently you possess powers of deduction, whatever else you may lack!" remarked Brenda Chisholm's aunt, alias Jimmy Silver of the Fourth, with withering scorn. "And now to business, young man! Since it seems that you hold my niece in such high esteem, it follows, presumably, that you would like, in due course, to marry her!"

Arthur Edward Lovell gasped. Even in his wildest dreams that possibility had seemed too remote for contemplation.

"I—I—" he stuttered.

"Quite!" shrieked the visitor, without waiting to hear Lovell get beyond the first person singular. "That, Master Lovell, is why I am here. I have come to inquire into your prospects—financial prospects, I mean, of course!"

"Oh!" gasped Lovell.

Brenda Chisholm's "aunt" thumped the table with "her" umbrella to emphasise what followed.

"I want you to understand distinctly, Master Lovell, that my niece is accustomed to a luxurious standard of living. By that, I mean that she requires from her husband an independent income of ten thousand pounds a year!"

"T-t-ten thousand?"

"Ten thousand!" repeated Lovell's irascible visitor, giving the table another whack. "That is the minimum! Now, Master Lovell, before we go into further details, answer 'Yes' or 'No' to this question: Are you in a position to allow your prospective wife ten thousand a year?"

Lovell groaned.

"I—I wasn't actually thinking of marrying Miss Chisholm, ma'am—"

"Are you going to give me your promise, or are you going to force me to knock a little sense into you with my umbrella?"

"I—I only wanted to say, ma'am— Oh crikey!"

Apparently Brenda's "aunt" had come to the end of "her" patience. At all events, the umbrella suddenly rose in the air.

Lovell didn't stop to argue with that umbrella. He wisely dodged.

And it was at that precise moment that the door opened.

Richard Dalton, M.A., master of the Fourth, looked in, evidently on one of his periodical visits to junior studies. Mr. Dalton, who had possibly heard sounds of strife from the passage, was frowning. He soon had cause to frown still more.

For the umbrella which had been intended for Lovell missed that junior altogether, and caught Mr. Dalton fairly and squarely on the head instead!

"Whooop!"

It was a wild howl from the master of the Fourth.

CHAPTER 4.

Lovell's Good-bye!

MR. DALTON, as a rule, was rather a dignified gentleman. But even the most dignified people can look undignified sometimes. Mr. Dalton looked undignified on this occasion.

He staggered back against the opposite wall of the Fourth passage, yelling:

"Oh! Owl! Whoop!"

"Oh crikey!"

The warfare in the end study came to a sudden end. Three juniors and an eccentric-looking female stared at Mr. Dalton in dismay.

"Are—are you hurt, sir?" gasped Lovell.

Mr. Dalton righted himself and glared.

"You do not imagine that I can be hit on the head with an umbrella without being hurt, Lovell, I suppose?" he rapped out sarcastically. "Who is this lady?"

"It's—it's Miss Chisholm's aunt, sir!"

"What!"

"Miss Chisholm's aunt, sir. I didn't invite her here myself, sir."

"Ridiculous!" hooted Mr. Dalton. "You are suggesting that this person is a relative of Miss Chisholm—in that case, of the headmaster, too?"

"Well, sir, she said—"

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"We can soon find out," said the Fourth master grimly. "Kindly follow me downstairs, madam. You boys will come, too."

Dicky Dalton stalked down the passage.

At the end of the passage he found himself saved a journey. For, coming up the stairs was Brenda Chisholm herself, accompanied by a tall young man whom the juniors recognised as Archie Wilmott, a friend of hers whom they had met a few days before.

Mr. Dalton stopped.

"Ah, Miss Chisholm! I was just coming to see you!"

Mr. Dalton waved his hand in the direction of the disguised Jimmy Silver. "Do you know this lady?"

Brenda Chisholm nodded.

"Yes. It's—"

"Your aunt, of course," said Lovell.

The Head's niece stared.

