

THRILLING YARN OF SCHOOLBOY FUN AND ADVENTURE INSIDE!

OUR GREAT
BOOK
OFFER!

(See page 21).

The GEM

2^d



TOM MERRY & CO. TRY THEIR HANDS AS DETECTIVES IN THIS

MISS PRISCILLA'S BODYGUARD!



Tom Merry & Co. go to Huckleberry Heath determined to solve the mystery of the blackmailing letters received by Miss Priscilla Fawcett, but Skimpole and D'Arcy, the two amateur sleuths of St. Jim's, decide to work on their own!

CHAPTER 1.
First Aid!

"OH!"
"Bai Jove!"
"Oh dear!"
"Somethin' the matter, deah boys!"
"Good gracious!"
"Gweat Scott! There's somethin' wong!"
"Oh dear! What shall I do?"
"This way, deah boys!"

And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's led the way, and Tom Merry and Jack Blake followed him.

The juniors had been chatting in the garden at Laurel Villa, the residence of Miss Priscilla Fawcett. Miss Fawcett was Tom Merry's old governess, and Tom and some of his chums were on leave of absence from the school.

They had come to Laurel Villa, as D'Arcy put it, to the "wescue of a lady in distwess." Miss Fawcett had received a threatening letter from some rascal, who wished to blackmail the timid old lady, and she did not feel safe at home without her darling Tommy.

Her darling Tommy felt that he couldn't come without his chums, too, and Dr. Holmes, the Head of St. Jim's, had given permission for the party to go to Huckleberry Heath—for Miss Fawcett had visited St. Jim's, and she had caused so much trouble there, that the Head was glad to say good-bye at any price.

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While the other fellows at St. Jim's were grinding away in the class-rooms, or slogging at early cricket practice, Tom Merry & Co. were having a quiet and enjoyable time at the old country village.

Of the blackmailer they had seen and heard nothing—and, in fact, in the interest of getting up a cricket match with certain youths in the village, they had almost forgotten the matter. And Miss Priscilla, in the pleasure of having her dear boy with her, seemed to have allowed the threatening letter to pass from her mind also.

But as Tom Merry heard the exclamation through the french windows that led upon the garden, and recognised his old governess' voice, it struck him all at once that there had been some further development of the strange affair.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was the first to hear Miss Fawcett's voice, and to approach nearer the window—and it was Arthur Augustus who pushed open the glass doors and entered first. Tom Merry and Blake were close behind him. The other juniors were down the long garden, and as yet unaware of what was transpiring.

"Bai Jove!"
"Phew!"
"She's fainting!"

Tom Merry sprang towards his old governess.

Miss Priscilla was leaning back in a deep-seated old arm-chair. There was a letter in her slim, white hand—but the juniors did not glance at the letter just then. Miss Priscilla's eyes were closed, and her face white. She seemed

By Martin Clifford.

to be unconscious, and for a moment the juniors were stricken with dismay.

Tom Merry & Co. were handy fellows in many ways, but how to deal with an old lady in a faint was a mystery they could hardly be expected to grapple with.

"Bettah wing," exclaimed D'Arcy hastily. "Bettah wing for Hannah!"

"Wing! What do you mean?"

"Wing the bell, ass!"

"Ring it, then! But—but something must be done!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Water, quick—water!"

Blake dashed to a jug of flowers on the table.

"Here's some—here you are!"

He hurled the flowers out of the open window and handed the jug of water to Tom Merry.

Tom Merry acted swiftly. He slopped the water over Miss Fawcett's face, and the good old lady gave a sort of jump, and murmured.

"Thank goodness!" exclaimed Tom Merry, in great relief. "She's coming to!"

"She's going off again!"

"Oh dear!"

"Try burnt feathers!" exclaimed Jack Blake. "The smell of burnt feathers revives people in faints—I've heard my sisters say so."

"Good! Got any?"

"Here's a stuffed bird—"

"Splendid! Yank it over!"

Blake dragged down the stuffed bird, and Tom Merry jerked off a handful of feathers and jammed a match to the ends. There was a terrific smell of burning feathers immediately, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gasped and put his head out of the window.

Tom Merry brought the scorched feathers close to Miss Fawcett's face. He felt them with his fingers to feel when they were cool enough, and then he allowed them to touch her face. Whether Miss Fawcett sniffed the scent, and whether it revived her, is uncertain; but it was certain that Tom Merry made black marks all over her kind old face, and transformed her into a remarkable imitation of a nigger minstrel.

Blake rang the bell, and kept on ringing it, while Tom Merry was reviving his old governess.

Hannah burst into the room.

"Good gracious! What is the matter? Oh dear!"

Hannah gave one terrified stare at Miss Fawcett's blackened face, and went off into a faint herself in the nearest chair.

Tom Merry looked at her in dismay.

"My only hat! She's gone off, too!"

"Phew!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Slop that other jug of water over her face, Blake!"

"Right—ho!"

Hannah jumped up, coming to with surprising suddenness before Jack Blake could get at her with the jug of water.

"Oh, oh!" gasped Hannah. "What has happened?"

"Miss Fawcett has fainted."

"But her face—"

"H'm! I'm afraid I've blacked it."

"My darling Tommy!"

It was Miss Fawcett's voice. She was coming to!

Tom Merry took her hand.

"Yes, dear; it's all right!"

"Tommy!"

"I'm here, dear!"

Miss Fawcett opened her eyes and looked at him. She held tightly to his hand and shivered.

"Tommy, that dreadful man!"

"What man, dearest?"

"That dreadful man! He has written to me again!"

"The hound!"

"This is the letter. He is going to set fire to the house."

"The silly ass!"

"And burn us all in our beds, my dearest Tommy!"

"It's only gas, dear!"

"I am convinced that he is a fearful criminal, and will carry out his threat," said Miss Fawcett, with a shudder. "We must fly."

"Bai Jove, it's imposs!" said D'Arcy. "We haven't any aeroplane in Hucklebewwy Heath, Miss Pwiscillah!"

"I mean we must go instantly."

"Oh, no!" said Tom Merry.

"Yes, yes, my darling boy! That dreadful man will carry out his threat!" said Miss Fawcett, with a shudder. "We must fly!"

"But—"

"It was wrong of me to bring you from the school into this fearful danger, Tommy. I feel that now."

"That's all right—"

"We must fly—"

"Well, let me see the letter."

Miss Fawcett began to cry softly. Tom Merry's eyes were gleaming with anger. He did not believe there was any danger, but he was burning with indignation against the unscrupulous scoundrel who could scare a timid old lady like this for the purpose of extorting money.

"Bai Jove!" said D'Arcy. "I should like to be within reach of the wottah! I should vewy much like to show him somethin' in the uppah-out line! Pway don't be fwightened, Miss Fawcett—I am heah!"

This assurance did not seem to relieve Miss Fawcett as much as might have been expected.

"Hannah, help me to my room! I feel very faint."

"Yes, dear ma'am!"

"We must fly, Tommy darling!"

"But the detective from Scotland Yard is coming down to-day!" urged Tom Merry. "We can't go till we've seen him!"

"Then we will go immediately we have seen him."

And Miss Fawcett went unsteadily out of the room, leaning on Hannah's arm.

Harry Noble, the Cornstalk junior at St. Jim's, looked in at the window.

"Hallo! What a niff of burning! Setting the house on fire?"

"No; Miss Fawcett has been fainting."

"Phew! What's the matter?"

"Another letter from that scoundrel."

The Australian came into the room.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "Now we may have a chance of getting on his track, and that's what we came for."

"Call in the other chaps, then," said Blake.

"Right you are!"

The Cornstalk put his head out of the window.

"Coo-oo-cy! Coo-cy!"

The signal call rang through the old garden of Laurel Villa, as it had often rung through the wild bush in Harry Noble's native land, and the juniors of St. Jim's answered it at once.

CHAPTER 2.

The Mysterious Letter I

TOM MERRY sat reading the letter, while the chums of St. Jim's gathered in the room. There were nine of them in all—Lowther, Manners, and Tom Merry, more commonly known as the Terrible Three, and Noble and Skimpole of the Shell, and Blake, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's.

They were all in the room, very curious to know what was on, by the time Tom Merry had looked through the letter.

Tom looked up, and found every eye in the room turned curiously upon him and upon the letter in his hand.

"Well, what's the row?" asked Monty Lowther. "Is this a meeting of the School House Musical Society?"

"Or the cricket committee?" asked Manners.

"Pway be sewious, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus, turning his eyeglass reprovingly upon the juniors. "This is a weally sewious mattah."

"Something to do with a new waistcoat, Gussy?"

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"It is serious, chaps," said Tom Merry quietly. "Miss Fawcett has had another letter from the chap who was trying to blackmail her."

"Oh!"

"This is the letter. You remember she had a letter before, and was frightened and came to St. Jim's—and from what she has told me, it seems that most people thought she was fancying it all, because the writing on the letter faded away afterwards, and it looked like a blank sheet of paper."

"Bai Jove!"

"Dr. Holmes sent it to Scotland Yard, and they reported that there had been writing on the paper, written in a kind

of ink that faded after a certain number of hours, and they partly made out what had been on the letter."

"That looks like business," said Lowther mysteriously. "And this is another letter from the same chap?"

"Yes. Miss Fawcett thinks we have come here simply to protect her; but, as a matter of fact, we're going to track down the scoundrel who is trying to frighten her."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "As you fellows know, I have had considerable twainin' as an amatuah detective, and I am quite willin' to place my services at the disposal of Miss Fawcett."

"Rats!"

"Weally, Digbay—"

"Yes, rats!" said Skimpole of the Shell. "I feel that I must repeat Digby's remark, D'Arcy. There is only one fellow at St. Jim's who has ever shown any marked ability as an amateur detective, and it would be false modesty for me to affect to believe that it was any other than myself."

"You uttah ass!"

"Really, D'Arcy—"

"Shut up, both of you!" exclaimed Jack Blake. "We're waiting for Tom Merry to read out the letter."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Order!"