"What are you talking about, Lovell? It's your own aunt!"

"What!"

It was Lovell's turn to stare.

Finally, everyone stared—at the wretched leader of the Fourth, who was beginning to pray for the earth to open and swallow him up.

Mr. Dalton broke the silence.

"So you are each under the impression that this person is the relative of the other? I think I begin to see daylight. Somebody is playing a hoax!"

And then Jimmy Silver found his voice.

"Th—that's it, sir," he stuttered. "It's—it's only me—Silver!"

"What!"

Jimmy Silver desperately jerked off his bonnet and wig, and rubbed away some of the greasypaint he had used.

For a moment nobody spoke. Then there was a laugh.

It came from Miss Chisholm.

Dicky Dalton did not laugh. He was glaring.

"Silver! Boy!"

"I'm sorry, sir!" gasped Jimmy Silver. "I did it from the best of motives. The—the fact is, you see—"

He broke off. Now that it had come to an explanation, it seemed an exceedingly difficult matter to explain to the satisfaction of all interested parties.

Lovell stepped into the breach. Lovell was almost breathless from the shock he had received; but he could see daylight.

"I suppose I'm the one to blame, really, sir," he said.

"I've felt rather—rather friendly to Miss Chisholm, you see, and these chaps wanted to cure me of it, so—so—"

"So they sent a bogus aunt to me to warn me off, and a bogus aunt to you for the same purpose," laughed Brenda Chisholm. "Really, it's too rich! I must be the one to blame, really. But I assure you, Mr. Dalton, I had no idea of all the trouble I was causing."

"Naturally not, Miss Chisholm!" gasped Mr. Dalton. "The whole thing is ridiculous—preposterous! I am sorry indeed that these boys have caused you so much annoyance. I shall see that they are adequately punished."

"I am quite as much to blame as they are, Mr. Dalton. You'll make me very happy by allowing the whole thing to drop."

The Head's niece looked eloquently at the master of the Fourth.

Apparently Dicky Dalton was not altogether immune from an eloquent look from Brenda Chisholm, for, after a moment's indecision, he smiled.

"Very well, then, Miss Chisholm. It was a very silly prank on Silver's part; but since you put it in this way, I can only accede to your request. The matter will be overlooked."

"Oh, thank you, sir!" chanted the Fistical Four, greatly relieved by the momentous decision, and quickly vanished.

Going up to the dorm, Arthur Edward's face broke into a sudden grin.

"Well, I was a silly ass!" he exclaimed. "So were you chaps, but not so silly as I was."

"All in a lifetime!" said Jimmy Silver philosophically.

"Anyway, are we all serene again now?"

"Never anything else, were we?"

"And you're quite cured of this spongy spasm?"

"Completely and absolutely cured!"

"Hurrah!"