"I refuse to ordah! I mean—"

Tom Merry began to read out the letter, and Arthur Augustus relapsed into silence, with an indignant glare through his eyeglass at Skimpole, the genius of the Shell.

The letter was written upon common notepaper, and in a round hand, and in a curious kind of pale greenish ink.

It was evidently the invisible ink which faded from view in the course of a few hours, as in the case of the first letter received from Miss Fawcett.

The letter ran as follows, and the juniors of St. Jim's listened with keen attention as Tom Merry read it out:

"Madam,—You have not met my demand, and you have not replied. I write again to give you a final chance. If the £100 is not paid by to-morrow, prepare to meet your doom."

"I must receive £20 to-night, the rest to-morrow. Place the money on the sundial at the end of the garden. I will take it, and know that you are in earnest. Fail me, and your house shall be burnt down, and every soul in it shall perish."

"Beware!"

"(Signed) NEMO."

"Bai Jove!"

"What do you think of that, you fellows?"

"Piffle!" said Jack Blake.

"Rot!"

"Gas!"

"That's it," said Noble. "It's gas—sheer gas. It sounds like a letter written by a character in a New York gore-book. I shouldn't wonder if it's some rascal who's got the idea from some American fiction."

Tom Merry nodded.

"I shouldn't wonder."

"Of course, the rotter has no intention of carrying out his threats. He couldn't set the house on fire, and he wouldn't if he could."

"Bai Jove! Wathah not!"

"It's simply an attempt to extort money by threats—threats which wouldn't have any effect on any but a timid old lady."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"But he's got fellows of a different kidney to deal with now," said Harry Noble, knitting his brows. "We're going to find him out."

"And make an example of him," said Manners.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Pway hand me the letter, Tom Merry," said Skimpole, holding out a bony hand. "I may be able to find some clue in it which has missed your untutained eye."

Tom Merry grinned and passed over the letter.

Skimpole blinked at it seriously through his big spectacles.

"Ah! This is the ink Miss Fawcett told us about," he said. "It will fade from the paper in a few hours."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We have to look for somebody, then, who uses invisible ink," said Skimpole brilliantly.

Blake patted him on the back gravely.

"Splendid, old chap!" he said. "Go on like that, and see if you can make any more startling and hair-raising deductions."

"Really, Blake—"

"Go ahead! We're waiting!"

Skimpole blinked at the letter again.

"The writing will furnish another clue," he said. "If we can find a person whose writing closely resembles this, and

who has also the knowledge of the manufacture and use of fading ink, we can guess that he is the man."

"Bravo!"

"Hurrah!"

"But how are we to find him?"

"I have not thought out that part yet."

"Bai Jove! I wergad you as an ass, Skimpole! Pway give me the lettah, and I dare say I can discovah a weally useful clue."

D'Arcy jammed his eyeglass into his eye, and scanned the letter very carefully. The juniors watched him in silence.

"Bai Jove!"

"Hallo! What's the discovery?"

"We shall have to look for a fellah whose witin' does not weseemble this," said Arthur Augustus, with a lofty look of scorn at Skimpole.

"Why?"

"Because this witin' is disguised."

"Oh!"

"Look here! Some of the 't's' are crossoed with a heavy stwoke, and some are crossoed with a light stwoke."

"So they are!"

"A chap as a wule crossoes all his 't's' the same way. This chap, I wathah think, genewally uses a heavy stwoke, and was adoptin' a light one for disguise. Ewerry now and then he dwops into his natural style—see?"

"By Jove, there's something in that!" said Blake. "I've always maintained that Gussy has his lucid intervals."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Go on, Gussy!"

"The hand looks extremely youthful," said D'Arcy. "I take that as pwoof that it was written by a grown-up person. It is easy to imitate wound hand, and throws you off the scent if you are twyin' to twack the handwitin'."

"Good!"

"I dare say I shall discovah a lot more clues shortly," said Arthur Augustus. "We've got to look for a chap who crossoes his 't's' with a heavy stwoke."

"Good!"

"By the way, how did that letter come?" said Noble. "I remember hearing that the first threatening letter that Miss Fawcett received was put by hand into the letter-box."

"This wasn't," said Tom Merry. "I expect the rotter dared not come up to the house personally this time. No doubt he knew that we are here."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"This has come by post. Here's the envelope!"

The juniors looked eagerly at the envelope.

It bore the postmark of Huckleberry Heath, the village on the outskirts of which Laurel Villa stood.

"Collected twelve o'clock to-day," said Tom Merry. "It was posted in the village this morning, then."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"That shows pretty clearly that it's a local rascal who's playing this little game," said Lowther.

"Looks like it."

"I'm pretty certain of it," said Tom Merry. "It's no London criminal, anyway. The mention of the sundial in the letter shows that he knows the place well, and the letter being posted here shows that he was in Huckleberry Heath this morning. From the letter it is plain, too, that he's going to be down here to-day and to-morrow. Besides, only a local person would know enough about Miss Fawcett to know that she was timid and easily frightened by a thing like this."

"Vewy twue."

"It's a giddy amateur trying his hand at blackmail," remarked Digby. "It would be a kindness to him to run him down and make an example of him. It may save him from ending his days in penal servitude."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I'm pretty certain about it bein' somebody belonging to the neighbourhood. A stranger in Huckleberry Heath always attracts attention—it's such a quiet place. If there were one staying about here we should have heard of him already."

"No doubt."

"So we've got to confine our search to the neighbourhood. I'll keep this letter for the detective when he arrives. I expect he will come to the same conclusion that we've come to," said Tom Merry, rising.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Really, Merry, I hardly agree with you," said Skimpole. "The attempt at blackmail is hardly in keeping with the simplicity of the rustic character."

"Rats!"

"There may be a stranger lurking in the neighbourhood—"

"Of course, it's possible."

"Hiding in the woods, perhaps, from whence he will steal in the dark hour of midnight to snatch the notes from the sundial," said Skimpole impressively.



Blake bumped into Manners and Manners slipped. There was a yell. "Oh!" Splash! The unfortunate junior plumped into the river and disappeared beneath the surface!

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I can see nothing to cackle at in that remark. I favour the theory of a stranger, and, with my splendid abilities as an amateur detective, I think I am likely to be correct."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Probably some desperate criminal from London is hiding from the police, and is filling up the time of enforced seclusion by this attempt to make money."

"Bai Jove! There might be somethin' in that, you know."

"I am glad to see you agree with me, D'Arcy."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus, who rather liked the idea of running to earth a desperate criminal from London. "I shouldn't wondah, weally! It's quite poss, you know, Tom Mewwy."

Tom Merry laughed.

"It's poss, but not prob," he replied.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I suppose we shan't see Miss Fawcett again for some time," said Tom. "She's too upset. Suppose we have a walk round the village, and I'll show you the place? You can see nearly all the inhabitants in one short walk, too."

"Good egg!"

Skimpole dug D'Arcy in the ribs with a bony finger.

"Will you come with me, D'Arcy?"

"What for, deah boy?"

"You are the only one who has sufficient intelligence to recognise the truth of my theory. I think I can get on the track, and I should like your assistance."

"Oh, vewy well!" said D'Arcy, pleased at Skimpy's way of putting it. "I will come with you with pleasure, deah boy!"

"Hallo!" exclaimed Blake, as the two amateur detectives went towards the french windows. "Aren't you coming to the village?"

Skimpole blinked at him.

"Haven't time now, Blake. I'm on the track."

"Ass!"

"I am goin' on the twack with Skimmsy, Blake."

"Duffer!"

"I wefuse to be called a duffah! I—"

"Bosh!"

And Blake took his cap and led the way out by the front of the house, while D'Arcy and Skimpole disappeared into the garden.

CHAPTER 3.

The Sportsman!

TOM MERRY & Co. were very well known in the village of Huckleberry Heath.

In that quiet spot Tom had spent his earliest years, after being brought home from India at a very tender age by Miss Fawcett, who had taken care of him ever since.

Since he had been at St. Jim's, Tom had spent a good many of his holidays at Laurel Villa, and he usually brought some of his school chums with him.

Consequently, the St. Jim's fellows were well-known in the village.

They were generally liked, too. They might be a little reckless, and sometimes a little mischievous. But there was always compensation for any little damage they might do; and, as a rule, the villagers nodded cheerfully enough to the merry juniors when they came along.

But there were exceptions.

The restless spirit of modern times had crept into even the quiet village of Huckleberry Heath. The building of the railway station had, in the opinion of the oldest inhabitant, marked the beginning of the fall from grace.

Be that how it might, certain it was that there were a number of young fellows in Huckleberry Heath who disdained the quiet ways of their forefathers, and prided themselves upon knowing the world.

At some distance from the heath there was a small racecourse, and the railway had placed this within touch of the enterprising youth of the village.

The sportsmen of the village spent a great deal of time there, and picked up reckless ways of talking about horse-flesh, using strange oaths, and wearing their hats rakishly on the sides of their heads; things that gravely scandalised the older inhabitants of the village.

The juniors of St. Jim's had no particular respect for fellows who frequented race meetings, and they did not like the sportsmen of Huckleberry Heath; but they were willing to have nothing to do with them.

When disagreement arose, it arose on the other side; but the juniors, of course, were not slow to take up the gauntlet. If a little liveliness could be found in the village, why not find it?

The leader of the "Sports," as they called themselves, was a young man named Snope. Snope was eighteen years old, and he condescended to keep accounts for a tradesman in Huckleberry Heath. This, however, was only because Snope found it necessary to live. He had a soul far above ledgers. When he was not hanging round a racecourse in his leisure hours, or when he wasn't "keeping it up with the boys," he spent his time reading cheap novels and lurid American detective stories. Snope prided himself upon knowing the world and its ways—especially its wicked ways. Its good ways hadn't so far interested him.

He had spent three days in London once while attending to some business for his employer. That was some time ago, and since then the incident had assumed remarkable proportions in the imagination of Snope.

The three days extended into weeks—months, and he forgot that he had spent the days in warehouses, and the nights in a cheap boarding-house in Bloomsbury. To judge by his talk on the subject he had seen all that there was to be seen in the great city, had hobnobbed with all kinds of swells in all kinds of places in the West End, and had had what he described as a "giddy time."