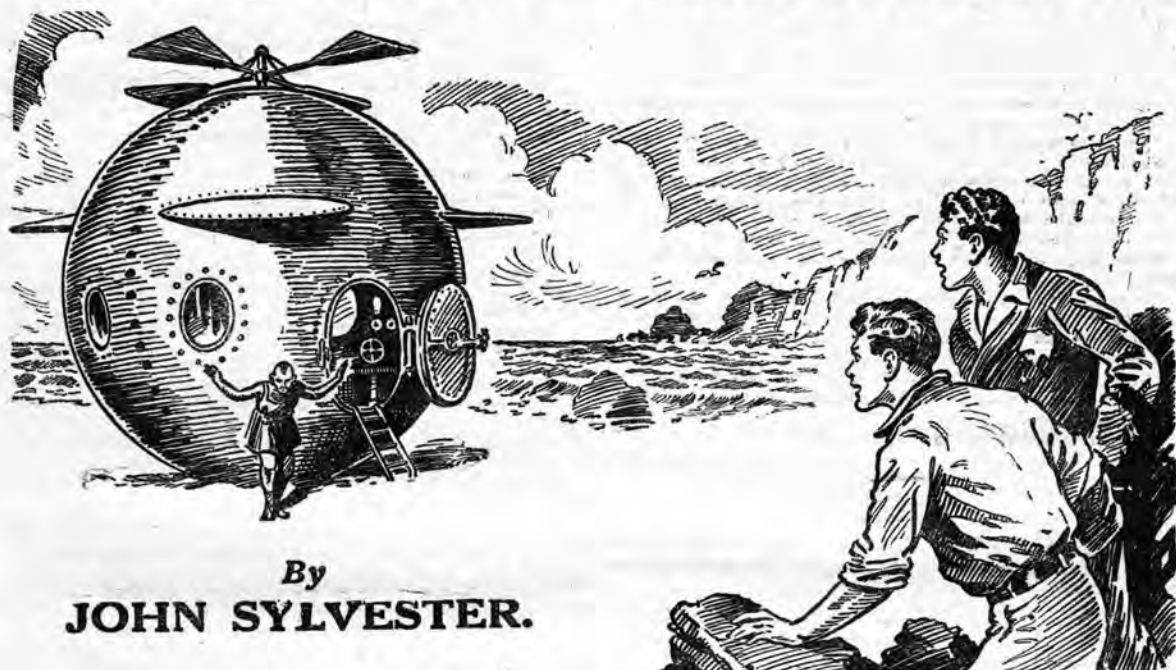
And the Fistical Four went to bed in great good spirits. And Lovell dreamed about football.

(Great news! Next week's GEM contains a special double-length yarn of Tom Merry & Co. It's called "The Treaty of St. Jim's!" and it's a WOW!)

STIRRING ADVENTURE YARN.

COMPLETE STORY.

THE SKY RAIDERS!



By
JOHN SYLVESTER.

**A MAN-EATING ORCHID EATS A DWARF! THRILLS GALORE IN THIS FINE
ADVENTURE STORY**

Found!

BUMP! Billy landed with a thud on some soft mass at the bottom of the pit. The soft mass squirmed beneath him, and he gasped as a familiar voice complained.

"Gerroff my head!"

"Nick!"

Then Billy broke into a terrific laugh. He had got used to surprises since that day when he and Nick had started on their voyage to Mars.

They had been walking along the shore in Cornwall, when they had discovered a weird-looking spherical flying machine, and had entered it to explore. Its only occupant had been a blue-skinned boy, whom they had later learnt was called Osaka. He was a Martian.

Suddenly the machine had started, and Billy and Nick found themselves hurtling through space—bound for Mars!

Months afterwards, it seemed, they had fallen into a terrible swamp on Mars, but they had reached an island in it, and there spent the night. In the morning Billy had awakened to find himself alone. His chums had gone. Then an enormous bird had swooped down, lifted Billy up, and carried him to the haunt of some dwarfs. The dwarfs had led Billy into an underground cave, and then pushed him into the pit in which he now found himself.

Now he was laughing as hard as he could.

"Gosh!" he panted. "And I thought you were a sacred crocodile or something."

"Dashed funny!" grumbled Nick. "I'll see the joke better if you take your foot off my face."

"Sorry, old scout!" grinned Billy. "But I didn't expect to come down in the world so suddenly. Now perhaps you'll tell me how you both got here."

"The same way as you," replied Osaka. "We were both asleep when the Warnawl pounced on us. We hardly had time to cry out."

"But it—that thing—didn't carry you both?" asked Billy incredulously.

"One in each claw. You would hardly think it possible. But it's very strong. The wild ones live on the natives."

"Then you've heard of the beast before?"

"There are stuffed Warnawls in our museums," Osaka replied; "but they are extinct except in the jungle."

"I'd like to be in one of your museums now—as a visitor, I mean. But it doesn't much look as though we shall even get there as a stuffed specimen."

"We are in the dickens of a mess," agreed Nick. "I've been talking to Osaka. We were just waiting for you to arrive before we decided what to do."