He usually alluded to that time as "when I was up in town, you know." And the adventures of Snope up in town were famous among the youth of Huckleberry Heath, and great was the envy they excited.

Snope generally took the lead among the local sportsmen.

No one could talk so cocksurely about the form of a horse; no one could make such breaks on the extremely rocky billiards table at the Bird in Hand. No one could get so near London fashions in clothes, or wear his hat in quite such a rakish angle.

For the rest Snope was weedy in form, and pasty in face; but he did not regard it as necessary for a sport to be athletic.

Between an individual like Snope and a hearty, healthy lad like Tom Merry there was not likely to be much in common.

In a small place like Huckleberry Heath people were bound to come into contact, and Tom Merry had come across Snope several times.

As a matter of fact, their first meeting was brought about by a mistake on Snope's part in the accounts, his employer being a tradesman who had the honour of serving Laurel Villa.

Miss Fawcett was very careful with her accounts, and, finding herself overcharged on one occasion to the tune of one pound four shillings and ninepence, she had requested Tom to call in at the shop with the bills, and explain to Mr. Jones, the grocer.

This led to Snope being carpeted, and somehow he seemed to attribute the trouble to Tom Merry, who certainly was quite blameless in the matter.

From that moment he disliked Tom Merry. And the sportsmen of Huckleberry Heath followed his lead in that matter, as in all others.

That had happened some time ago, and on the occasion of his present visit to the village, Tom had almost forgotten the existence of Snope.

The existence was brought back to his memory now.

The juniors left Laurel Villa, and strolled down the lane towards the village.

As a beginning to their enterprise, it was best to see the lie of the land, as Harry Noble put it, and as the evening was coming on—a very pleasant autumn evening—it was a good opportunity for a stroll round.

The juniors strolled down the lane in the sunset, and as they neared the village Monty Lowther gave Tom Merry a tap.

Tom looked at him.

"Hallo!"

"Who's that chap?" asked Lowther, with a nod of his head towards a youth sitting on a stile by the side of the lane, who was looking towards Tom Merry with a decidedly unamiable expression of countenance.

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Tom Merry laughed.

"That's Snope."

"Snope!"

"Yes; Algernon Snope. I hear that he was christened William, and adopted Algernon as a more classical name."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The sports call him Algy, for short."

Lowther stared.

"The sports!"

Tom laughed again.

"Yes; the smart set of Huckleberry Heath, you know. I suppose you find a smart set everywhere—silly asses who think it awfully clever to play the giddy ox."

"Well, we've got 'em at St. Jim's."

"What ho!" said Blake. "You've got 'em here, too?"

"He's all right, you know," said Tom Merry; "only rather an ass. He doesn't like me; that shows rather bad taste, otherwise I dare say he'll pass. I'm rather glad to see Snope," went on Tom, with a grin. "Mr. Dodds—you remember Dodds, the curate here—"

"Yes, rather! I remember his playing cricket at St. Jim's," grinned Blake.

"Well, Dodds is rather concerned about these chaps—the sports, you know. They play billiards, and drink on Sunday instead of going to church, and so forth. Of course, Doddy doesn't want to make people come and listen to him if they don't want to. But even if a chap cuts church, he might treat Sunday decently. And, anyway, billiards and drink aren't much good to a kid like that."

"Right you are!"

"Then they go in for racing, betting, and so on. Blessed if I know where Snopey can find the tin! Jones doesn't heap money on him in the way of salary—I know that. But it's no business of mine, of course. I feel rather sorry for the ass. It's not pleasant to see any chap going to the dogs. Dodds suggested that we should challenge Snope & Co. to a cricket match."

"Oh, that's the match you were talking about, is it?"

"That's it!"

Monty Lowther chuckled.

"He doesn't look as if he plays cricket."

"Well, they play a kind of cricket," said Tom Merry, laughing. "Mr. Dodds has persuaded them all to join the cricket club. And he drives away at it, you know, and keeps them up to the game somehow. He stuck them at football during the winter, and I imagine it was all the better for them."

"Yes, rather!"

"A cricket match will liven us up a bit while we're here. And Dodds likes the idea, so I'm going to challenge Snope & Co.—what?"

"Good egg!"

"Then I'll speak to him now. You chaps trot on."

The chaps trotted on, and Tom Merry stopped as he came abreast of the fellow on the stile, and greeted him cheerfully.

CHAPTER 4.

Rough on Algy!

SNOPE looked at Tom Merry. Then he opened his cigarette-case, selected a smoke, and lighted it.

This was done with the swagger air of a youth fully satisfied that he was a fully fledged man of the world.

Tom Merry watched him with a humorous twinkle in his eye.

"Good-evening!" he said cheerfully.

"Good-evenin'!" said Snope, who was always very, very careful to drop his "g's."

Tom Merry grinned.

"Nice evening," he said.

"Very nice evenin', dear boy," said Snope.

Tom Merry chuckled.

"I've been wanting to see you," he remarked.

"Gaze on me, and take your fill," replied Snope. humorously.

"You're playing with the Huckleberry Ramblers, I think?"

"I'm their captain," said Snope.

"Good!"

Snope puffed at his cigarette. It was a cheap cigarette. Algy's means did not run to expensive smokes. The smell of the cheap tobacco was decidedly disagreeable to Tom Merry, who coughed and retreated a pace.

Snope chuckled.

"You don't smoke?" he asked.

"No," said Tom Merry dryly.

"It's the salt of life!" said Algy. "I don't know what I should do without a fag, I don't really, don't you know?"

"Great comfort, I suppose?" grinned Tom Merry.

"You're right, my boy, it is."

"Don't you find it interferes with your cricket?"
 "Not a bit."
 "You get it in the wind, don't you?"
 "Oh, my wind's pretty good!"
 "Then you're lucky. I hear the Ramblers are in good form just now?"
 "Oh, yes; fair!"
 "All your dates full up?"
 "Most of 'em."
 "Look here! Could you get up a match with us while we're here?" said Tom Merry. "There are nine of us staying at Laurel Villa, and we'd like a cricket match. We could play nine a side, or we'd take on a couple of village chaps. We should awfully like to play the Huckleberry Ramblers."

Snope laughed derisively.
 "My dear kid—"
 "Well?"
 "You wouldn't have an earthly!" said Snope patronisingly. "What's your age—about fifteen, I suppose?"
 "Yes," said Tom Merry, with a smile.
 "Well, our average age is seventeen—eighteen."
 "Yes, I know you're an older team."
 "And we play cricket," said Snope. "No schoolboy game for us, you know. We play it."
 The hero of St. Jim's grinned.
 He had some idea how the Ramblers "played" the game, and he thought there would be a surprise in store for them when they met a St. Jim's team, even if the average age was two or three years less.

"You see, it would be a walk-over," said Algy Snope. "You would look fools, and we should look fools, too, for playin' a parcel of kids."

"But—"
 "So I'm afraid it can't be done."
 "Look here! You see—"
 "Hallo!" said Algy.

"We could wipe you off the face of the earth as easily as winking!" said Tom Merry warmly.
 Algy chuckled.

"Go on!"
 "We may be a schoolboy team, but we'll undertake to knock you sky-high, and knock up two runs to your one all the time."

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "You don't think so?"
 "Not half!"
 "Well, meet us, and see."

Algy shook his head.
 "Can't be done. I couldn't lower the dignity of the Ramblers by fixing up a match with a parcel of kids."

"You ass—"
 "Oh, draw it mild!" said Algy.
 "Well, you talk like an ass, you know."

"If you want a little contest, I shouldn't mind puttin' up my firs for a few minutes," grinned Algy.
 "Your what?"
 "Fins."

"Oh! You mean you could box?"
 "Well, I rather think I could knock you off the earth with one hand, dear boy."

Tom Merry stepped back from the stile.
 "Try it, then."
 "Oh, I don't want to hurt you!"
 "You're not likely to hurt me. I'm fifteen, and you're eighteen, but I could make rings round you with my eyes shut!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "You ass—with your cheap fags, and your staying up late at night over a billiards-table!" said Tom scornfully.
 "Why, there are kids in the Third Form at St. Jim's who could give you a walloping."

"I shall really have to take you down a peg or two, don't you know."

"Come on, then. I'm waiting to be taken down."
 Algy laughed.

"Look here, my boy! I won't hurt you. I've been pickin' up tips lately from the Bloomsbury Buster, who's stayin' over at Lantham. I know him."

Algy made this announcement with great pride.
 "Rubbish!" said Tom Merry.
 "Eh?"
 "Get off that stile."

"Look here—"
 "I'll yank you off if you don't."
 Algy's eyes glittered, and he threw away the stump of his cigarette and slipped off the stile.

"Well, if you will have it," he remarked.
 Tom Merry pushed back his cuffs.
 "Come on, you ass!"
 "I'll give you a jolly good licking while I'm about it!" said Snope, with a slightly venomous smile. "You swagger about the village as if the place belonged to you—"

"I don't!"
 "You think you're better than other fellows because you go to an expensive school?" said Snope savagely.
 Tom Merry flushed.
 "I don't! Only a silly ass would think such a thing!"
 "You want taking down a peg or two."
 "Now you're coming to business. If you can take me down, don't count the pegs. I'm willing for you to do all you can."

"Look out, then!"
 And Snope came on.
 Algy's idea of boxing seemed to have been learned by watching the motions of a windmill. He came on, waving his thin arms about his head, and letting out lashing fists blindly at Tom Merry.

Tom had not expected much prowess from the chief of the Huckleberry sports, but he had hardly looked for anything quite as helpless as this.

He knocked aside Algy's waving arms with his left, and gave the youth a gentle tap on the chest with his right. It was hardly forceful enough to be called a blow, but it made Snope sit down, puffing and gasping, in the dusk.

"Ow!"
 Tom Merry grinned.
 "Come on!"
 "Ow! That's enough!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "I—I—I'm out of form to-day."
 "Ha, ha, ha!"

"I've been overdoing it a bit, keeping it up with the boys, I suppose!" gasped Snope, staggering to his feet, and leaning on the stile. "I'll give you a licking another time, Tom Merry."

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 And Tom Merry, still laughing, ran along the lane to rejoin his friends.

CHAPTER 5. The Man in Black!

"H A, ha, ha!"
 "Jolly good!"
 "Ha, ha, ha!"

The chums of St. Jim's had witnessed the brief encounter from the distance, and they were laughing heartily as Tom Merry came up.

The hero of the Shell was laughing, too.
 "It was funny, wasn't it?" he remarked. "The ass thinks he's a boxer as well as a cricketer!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Are they going to play us at cricket?" asked Blake.
 Tom Merry shook his head.

"What! No?"
 "No; it's beneath their dignity, as an older team. So says Snope."

"Why, the frabjous ass!"
 "We could lick them with half a side!"
 "We could wipe them off the earth!"
 "The cheeky ass!"

"Oh, we'll make them play, somehow!" said Tom Merry.
 "But let's get along."
 "Hallo!"

"What's the row?"
 "A stranger!" exclaimed Blake, as tragically as if a stranger in the lane was as dangerous as a lion or a tiger.

The juniors all glanced at the stranger.
 He was a little man, quietly dressed in black, with a silk hat that showed signs of wear, and a somewhat benevolent expression upon his face.

He was coming down the lane towards them from the village, and a pair of keen, grey eyes flashed at the boys as he approached.

"Did you see that?" exclaimed Noble.
 "See what?"
 "The way he looked under his eyebrows. He's watching us, and thinks we can't see it. I'll bet he's not as innocent as he looks."

Tom Merry looked serious.
 Strangers were uncommon enough at Huckleberry Heath, and he had agreed that the blackmailer must be a local resident because there was no stranger known to be in the neighbourhood just then.

Yet here was a stranger!
 A stranger of a particularly quiet and harmless appearance, and yet with a pair of keen eyes and a quick, alert way of using them.

Was it possible—
 "We've got him!" murmured Herries.
 "Eh?"
 "Skimmy's right! It's a criminal from London."
 "But—"

"And this is the man."

"But—"

"It's quite possible, anyway," said Blake, with suppressed excitement. "I think we ought to keep him in sight, anyway."

"Yes, rather!"

Tom Merry hesitated.

"Well, I suppose there would be no harm in that," he remarked.

"Of course not."

"It's the thing to be done, my dear fellow."

"But seven of us can't shadow him, though. You chaps had better cut on, and—"

"Stuff!" said Lowther decidedly. "I rather think I'm the fellow to keep on his track without being discovered."

"Oh, come, Monty—"

"Look the other way while he passes us, or he's bound to smell a rat."

"Good wheeze!"

And the group of juniors intently studied the darkening landscape while the little man passed them in the lane.

The gentleman in black walked on without once glancing back. The juniors of St. Jim's turned their heads and looked after him.

"He doesn't seem to be afraid of being watched," Tom Merry remarked.

"Ah, that's his cunning, of course!"

"He may be going to look back at the corner."

"Watch him and see."

"Right!"

They watched the receding figure keenly. The gentleman in black turned the corner of the lane, and as he did so he cast one quick glance back.

If the juniors had not been watching for it they would never have seen it. The next moment the little figure disappeared.

Tom Merry & Co. looked at one another with bated breath.

"What do you think of that?" breathed Noble.

"My hat!"

"Looks like business, Kangaroo."

"I shouldn't wonder if—"

"It's the giddy blackmailer!"

"And he knows we're Miss Fawcett's guests, and that we're on the track," said Digby excitedly.

"Let's shadow him."

"Good!"

"Pity I didn't think of bringing my bulldog from the school," said Herries regretfully. "Towser would have tracked him down like—like anything."

"Oh, blow Towser!"

"Look here, Blake—"

"Let's shadow this chap, and see whether he goes towards Laurel Villa," whispered Manners. "If he does it will be pretty clear."

"Good!"

"Cut across the field here, and follow him on the inside of the hedge," said Tom Merry sagely. "He can't possibly spot us then."

"Good egg!"

The evening stroll through the village was abandoned at once. The juniors clambered through a hedge into the field, and cut across it to the lower lane which the gentleman in black was now traversing.

Over the top of the hedge they caught sight of the top of the silk hat, bobbing as the little gentleman strode along the lane.

On the inside of the hedge it was easy for them to keep it in sight without revealing their presence to the man in the road.

On the inside was a stream, flowing with about three feet of water, and the chums of St. Jim's were careful to give it a wide berth as they scouted along.

Suddenly the silk hat stopped.

"Look out!" whispered Lowther. "He's heard something!"

The juniors halted.

Perhaps the little man in black had very keen ears, and he had caught some incautious footfall from the inside of the hedge.

The movement of the hat showed that he was looking towards them.

There was the sound of a rustle. It was made by a hand from the road pulling the twigs aside, evidently for the purpose of looking through into the field.

"Bunk!" muttered Noble.

"What ho!"

The juniors swung off, but the footing on the edge of the stream was uncertain. Blake bumped into Manners, and Manners slipped.

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There was a yell.

"Oh!"

Splash!

And Manners disappeared into the water.

CHAPTER 6.

Tracked Down!

FROM the other side of the hedge came a quiet chuckle, but the juniors did not notice it. They had plenty to think about just then without paying attention to the gentleman in black whom they had been shadowing.

The silk hat disappeared beyond the hedge. The man in black was gone. But all the attention of Tom Merry & Co. was centred upon Manners.

The unfortunate junior had plumped headlong into the water, and completely disappeared beneath the surface.

He came up, gasping and spluttering, choked and blinded with mud and water; but the current happened to be strong, owing to a recent fall of rain, and he was whisked off his feet by it.

Over he went, with a gasp and a splash.

Tom Merry and Monty Lowther did not hesitate. They plunged knee-deep into the stream and seized the struggling junior, and dragged him to the side.

Kangaroo and the rest lent a hand, and Manners was dragged from the water, and lay gasping in the grass.

"Ow! Oh! Ooooh!" gurgled Manners.

"My only hat!" gasped Jack Blake. "Of all the clumsy asses!"

"Oh, you ass! You shoved me!"

"You shoved me, you mean!"

"If you hadn't bumped against me I shouldn't have fallen into the water!" spluttered Manners.

Blake snorted.

"Well, you bumped against me, and I didn't fall into the water," he retorted. "Blessed if I can understand a chap being so clumsy."

"You bumped—"

"You bumped—"

"Oh, cheese it!" exclaimed Kangaroo. "It can't be helped now, anyway. Nice state you're in, I must say!"

"Ow! I'm soaked to the skin!"

"What about us?" grunted Lowther. "Look at my trousers!"

"And mine!" growled Tom Merry.

"Oh, blow your old trousers!"

"They're not old trousers," said Lowther, rather excitedly. "If you want to know, these are my Sunday bags I've taken into use specially for this visit."

"I don't want to know—"

"Look here, Manners—"

"Peace, my children—peace!" said Tom Merry. "While you're slanging one another the chap we're shadowing is getting off."

"Phew! I forgot him!" said Digby.

"He must have heard this row."

"Yes, I should say so, unless he's as deaf as a stone."

"Let's have a look for him, anyway."

Kangaroo took a leap over the narrow stream, and plunged through the hedge into the lane. The rest of the party followed him.

They looked up and down and round about in the lane. But there was no sign of the gentleman in black. He had had more than five minutes to make himself scarce in, and he had undoubtedly done it.

The man in black was gone.

"Well, my hat!" said Tom Merry.

The amateur shadowers looked at one another in dismay.

"Where has he gone?"

"He must have cut off pretty quick."

"Rubbish!" said Blake. "He had plenty of time to crawl away on his hands and knees, if he wanted to, while you Shellfish were wasting time."

"Look here, Blake—"

"Seat! Manners has mucked it all up."

"You bumped into me, you ass!"

"Oh, rats!"

"Better get back to Laurel Villa," said Tom Merry. "We shall have to change our things pretty quick, or we shall catch a deuce of a cold!"

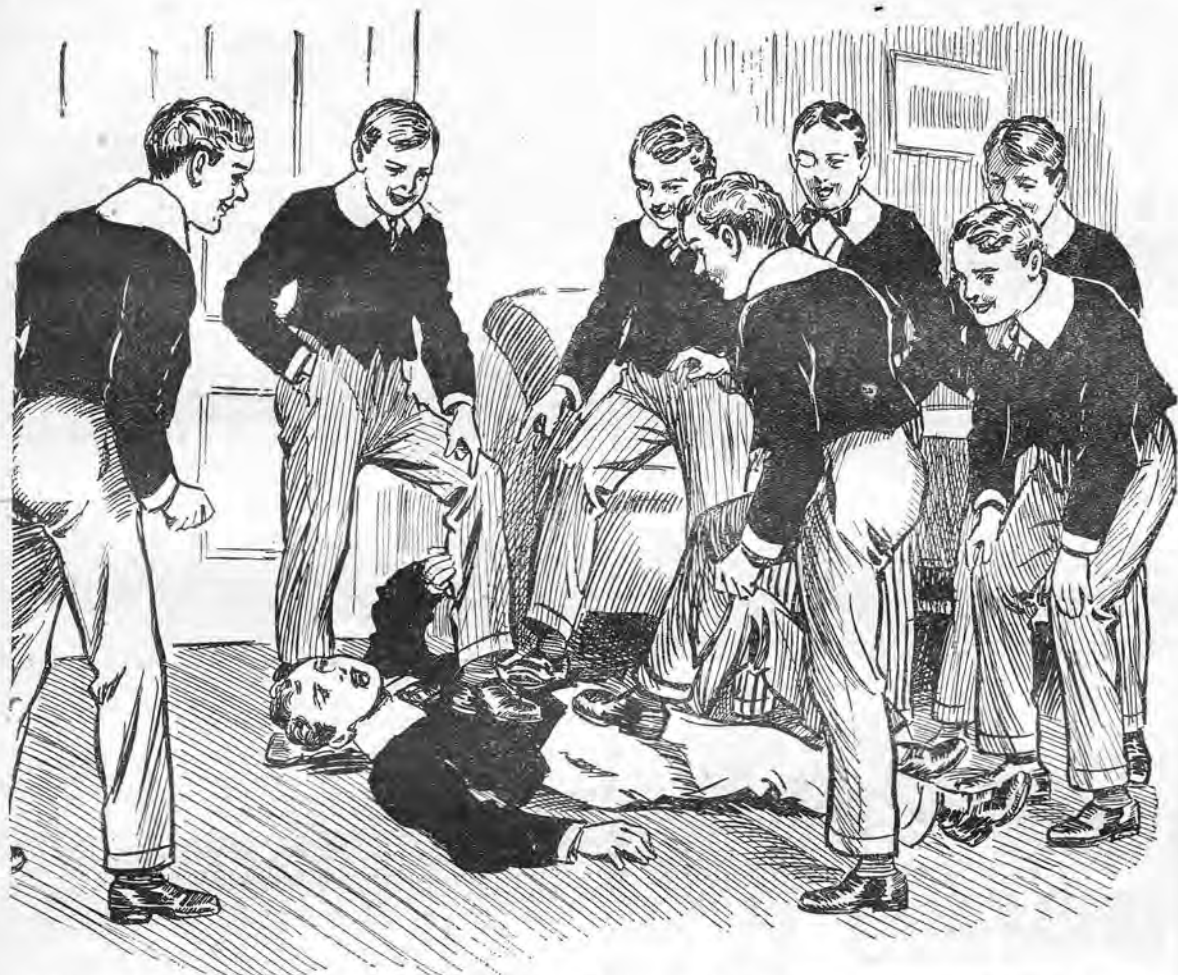
"Yes, rather!" said Manners, whose teeth were beginning to chatter. "I'm going to run on."