"Then you were certain I'd join you?" asked the astonished Billy.

"They wanted three, at least. They've been keeping their precious god on half rations. Osaka heard them saying that there had to be voluntary victims."

"What the blazes are you talking about?" cried Billy.

"It's a nasty subject. But the point is that these blighters worship a beast that lives on the edge of the swamp, in a sort of pool. It's not a crocodile; it's not a squid. It isn't like anything you've ever heard of. But it gets ravenous, and when there aren't enough prisoners of war, they have to feed the thing with members of the tribe."

"I see," nodded Billy slowly. "We came just in time. Well, I'm all against cruelty to animals, but I think we've got to let it go hungry for a bit longer."

"But how?"

"Osaka still has one charge left in his gun. You saw what it did to the swamp monsters. It's a sort of death ray. It would kill anything within reach. But we've got to be jolly careful how we use it, because once that's gone we are finished."

Billy thought for a moment.

"Are your hands free?"

"Yes, they sort of lassoed us, but it was easy enough to get rid of the rope."

"You don't want to get rid of it. There are three ropes. That's how we are going to get out of here."

"I don't see—"

"No, you can't possibly see from where you are. But just where I stepped off the brink I noticed a stoutish post. If we could fasten our rope to that we could climb out."

Nick looked upwards and shook his head.

"There's a guard up there. He'd cut the rope as soon as he spotted our game."

"We've got to deal with the guard first," said Billy grimly, and Osaka suddenly became interested.

"I believe it's possible," he declared. "I'm pretty useful flinging the rope. I didn't do so badly when we had to get off the sinking airship."

"You did darned well, and you are going to repeat your little trick. Now, let's join up all the rope we've got."

It was a relief to act. Their position was really more desperate even than they admitted. But here, at any rate, was one chance in a billion to get away.

"It's going to be awkward to throw upwards," said Billy, when the knots were tied. "One trouble is, the guard may shoot for help when we try."

"I'll have to get him first time," replied Osaka. "But it's not so hard as you think. You've forgotten something. You took a jolly long drop just now. Have you wondered why you didn't hurt yourself?"

"I thought Nick was the reason," Billy grinned. Then: "By Jove, you are right, though. You mean—"

"The force of gravity is different on Mars than on the earth," Osaka explained.

He pointed out that Mars, being smaller than the earth, did not attract bodies with so much force. Consequently you could throw a lump of rock quite easily on Mars, which you could hardly move on the earth.

"That's darned handy," said Nick. "It means you can jump without hurting yourself so much. But, of course, it applies all round."

"Which is the snag," admitted Osaka. "However, here goes!"

Escape!

OSAKA took careful aim. They could see the dwarf standing on the edge of the pit. He seemed to be leaning on a spear.

Whiz!

The rope sang through the air. The guard, as they feared, jumped aside. But he saw the rope, and, thinking to foil their intentions, he seized it.

As he did so, Osaka pulled hard. The rope tautened and the slip-knot suddenly became tight on the arms of the astonished guard.

Before he could tear it away, Osaka gave a tremendous jerk. There was a yell of terror. The pygmy swayed and crashed into the pit.

"Look out!" gasped Nick.

A crashing weight descended on them. It turned into a writhing mass of arms and legs.

They soon silenced him, however. So far, so good. The rope was flung again, but it missed. Three times Osaka tried to find the post, but he failed.

"Like hoop-la!" grinned Billy encouragingly.

The fourth time proved lucky.

"We'll have to go one at a time."

"Then you go first, Osaka. You may have to use that popgun."

There was not a moment to lose. Agile as a monkey, Osaka hauled himself to the top. Nick followed, but when Billy was only half-way up he heard a shout.

"They are coming! Hurry!"

"Never mind me! Go ahead!"

But they waited, sweating with suspense. Billy had no sooner scrambled over the edge than he saw, at the other entrance to the cavern, a dozen dwarfs rushing towards them.