"Get a move on, then!"

Manners started at a trot. The juniors walked quickly to keep level.

Tom Merry wrinkled his brows seriously.

"We've lost sight of that chap," he observed. "But at the time we lost him, he was certainly going in the direction of Laurel Villa."



"What-ho! Bump him!" Tom Merry went down on the carpet with a heavy bump and several feet were planted on him, pinning him down. "Now then," said Lowther, "expound!"

Kangaroo nodded.

"That's so."

"And the fact that he spotted us shadowing him shows that—"

"That we were mugs!"

Tom Merry laughed.

"No, I didn't mean that. It shows that he was on his guard."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Why was he on his guard?" demanded Tom Merry, with the air of one propounding an extremely difficult problem.

"Is that a conundrum?" asked Blake.

"No, ass! I mean, why was he on his guard? No reason why he should be, unless he had a guilty secret of some kind."

"Good!"

"In the circumstances, it's pretty clear to me that that chap will bear watching," said Tom Merry decidedly.

"What-ho!"

"If he's still making for Laurel Villa, we shall sight him again when we get there," went on the hero of the Shell.

"Good!"

"So let's get on quickly. Hallo! There's Algy again!" Algy was coming towards them, with another cigarette in his mouth, at which he was puffing away with an air of great enjoyment.

"There was a great deal of dust upon his jacket, but otherwise he showed no signs of the encounter he had had with Tom Merry."

"Hallo, Algy!" said Lowther. "What's the odds on Blue Smoke for the Diddlem Stakes?"

Algy did not deign to reply to that frivolous question.

He blew out a little cloud of cigarette smoke, and walked on, apparently unconscious of the presence of the St. Jim's juniors.

Monty Lowther chuckled.

"I should like to see more of that chap," he remarked. "I think I could find a lot of harmless and necessary amusement in pulling his respected leg."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Manners was well ahead, leaving a trail of wet in the dust of the lane behind him. As they passed the last curve in the lane before arriving at Laurel Villa, Manners was seen to stop suddenly, turn round, and wave his hand.

The juniors stared at him blankly.

"What on earth's the matter with him?" exclaimed Digby.

"He means us to hurry up."

"Put it on, then."

They broke into a run.

Manners continued to wave his hand excitedly until they were within earshot.

"Buck up!" he called out.

"What's the row?"

"I've seen him."

"Whom?"

"Him, ass! The chap we were shadowing."

"Oh!"

"When I waved to you I had just caught sight of him again!" exclaimed Manners triumphantly.

"Good egg! Where was he?"

"Just going into the gate of Laurel Villa."

"Phew!"

And the whole party broke into a rapid run.

They felt that so many indications, all pointing to the same conclusion, could not deceive them. This was "Nemo," the writer of the anonymous letters, without a doubt. They dashed at top speed towards the garden gate of Laurel Villa.

"Hallo!" gasped Tom Merry, as they ran. "What's that?"

From beyond the trellis, over the garden wall, came a sound of disturbance—of struggling and gasping.
 "Buck up!" shouted Tom Merry.
 And he tore towards the gate.

CHAPTER 7.

Skimpole at His Best!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY and Skimpole had not been idle in the meantime. The two amateur detectives of St. Jim's were convinced that they were destined to solve the mystery, and bring the blackmailer to justice. They only differed on one point, and that was that each thought he himself was destined to have the principal hand in the success.

Skimpole led the way through the great, old-fashioned garden, which lay wide all round the old house, with a mysterious look upon his face.

D'Arcy followed him.

Skimpole followed the garden paths without a word, and did not speak till the shrubberies hid them from view of the windows. Then he turned cautiously to D'Arcy.

D'Arcy jammed his eyeglass into his eye, and regarded the genius of the Shell with considerable doubt.

"What's all this wot about, Skimmay, deah boy?" he asked.

"Really, D'Arcy—"

"What's the twouble, anyway?"

"You remember what the blackmailer said in the letter?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Twenty pounds is to be placed on the sundial in the garden, and he is to fetch it away to-night."

"Yaas."

"I am going to examine in the vicinity of the sundial. You know where it is—on a grassy lawn at the end of the garden. The lawn will show any tracks—"

"But—"

"As the blackmailer is a stranger to the vicinity—"

"How do you know he is?"

Skimpole smiled superior.

"He is according to my theory, at all events. Taking it for granted that he is a stranger in the vicinity—"

"But—"

"Taking that for granted, I say, how does he know anything about the sundial? It follows that he must have been spying about the place."

"Yaas, but—"

"If he has been near the sundial, he will have left tracks on the lawn."

"Bai Jove!"

"I have a wonderful gift for following tracks. You can help me. Come on."

"Yaas, but—"

"There is no time for talk. Come on!"

D'Arcy followed the genius of the Shell in silence. They reached the little green lawn where the sundial stood, almost out of sight of the house.

Skimpole blinked at the short-cropped grass through his spectacles.

"This is where we shall find the tracks, D'Arcy."

"Bai Jove!"

"Help me to look for them."

"Vewy well."

And the two juniors went down on their hands and knees, carefully examining the soil for traces of a footprint.

They were too deeply occupied to observe a handsome, athletic young man in a clerical collar, who came in at the open gate at the end of the garden, and came up the path that passed near the sundial.

It was the Rev. Mr. Dodds, the curate of Huckleberry Heath—an old friend of Tom Merry and the juniors of St. Jim's.

The curate stopped in amazement as he saw the juniors on their hands and knees peering into the grass. He stepped from the path upon the lawn, and called to them.

"Have you lost anything my lads?"

Arthur Augustus jumped up, and Skimpole, without rising, blinked round at the curate of Huckleberry Heath.

He waved his hand frantically to Mr. Dodds.

"Keep off—keep off!"

The curate looked astounded.

"My dear lad—"

"Keep off!"

"But, Skimpole—"

"Keep off—keep off!" shrieked Skimpole.

"You uttah ass, Skimmay!" said D'Arcy, in amazement.

"Mr. Dodds is not goin' to hurt you. What evah do you mean, you duffah?"

"Keep off!" shouted Skimpole. "I mean, keep off the grass!"

"Keep off the grass?"

"Yes. You'll destroy the tracks if you tread on them!"

"The tracks?" said Mr. Dodds dazedly.

"Oh, I compwehend! Vewy true! If you walk on the gwass, sir, you will twead on the twacks!"

"What tracks?"

"We are lookin' for twacks, sir."

"But—"

"Skimmay thinks he's on the twack of the blackmailah, sir," said Arthur Augustus. "We're lookin' for the wascal's twacks."

Mr. Dodds stared at him, and then burst into a laugh.

"Really! Very good! Ha, ha, ha!"

"I fail to see the cause of your laughtah, sir," said D'Arcy, looking perplexed. "We have come down here on purpose to discovah the blackmailah, sir."

"And you are on his track?" asked Mr. Dodds, smiling.

"Well, sir—"

"Eureka!"

It was a sudden exclamation from Skimpole. He was blinking excitedly at a big indentation in the soft soil close by the sundial.

D'Arcy ran to his side at once, and turned his eyeglass upon the spot.

"What is it, Skimmay?"

"Look!"

"Bai Jove!"

"It's a track—just as I expected!"

"Gweat Scott!"

"So you've found the track?" said the curate, smiling.

"Yaas, wathah, sir!"

"I congratulate you!"

"Come and look at it, sir."

"With pleasure."



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Skimpole feebly. "It—it—it is impossible that—that the tracks were made by the donkey!"

"By Jove!"

"What could a donkey be doing in Miss Fawcett's garden?" argued Skimpole.

"He might be swayin' down by the sundial, lookin' for twacks," said D'Arcy. "I saw an ass doin' that."

"Really, D'Arcy—"

"You fealful chump!"

"But—"

"I had an idea," said Mr. Dodds, with a lurking smile. "I had an idea that the track was made by a hoof rather than by the foot of a human being. Of course, I did not feel competent to give advice to such a competent tracker."

"Of course not, sir," said Skimpole.

D'Arcy gave him a look.

"You fwabjous duffah!"

"Upon second thoughts, the tracks were probably made by this animal," said Skimpole, after looking through the shed and finding that the donkey was the only occupant. "He must have strayed into Miss Fawcett's garden."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Of course, the most experienced detective could not guess that a donkey would stray into the garden and leave his tracks there."

"You couldn't, anyway."

"I trust, D'Arcy, that you do not intend to disparage my abilities as a detective."

"I wegard you as an uttah ass."

"Really—"

D'Arcy sniffed, and left the shed. Mr. Dodds was already walking back to the garden of Laurel Villa. Skimpole followed slowly.

"I was just going to call upon Miss Fawcett," the curate remarked. "She is at home, D'Arcy?"

"Yaas, sir; but she is suffevin' fwom a shock."

"Indeed! How is that?"

"Anothah thwateenin' lettah fwom that wascal, sir."

Mr. Dodds' brow darkened.

"Ah! Indeed!"

"Yaas, wathah, sir!"

The curate nodded, and went on towards the house. Like other advisers of Miss Fawcett, he had at first believed that the old lady's fright was due to a strange fancy on her part; but the report from Scotland Yard had convinced him of the reality of the threatening letter.

Skimpole tapped D'Arcy on the shoulder and detained him.

"It is no use being discouraged by a slight want of success at the start, D'Arcy," he remarked.

"Wats!"

"We must stick to the trail."

"More wats!"

"The other fellows can do nothing. Their undeveloped intelligence is incapable of grappling with a problem like this."

"Yaas, that is twue enough. What is wequired at a moment like this is a fellow of tact and judgment," agreed Arthur Augustus.

"We will stick to the trail," said Skimpole firmly. "I adhere to my theory that the blackmailing is done by a stranger—a desperate criminal from London—lurking in the neighbourhood. What we have to do is to scout round the neighbourhood carefully, and spot any stranger who is stayin' here."

"But Tom Mewwy says there is no siwanger stayin' about here."

"His methods of observation are very crude."

"Yaas, pewwaps."

"We will see for ourselves. Let us go and scout."

"Well, I suppose we may as well, as there is nothin' to do till the other fellows come back."

"That is hardly an enthusiastic way of looking at it, D'Arcy."

"Oh, wats!"

The two juniors proceeded to scout. Although there was no enemy in sight and very little chance of encountering one, Skimpole observed every caution.

He dodged and doubled among the shrubbery as he made his way round the house, while the swell of St. Jim's marched after him with head erect.

"Aha!"

Skimpole halted suddenly as he uttered that exclamation.

"What's the mattah, deah boy?" asked his companion.

"Look!"

"Where?"

"In the road."

Skimpole pointed with a bony forefinger.

Arthur Augustus gave a start. From the point they had reached they could see through the trees in the garden to the road. In the road stood a little man in black, in a worn silk hat, gazing towards Laurel Villa intently.

"Is that a stranger?" murmured Skimpole.

D'Arcy nodded eagerly.

"Yaas, wathah! I've been wound Hucklebewwy Heath a lot of times, but I've never seen him before."

"Then he is, in all probability, a stranger here. I was bound to succeed at the second attempt."

"But—"

"He seems to be greatly interested in this place."

"Vewy twue."

"If he approaches it, that will be proof enough. If he enters the garden, we will seize him and make him a prisoner. Doubtless his pockets will be found full of combustibles for setting the house on fire, and that alone will be sufficient to convict him. We—"

"Look out! He's coming!"

The little man in black was walking straight up to the gate.

In a moment the two amateur detectives had taken cover in the shrubbery, beside the path that led up from the gate to the house.

Was the stranger coming in?

If so, what clearer proof of his guilt could possibly be required—at least, by two enthusiastic amateur detectives of fifteen?

There was a click.

"The gate!" breathed Skimpole. "He's coming in!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Quiet! Don't make a row, or—"

"Who's makin' a wow?"

"I say—"

"Shut up, deah boy!"

There was a crunching of feet on the path.

The figure in black loomed up in the growing dusk, and the amateur detectives sprang upon it valiantly.

There was a gasp of surprise, and the stranger went heavily to the ground, with Skimpole and Arthur Augustus sprawling over him.

Potts, the Office Boy!



CHAPTER 9.

A Surprising Prisoner!

"GOT him!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Help!"

"Hold him tight!"

"Help! Thieves!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Help!"

Such were the cries and exclamations that burst upon Tom Merry & Co. as they dashed through the garden gate of Laurel Villa.

Tom Merry ran up the path, and almost ran into three struggling forms in the dark.

"What's the matter?"

"Help!"

"Is that you, Tom Mewwy? We've got him!"

"Got whom?"

"The blackmailah!"

"My hat!"

"Lend us a hand, deah boy!"

"Why, it's our man!" shouted Lowther, peering at the gentleman in black in the dusk. "I thought so! Gussy's collared our man!"

"Wats! He's my man!" said D'Arcy, getting a firm seat on the chest of the man in black, and pinning him down by sheer weight. "Bai Jove! How he wiggles? I wish Fatty Wynn were here to sit on him!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Pray give assistance!" gasped Skimpole, who was groping for his glasses, which had been knocked off in the struggle. "The villain may be armed—"

"Help!"

"He's our prisoner!" declared Kangaroo. "We've been shadowing him—"

"Yes, rather."

"He belongs to us."

"Wats! We captured him!"

"Yes; but—"

"Help! Help!"

"Hold on!" exclaimed Tom Merry, struck by a sudden doubt. "It's not usual for a criminal to yell for help when he's arrested, I believe. He can't expect the rest of the criminal classes to be within hail."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Perhaps there's been a mistake."

"Impossible!" said Skimpole, picking up his glasses and adjusting them on his nose. "With my methods a mistake is impossible!"

"I regard a mistake as impos, Tom Mewwy."

"Well, let's question the chap before we execute him, anyway," grinned Kangaroo, who had his doubts as well. "What's your name, old fellow?"

"My name! I am Inspector Fix, sir!" roared the little man in black. "I will have you all arrested for this!"

"Inspector Fix!"

"Yes, you rascals!"

Tom Merry gave a prolonged whistle.

"My only hat!"

"Do you know the name?" said Blake.

"What-ho! It's the detective from Scotland Yard whom Miss Fawcett is expecting."

"Phew!"

"Great Scott!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Pray do not release him," said Skimpole anxiously. "This is, of course, a pretence for the purpose of escaping us. My methods could hardly lead to such a mistake."

"Oh, blow your methods!"

"Really, Lowther—"

"It looks to me as if Gussy has made a fearful bloomer this time," said Tom Merry.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Of course, you can't help it, Gussy."

"But you said he was your pwisonah. You have made a feahful bloomah quite as much as I have, Tom Mewwy!"

"It's no good arguing about it, Gussy; any amount of talk won't alter the facts," said Tom severely.

"But, weally—"

"Is anything the matter?"

It was the quiet voice of Mr. Dodds.

The noise of the affray had reached the house, and the curate of Huckleberry Heath had come down the path to ascertain what was the cause of it. He looked at Mr. Fix—now standing up and dusting himself—and then at the ring of juniors, in amazement.

"Matter, sir!" snorted Mr. Fix. "I should say so! I have been assaulted by a crew of mischievous young rascals!"

"Weally, sir!"

"Mr. Fix!" exclaimed the curate.

"Ah, it is you, Mr. Dodds!"

The two shook hands. No further proof could be needed of the identity of Inspector Fix of Scotland Yard. Skimpole blinked at them and disappeared among the laurels. He was having cruel luck as a detective.

But D'Arcy stood his ground. The swell of St. Jim's had taken exception to Mr. Fix's words, and he meant to have it out.

"I twust, sir, that you will believe that this mistake was unintentional," he said.

The inspector snorted.

"And I twust, too, that you will withdraw the expwession you have just used."

Another snort.

"I decline to be chawactewised as a young wascal. I regard the expwession as oppwobwious in the extweme."

"Ring off, Gussy!"

"I decline to wing off. It is a question of dig with me. I wefuse to be chawactewised as a young wascal."

"I'll have you all prosecuted for assault!" growled Mr. Fix, rubbing his aching bones.

"Bai Jove!"

"Pray come in, sir," said Mr. Dodds. "This is all a mistake. The boys are guests of Miss Fawcett, and they have been trying to capture the blackmailah. They evidently took you for that person, as they did not know you by sight."

"The young donkeys!"

"That is an oppwobwious expwession, too."

"But if it is a mistake I will overlook it," said Mr. Fix, with a grunt.

"Vewy good; but—"

"Better apologise, Gussy!" whispered Digby.

"Weally, Dig—"

"A handsome apology is about the only thing you can do."

"But the boundah has used oppwobwious expwessions—"

"Never mind; do your little bit."

A TALL STORY!



"Do you considah that I ought to apologise, 'Tom Mewwy?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Oh, vewy well! Mr. Fix——"

"Eh?"

"I beg to expwess pwofound wegwet for this unfortunate oocurrence, and undah the cires I am quite pwepared to ovahlook any oppwobvious expwessions you may have uttah in the heat of the moment."

"Huh!" said Mr. Fix.

And he walked up the path to the house with the curate.

Arthur Augustus jammed his monocle into his eye, and gazed after him. Then he turned the glimmer of his eyeglass upon Tom Merry & Co.

"I see nothin' whatevah to gw in at," he remarked, "and I wegard that apology as bein' absolutely thwown away. The boundah seems to have no ideah whatevah of courtesy."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I have apologised most handsomely, and he has simply gwunted in weturn. I wegard it as the worst of bad form."

"Never mind, Gussy; you've done your little bit, and you're not responsible for his actions," said Lowther. "In fact, I hardly consider you responsible for your own."

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"Let this be a lesson to you, Gussy!" said Tom Merry sagely. "Make a little more certain next time before you start arresting people."

"But you were claimin' him as a pwisonah yourself, Tom Mewwy!"

"I think it's tea-time," said Tom Merry hurriedly. "Let's go in."

And they went in.

CHAPTER 10.

Laying the Snare!