"Try this tunnel to the right!" cried Osaka.

A spear missed his shoulder by inches.

All three ducked as they ran. It seemed impossible to avoid being hit; but they gained the temporary shelter of a new tunnel.

"Wonder if it's the way out?"

Or it might lead them farther into the labyrinth.

They could hear muffled cries behind, and suddenly they also heard shouts coming from the opposite direction—towards them.

"We are trapped!" gasped Osaka. "Another lot are coming. We are caught between the two!"

"But there's another passage branching off in front. Try that."

There was a chance they would take the wrong passage and meet the other dwarfs tearing towards them. It was difficult to judge from the sounds.

They risked it, however, and, so far, it looked as though they had chosen rightly. This passage began to broaden, and was growing lighter.

"It leads to the forest. It must!" panted Nick.

"Then we are saved, unless—"

Osaka hadn't the breath to finish the sentence. A renewed roar showed that the two forces had joined. But the light

was getting better. A moment later they saw a bright patch of daylight.

"Quick!"

But, despite their danger, they slowed down. Daylight was in front, and possibly freedom; but something checked them. A smell of putrefaction so abominable that it was hardly possible to endure.

"Ough! Talk about rotten eggs—"

"But listen!" cried Osaka, in despair. "In a few seconds we shall be overtaken."

"I can't stick it!" gasped Nick, going green. "Anything else—"

They had to force themselves to continue. Billy felt sick. The nauseating smell became even more powerful. It left them dizzy.

"Here they come! The blighters can't have any noses!"

"I wish they hadn't got any spears!" said Billy, as the first of the pursuers came into sight. "You'll have to use your gun, Osaka."

But Osaka, who was ahead, had suddenly come to a standstill. The tunnel did not lead into the forest, as he had hoped. It ended abruptly, and a steep slope led down to a wide pool.

The pool was at the bottom of a crater. All around rose a sheer wall of red rock.

On the edge of the cliff were swarms of dwarfs. They appeared wildly excited. Soon the reason was apparent.

Wearing a fantastic garb of feathers, two, who were evidently witch-doctors, came to the brink carrying a struggling victim. He was held aloft and then hurled into the pool.

Drums rolled out like thunder. The screaming wretch struck the water.

"Look!" cried Billy hoarsely.

The water was dark green with what at first had seemed to be weeds; but now it proved to be the leaves of a gigantic plant.

The whole plant, not unlike a water-lily, stirred and came to the surface. As soon as the body of the doomed dwarf struck one of the leaves, it curled with weird sensitiveness.

Actually it released a gum-like substance, so adhesive that escape was impossible. And the sticky liquid sent up fresh waves of an unbearable odour, like decaying vegetation.

"He's going inside—the petals are opening!"

"Like a fly-catcher," faltered Nick, "on a big scale."

Slowly the crimson petals unfurled. The thing seemed to have intelligence. The terrified victim disappeared into that fleshy mouth.

"That's what they meant for us!" muttered Billy.

"They still do!" Osaka exclaimed, wheeling as the natives who had been creeping silently up from behind made a sudden rush.

In a flash Billy found himself involved in a hand-to-hand fight. Anxious not to rob the man-eating orchid they worshipped of its prey, the natives hesitated to use their spears.

But small in stature though they were, Billy was astonished at their strength. In a wrestling match with a pygmy head and shoulders shorter than himself, it was all he could do to throw his opponent, and he knew a few tricks of ju-jitsu.

A blow on the head sent him reeling backwards. At the same time, dazedly, he was aware of Nick throwing up his hands and falling off the edge. He struck the pool with a great splash.

Frantically, Osaka tried to get out his terrible lethal weapon. There was only one charge left in it, but now was the time to use it. Only he was struggling with three pygmies, who were trying to force him off the parapet.

All this was seen by Billy in an instant. He struck blindly at a tattooed face, managed to avoid a sweeping club, but suddenly his leg was seized. He struggled to save himself. He knew he was perilously near the brink.

What happened next he was never sure. He was conscious of a violent blow on the back of the neck, and all at once he was falling again through empty space.

The water closed over his head. When he came up the terrible odour, released by the orchid to stupefy its victims, nearly reduced him to senselessness.

He tried to swim, but his legs were caught in weeds that seemed to tighten with conscious purpose. Then he saw Nick, trapped like the first victim, on an enormous petal.

The terrible mouth was opening again. They were as helpless as insects. Nick was being dragged towards the gaping red cavity. Another moment—

But Osaka acted. Breaking free, he had discharged the death ray into the pool. The effect was instantaneous and ghastly.

The water was whipped into a red froth. The petals and long green trailers writhed and convulsed in death agony.

"Good old Inky!" breathed Billy, treading water. "But what's going to happen to us now we've killed their precious pet?"

Vengeance, however, was very far from the thoughts of the dismayed dwarfs. They were dumbfounded by the sight.

The drums had stopped beating, and like a portent there was a roaring sound in the sky itself.

Billy looked up. He saw an air machine circling overhead, round and glistening, not unlike the one in which they had made their journey.

"We are saved!" Thin and far away, Osaka's voice was, nevertheless, shrill with relief. "It's the rescue party come to find us."

The rescue party. That meant not only were they saved, but they would see the rest of the planet—the civilised part.

Billy gave a whoop of delight, but it was tempered by one reflection. This would be the end of their adventures. The rest would seem tame after this beginning.

He need not have worried!

War!

"I SUPPOSE," said Billy thoughtfully, "that big green star must be the Earth?"

He stared through a porthole of the airship as it rose into the night, and Nick Redburn came up beside him.

"Feeling homesick?" he grinned.

"Not jolly likely. There's heaps more I want to see on Mars. We don't know the first thing yet. The swamp was only a sideshow. Somehow it got left over from prehistoric times. But Mars itself must be a hundred times more civilised than the Earth."

"Yes," nodded Dick. "I suppose it's what we'll be like in a thousand years' time. When you think of an airship like this it shows how far ahead they are. It can go straight up and down, and even under the sea. It's like a shell, only hollow, and even faster."

"And talking of shells, you can bet your life they've improved on all that. They know all about poison gases and death rays and so on. If there was a war on—"

"But there is," said a voice just behind them, and they both spun round in surprise to see Osaka.

The Martian boy's eyes were sparkling with excitement. His face seemed to have turned an even deeper shade of blue.

"There's a war right enough. My own country is fighting the Craws. I've just been talking to the pilot. What's more, he says we've got to join in."

"Good egg!" chuckled Billy. "Down with the Craws."

"LOOK!" cried Billy hoarsely. As the dwarf hit the giant orchid the petals curled, and a mouth opened to receive the falling body!



sock 'em in their jaws!" He hit out at an imaginary enemy with his fist. "I'm feeling great. I want to bash somebody!"

"Well, don't start on me," protested Nick, jumping back. "You'll have lots of chances. But look here, Osaka, what's it all about? How do you fight on Mars? You don't use guns, do you?"

Osaka shook his head vigorously and explained.

"Guns went out centuries ago," he said. "There are still some to be seen in museums. Most of the fighting now is carried on with electric rays. Every new improvement to one of these rays causes a war, since for a time the country with the best ray can beat all comers."

That was the trouble now.

"My own country—Borak—is fighting the Craws. We are blue skins, and they are yellow. So far as numbers go we are about the same."

"Up with the blues!" cried Billy.

"We'd win easily if it wasn't for this new invention. The worst part is that it's really our own. Only it was stolen

about six months ago. And now—I'm not certain whether we can beat them or not."

"You bet we will. We've got to. How long before we get there?"