MISS FAWCETT had recovered somewhat from the shock of the threatening letter. For a long time the old lady was shut up with Mr. Dodds and the detective from Scotland Yard, discussing the matter. The letter was taken in by Tom Merry, and the detective examined it and re-examined it, and pursed his lips over it.

Miss Fawcett waited anxiously for the verdict.

The little inspector sighed slightly.

"I was thinking of leaving the house this evening, and taking the dear boys with me," said Miss Fawcett nervously. "I am sure dear Mr. Dodds would gladly accommodate us all for the night."

"That is not at all necessary, Miss Fawcett," said the inspector, with a rather queer glance at dear Mr. Dodds, who sat speechless. "I would advise you to remain."

"But the danger?"

"What danger?"

"The wretch threatens to burn down the house."

Mr. Fix laughed heartily.

"You must not pay any attention to that nonsense, Miss Fawcett."

"But——"

"There is nothing in the threat. The fellow is only attempting to work upon your fears. The whole thing is absurd!"

Miss Fawcett naturally had a great respect for the judgment of an experienced detective officer, and she was greatly relieved by the assurance.

"Then you think he is not in earnest, Mr. Fix?"

"I am certain he has no intention whatever of attempting to fulfil his threats," said the inspector. "He may threaten you again, or try to frighten you, that is all."

"What a wicked man!"

"More fool than rogue, I should say," replied the inspector. "He can have no idea that a Scotland Yard officer has been sent down here."

"It has not been mentioned outside the house," said Mr. Dodds.

"Good! He speaks of taking an instalment of the money from the sundial in the garden to-night."

"Yes."

"In that case, if he comes there, it will be only necessary to keep watch in order to ascertain his identity, if not to capture him," said the inspector. "He thinks he is dealing with a nervous lady; as a matter of fact, he is dealing with a detective who knows his business, and that is where he will get into trouble. I shall conceal myself near the sundial to-night, and watch for him."

Mr. Dodds nodded thoughtfully.

"But he may be watching from a distance."

"Probably."

"And unless he sees Miss Fawcett approach the sundial to place the money there he will not approach himself."

The detective smiled.

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"Doubtless, and so he must be hoodwinked. I will not, of course, ask Miss Fawcett to take any part in the proceedings; but this lad"—he nodded to Tom Merry—"he could put on a shawl, or something of the sort, and go down to the sundial after dark, and place something there. Then, if the blackmailer is watching the garden paths, he would be satisfied that his threats had been yielded to."

Tom Merry's eyes glimmered.

"I should be quite willing, sir."

"Oh, no, no, no, my dearest Tommy!" ejaculated Miss Fawcett. "I could not allow him to go into this fearful danger!"

Tom Merry smiled.

"There will be no danger, dear."



The two trackers rushed gallantly into the shed. A donkey that was stretched on a heap of straw turned its head and looked at them. There was nobody else in the shed! The donkey was the first to break the silence. "Hee-haw!"

"Yes, there will be fearful peril. Suppose the black-mailer is armed——"

"But——"

"He may carry revolvers or knives——"

"But——"

"He might murder my darling."

"My dear madam, there is no danger whatever; but if you are alarmed about the boy I will make some other arrangement," said the detective a little testily.

"Yes—yes, please!" said Miss Fawcett. "I do not wish to spoil your plans, but Tom is such a gentle and delicate lad. Could not Mr. Dodds put on a shawl and a bonnet and go down to the sundial?"

Mr. Fix coughed, and Mr. Dodds turned pink. The suggested masquerade was hardly in keeping with his clerical character, but the curate did not like to say so to Miss Priscilla.

"Ahem!" said Mr. Fix. "Ahem! Mr. Dodds is somewhat too large in stature to be easily mistaken for you, Miss Fawcett."

"Exactly," said Mr. Dodds, much relieved. "With your permission, though, inspector, I will be on the spot with you, in case the rascal gives trouble."

"I shall be glad of your assistance, sir. We will find someone else to act the part of Miss Fawcett."

"Please let me go, dear!" said Tom Merry, pressing his old governess's hand. "There is not the slightest danger. You can trust Mr. Fix."

"My darling Tommy—"

"Yes, but—"

"There are the dreadful dewdrops on the grass at night, Tommy sweet. You would get your poor little feet wet."



"I can wrestle any chap in the Shell at St. Jim's, let alone the Fourth."

"My sweet boy—"

"Ahem!" said Mr. Fix. "Perhaps Herries will take the part of Miss Fawcett in our little comedy to-night—"

"I wish you would let me do it, dear," said Tom Merry persuasively. "It will be fun, and I am sure I could do it rippingly. And it would save the secret going any further, too."

"There is something in that," said Mr. Dodds.

"Gentlemen, I will go myself!" exclaimed Miss Fawcett heroically. "I—I will arm myself. I have a large pistol upstairs that belonged to my grandfather. I will take it—"

Mr. Fix was suddenly taken with a fit of coughing, probably caused by a mental picture of Miss Fawcett facing the blackmailer armed with her grandfather's horse-pistol.

"Ahem!" gasped Mr. Fix. "I—I think, upon second thoughts, Miss Fawcett, that it would be better for you not to go. You might faint—"

"Yes, that is possible."

"And give the alarm—"

"Ah! I did not think of that."

"If the rascal escapes us this time he will learn that there is a detective in the house, and he will be more upon his guard," said Mr. Fix. "He may even proceed to something more than threats for the purpose of making you believe that he is in earnest."

"Oh dear!"

"We must capture him to-night."

"But—but if he is a desperate criminal, it will not be safe for any of the boys to take part in the proceedings," said Miss Fawcett anxiously. "They are really in my charge, sir—confided to me by the headmaster of St. Jim's."

Mr. Fix smiled.

"We have no desperate criminal to deal with, Miss Fawcett. From the evidence furnished by this letter itself I am certain that the writer is a resident in this neighbourhood, and I suspect that he is some scoundrel who is in want of money, and, knowing your timidity—excuse me—has hit upon this method of extorting some from you. I think it is extremely probable that this is his first attempt as a blackmailer, and we must make it his last."

"Ah, poor fellow!"

"Eh?"

"If he is a young fellow, and it is possible yet to save him from his folly, I—I should not like him to be arrested," faltered Miss Priscilla. "I—I should like him to be stopped from his wickedness, and—and given a warning, and—and then I think he could be left to Mr. Dodds, who would try to reform him."

"Ahem!" said Mr. Fix, looking rather grim. "That depends upon whom the rascal turns out to be. But I assure you it is quite safe for one of the boys to assist me in the way I suggested."

"You will let me go, dear?" urged Tom.

"I will let Mr. Dodds decide," said Miss Fawcett. "If he thinks you may safely go, I will not say no."

"I think he may safely go, certainly," said Mr. Dodds.

"Then you may go, Tommy; but—but do be careful to keep your feet dry."

"Yes, dear," said Tom, with a wry face.

"And—and wrap your neck up well."

"Ye-es."

"And do not forget your chest-protector."

"Ye-es."

"And now," said Mr. Fix, "that matter is settled. Do not mention what is decided to any of your friends, Master Merry. Among so many there would certainly be some talk, which might reach the ears of the rascal we are trying to track. He may possibly have some acquaintance among the maids here. You cannot be too careful. Not a word outside this room, mind."

"I will be careful, sir."

"What time do the boys go to bed, Miss Fawcett?"

"At half-past nine."

"Very good! Master Merry may be allowed to stay up, and then he will not have to give the others any explanation. It will be useless to go into the garden before ten, I think."

And, that being settled, Tom Merry left the room, and rejoined his chums, who were waiting for him with considerable curiosity.

CHAPTER 11.

Tom Merry Does Not Explain!

"WELL?" That monosyllable uttered simultaneously by eight voices, was jerked at Tom Merry as he entered the room where the juniors of St. Jim's were waiting for him.

Tom turned crimson.

"But, dear—"

"And the night air would be so bad for your poor little chest. You know how delicate you are."

"Oh dear!"

"Tommy dearest—"

"Ahem! I will find somebody else," said Mr. Fix. "It will not be difficult. One of the other lads—"

"Yes, they are not so delicate as my darling Tommy! I saw Tommy wrestling with Herries to-day, and I felt so nervous. Herries is so big and rough, and Tommy is such a delicate and gentle child."

"Why, my only hat!" exclaimed Tom Merry, exasperated at last. "Why, I can lay Herries on his back in two shakes of a lamb's tail. I was only playing with him to-day."

"My darling, he is so rough—"

Tom Merry glanced at them innocently.
 "Well?" he said.
 "Well?" repeated Jack Blake, crescendo.
 "Well?" replied Tom Merry affably.
 "Well?"
 "Well?"
 "Look here!" said Kangaroo. "What do you mean?"
 "Nothing."
 "Bai Jove!"
 "You said 'well,'" remarked Tom Merry, "so I said 'well.' I thought it was some kind of a game you were starting."
 The juniors looked at one another.
 "None of your old buck!" said Kangaroo. "What's the upshot?"
 "Eh?"
 "You've been jawing it over with the detective."
 "Yes."
 "And you've laid some plans, I suppose?"
 "Yes."
 "What are they?"
 "Plans," said Tom Merry.
 "Look here! Don't begin being funny. That's Lowther's job—and we have enough of it from him, if not too much!"
 "Hear, hear!" said Digby heartily.
 "Yaas, wathah!"
 Monty Lowther looked a little unpleasant.
 "Of all the asses—" he began.
 "Oh, don't start talking about your relations now, Lowther!" said Blake. "The question is, what plans have they been laying?"
 "Yes, that's the question," agreed Manners, who had changed his clothes before tea, and now looked quite himself again. "What are the plans?"
 "Speak, you image!"
 "Go ahead!"
 "Pray acquaint us with the plans, dear boy. I want to know whethah they meet with my approval."
 "Certainly," remarked Skimpole. "I shall be very pleased to help in carrying out the plans if they come up to my opinion of what is necessary."
 "Go ahead, Merry!"
 "Are you deaf?"
 "Why don't you speak?"
 Tom Merry laughed.
 "Because I've nothing to say."
 "What?"
 "Anybody care for a game of chess?"
 "Blow chess!" howled Manners. "What we want to know about is the plans!"
 "Are the plans, you mean," said Digby.
 "Bosh!"
 "Look here—"
 "The plans—"
 "I tell you—"
 "What price a game of leap-frog round the table?" asked Tom Merry blandly.
 "Are you going to jaw?"
 "Certainly, if you like. I'll give you a lecture on the subject. 'Little boys should not be curious.'"
 "Collar him!" shrieked Kangaroo.
 "Here, hold on! Hands off!"
 But the warning was unheeded.
 The juniors fairly swarmed upon Tom Merry, and in a moment he was struggling in the grasp of eight pairs of hands.
 "Bump him!" roared Herries.
 "Yaas, wathah!"
 "What-ho! Bump him!"
 Bump!
 Tom Merry went down upon the carpet with a heavy bump. Then seven or eight feet were planted upon him, pinning him down.
 "Now, then!" said Lowther. "Expound!"
 "Rats!"
 "Explain!"
 "More rats!"
 "Are you going to talk, and tell us all about it?" roared Kangaroo.
 "Not half!"
 "Bump him!"
 "Look here! Ow, yow! Hold on, I tell you!"
 Bump, bump!
 Tom Merry struggled desperately, and several of the juniors rolled over on the floor with him. The struggling combatants rolled against the table, and sent it flying. There was a crash, and a roar of voices.
 "Goodness gracious!"
 Miss Priscilla Fawcett opened the door, and stood looking in upon the startling scene, spellbound.
 "Tommy, my darling, what—"