"Any minute. We are moving pretty fast. If you look—"

Suddenly he broke off. A mechanic came running up. There was a whispered conversation, and Osaka turned excitedly.

"There are friendly planes ahead!" he exclaimed.

"I can't see anything," declared Billy.

"No, but you will presently. We've got an instrument for



detecting. It's a whole fleet, and they are going to make a raid."

Both boys darted to the porthole. For several minutes they could see nothing, but all at once the moon came up; not like the moon of the Earth, but a smaller satellite that moved much faster, going round the planet three times in a day.

"Billy, do you see them? Hundreds of planes—"

"We are going to join in the raid," Osaka broke in. "They've signalled to us. The capital of the enemy is just underneath."

"But there's only sea!"

"There's an island. Of course, they aren't showing any lights; they don't need to. The city's built underground."

"Underground?" echoed Billy, in amazement.

"In the olden days we used to build on the surface. But when we developed flying that became too dangerous."

"But how can you bomb a place that's underground?" queried Nick.

"We don't use bombs. We use a kind of wireless ray. You'll see presently."

They had not long to wait. There were dozens of questions Billy was dying to ask. He could see, in the moonlight, the spherical shapes of the machines. From the ground they must have looked like innumerable bubbles.

The land had become visible now. It looked like a dark plain, girdled by water the colour of silver. There was no sign of life, nothing moved until—

A muffled explosion!

The boys exchanged glances, and Billy's jaw dropped as he pointed.

"Look at that airship—right close to us!"

It had burst into flames like a toy balloon. In the glare, wriggling black figures dropped out. This appeared to be a signal.

There was another, more distant, report, followed by another, and yet another, and then a whole series of bangs like guns going off.

"They've found us! They are destroying the whole fleet!" cried Osaka in dismay.

It was a dreadful, uncanny sight. Out in the moonlight the death ray was sweeping like a tongue of invisible fire among the airships. Every material object it touched was instantly destroyed.

It was so appallingly powerful that the great airships were shrivelled up in a second, and they dropped down into the sea, sizzling like a red-hot cinder touching the water.

"This is awful! It will be our turn next!"

Osaka tore himself away from the porthole. But neither Nick nor Billy could take their eyes from the terrible scene.

The sounds were deadened, but that made it seem even more horrible. Airship after airship, packed with living creatures, burst into flames and dropped into the sea like a ghastly shower of fireballs.

Yet there was no sign of any enemy. There was no sound, except those explosions.

"I don't think we shall see much more of Mars," whispered Nick.

"Yes, we shall—"

But even as Billy spoke the floor beneath them slanted at an alarming angle.

He fully expected the next moment they would be enveloped in a sheet of flame. But actually they just missed the sweep of the death ray by diving almost as fast as the charred machines plunged into the sea.

They touched the water. It swirled against the porthole and closed over them. Still they rushed down.

"What's happened? Are we out of control?"

"No, it's a part of a plan. We've had a new order, by wireless," said Osaka, steadying himself as the machine lurched again, and suddenly all movement ceased.

"But how—"

Billy stopped as the door of the engine-room opened, and the commander came out. Another door also opened, and the crew of six filed into the cabin.

They were like human beings in every respect except that their skins were a different colour. The commander began to address them, and Billy now knew enough of the language to be able to follow.

"The attack," he said, "has failed. Our own weapons are powerless against this new weapon which is being used against us. There is only one thing left to us to attempt. But I must warn you, it is certain death."

He paused and looked round at the dark, impassive faces. Then he explained.

"I've just had a message that the power station of the enemy is not in the city at all. It is in the harbour, under the sea. From this power station the ray which has destroyed our fleet is being sent out. If we can demolish it, we can yet hope for victory. But even if we succeed, we shall certainly lose our own lives."

No one spoke, and his manner changed—showed relief, Billy thought. He proceeded to give orders.

But the blue-skinned men were beaten. The Craws had triumphed.

The war, surely the shortest in history, was over.

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