Mr. Dodds was smiling over her shoulder. Inspector Fix, of Scotland Yard, looked on with a puzzled expression.
 "Tommy!" shrieked Miss Priscilla.
 In a moment the combat ceased.
 The juniors, dusty and dishevelled, and very much confused, sprang to their feet.
 "Tommy—Tommy, my darling!"
 "It's—it's all right, dear," stammered Tom. "Only fun, you know."
 "Your collar is torn out."
 "Yes; I—I like it like that."
 "Your jacket is split."
 "I—I like split jackets."
 "Tommy!"
 "It's only fun, Miss Fawcett," said Kangaroo. "We were only bumping Tom because he had the cheek to think he could keep a secret from us."
 "Yaas, wathah! We regarded it as feahful cheek, you know!"
 "Ha, ha, ha!" came from Mr. Dodds. "Only a little rough play, Miss Fawcett."
 "Are you sure you are not hurt, darling?"
 "Oh, I'm all right!" said Tom Merry.
 "Very well," said Miss Fawcett, still looking a little dubious. "But pray—pray do not have any more of this fun! I am afraid for Tommy. He is so delicate that any rough play might send him into a decline at any time."
 "Poor Tommy!" murmured Lowther.
 Tom Merry looked daggers at his chum.
 "We will be vewy careful with Tommy, Miss Pwiscillah," said Arthur Augustus. "You may wely upon it that there shall be no more wuff play."
 "Thank you, my dear little Arthur!"
 It was Arthur Augustus' turn to blush.
 Miss Priscilla closed the door, and the dusty juniors gathered round Tom Merry.
 "Now, you ass, are you going to explain?"
 "I can't," said Tom Merry. "If you had given me time, you duffers, I'd have explained that. Fix has arranged something, but I'm to keep it dark for the present."
 "Rot!"
 "Rubbish!"
 "Bosh!"
 "Rats!"
 Such were the forcible expressed opinions of the St. Jim's juniors upon the subject of Mr. Fix's arrangements. Tom Merry laughed breathlessly.
 "Look here, you chaps, be sensible! I don't like keeping you in the dark, but Fix says I was to, and I agreed."
 "Oh, in that case, we ovahlook the mattiah!" said Arthur Augustus gracefully. "Of course, if Tom Mewwy has given his word, it's a mattah of honah with him."
 "He was an ass to agree."
 "Yaas, I think it will be generally admitted that Tom Mewwy is an ass."
 "Hear, hear!"
 "But, undah the cires, he is bound to shut up."
 Kangaroo grunted.
 "Bet you they'll make a muck of it between them!" he said.
 "Yaas, I wogard that as vewy pwob."
 Skimpole looked very thoughtful. Two big wrinkles appeared in his bony forehead, showing that his mighty brain was hard at work.
 "Probably Mr. Fix does not know of my abilities," he remarked. "I will go and see him, and explain that it would be better to tell about the matter, as my advice may be useful."
 Tom Merry chuckled.
 "Go and tell him so, by all means, Skimmy."
 And Skimmy did. But, much to his surprise, the Scotland Yard detective did not seem impressed, and declined to admit him to his confidence in the matter.

CHAPTER 12.

Two on the Track!

AT half-past nine, the usual bed-time for the juniors when they were at St. Jim's, they marched up to bed.

Miss Fawcett was very careful to keep them to regular habits while they were in her charge. But for once Tom Merry did not accompany them upstairs. When they bade Miss Fawcett good-night, Tom Merry bade them good-night, too, with a smile that would certainly have led to another bumping had not Miss Fawcett been present.

The juniors went up to bed in a wrathful frame of mind. Kangaroo sat on his bed, and looked round at the others. They showed no signs of undressing and turning in.

The juniors had their beds together in a large room on the second floor, nine beds in a row. At St. Jim's a master

or a prefect usually turned out the light, but at Laurel Villa they were entrusted with that themselves.

"Well, going to bed?" asked Herries.

"Wathah not?"

"Not much!" said Kangaroo. "They're up to some little plan for catching the blackmailer, and Tom Merry is taking a hand."

"Looks like it," agreed Blake.

"Are we going to be left out?"

"Not much!"

"Can they possibly manage the thing without our assistance?"

"I don't suppose so for a moment."

"Are we going to let them try?"

"Never!"

"That's right," said the Cornstalk, nodding. "My idea is to keep awake and on the watch. We can turn the light out and wait. When there's a movement we can join in and make the thing a success."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"That's really what we came here for; and it would be absurd to go to bed like kids, and let a set of duffers muck it up."

"Bai Jove! I quite agree with our friend Kangaroo, you know."

"Perhaps it would be better for you all to go to bed, and leave the matter in my hands," Skimpole remarked thoughtfully. "As the only person here of any real ability, I think—"

"Oh, suffocate him, somebody!"

"Really, Digby—"

"Scat!"

Kangaroo turned out the light. Mr. Dodds, who knew boys, had gone into the garden to look at the window. When the light went out, the curate of Huckleberry Heath was satisfied.

He rejoined Miss Fawcett, not doubting that the juniors of St. Jim's had gone to bed.

As a matter of fact, they had never been wider awake.

In the shadowy room, where they could hardly see one another, they conversed in whispers for the first half-hour, chuckling over their intended participation in the scheme, whatever it was, for trapping the blackmailer.

Skimpole wore a very thoughtful look.

He drew D'Arcy to one of the windows, which was open, and from which it was easy to step upon the roof of an outhouse, and then to reach the garden.

The swell of St. Jim's looked out into the garden. The trees and the high shrubberies interrupted the view for more than a few yards. There was a glimmer of a moon through banks of clouds.

"Well, deah boy?"

"I do not think we should remain here," said Skimpole, in a whisper. "While those chaps are waiting we may possibly capture the blackmailer. We are far more competent to deal with the matter."

"Yaas, that is vewy twue."

"You remember that the villain required money to be placed on the sundial to-night?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Well, suppose we get out of the window and keep a watch on the sundial?"

"Bai Jove, that's a wippin' ideah!"

"Will you come?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Don't make the others look this way. We can deal with the scoundrel, and it is only fair for us to have the honour of capturing him."

"Quite wight. Besides, the othahs might make a vow, and muck it all up."

"Come on, then!"

Skimpole stepped out of the window upon the roof of the outhouse. Arthur Augustus followed him quietly. They made hardly a sound, and the juniors in the bed-room who were at some distance from the window, did not observe their departure. They were, as a matter of fact, too busy talking over their own plans to have any attention for the amateur detectives of St. Jim's.

Skimpole trod along cautiously to the edge of the roof.

"There is a rain-barrel beneath us," he said, peering over the edge. "I trust that the lid will bear our weight, as there is no other means of descending to the ground."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Will you go first, D'Arcy?"

"Not at all, deah boy; I don't want to take pwecedence of you in this mattah."

"My dear fellow, I am quite willing to let you go first," said Skimpole, who had no desire to test the weight of the barrel-top.

But D'Arcy did not exactly yearn to do so, either.

"Oh, no, Skimmay! You're leadah of this bizney, you know."

"Yes, but—"

"Pway don't wait for me."

"I really think—"

"I'll wait on the edge while you get down."

"We ought to waste no time—"

"I am waitin' for you, deah boy."

"The fact is, D'Arcy—"

"Bettah not talk too much, Skimmay, in case they heah our voices."

Skimpole resigned himself to his fate. As leader in the enterprise, he could not expect D'Arcy to take the lead, and the swell of St. Jim's naturally did not choose to be either leader or follower just as it suited the convenience of his comrade.

"Very well, D'Arcy, I will go first."

"If you pwefer me to be leadah, deah boy, I will go first."

"Ah! I am afraid I could not trust to your intelligence. But I do not wish to be greedy; you shall lead until we arrive upon the scene of action."

The swell of St. Jim's chuckled softly.

"Wathah not, deah boy!"

"Oh, very well! I trust the lid will bear my weight."

"I trust so. If you get a duckin', I will get down some othah way, and you can go back, and leave the whole mattah to me."

Skimpole made no reply to this generous offer. He lowered himself from the edge of the roof, and felt for the lid of the rain-barrel with his feet.

He found it, and rested his feet there.

"Ah, I think it will bear my weight!"

D'Arcy peered over at him.

"Jolly good. I—"

"Oh!"

"What's the mattah, deah boy?"

"Oh, I am going— Oh!"

"Bai Jove!"

There was a sudden cracking sound, and the lid of the rain-barrel, which wasn't built to stand the weight of an amateur detective, collapsed.

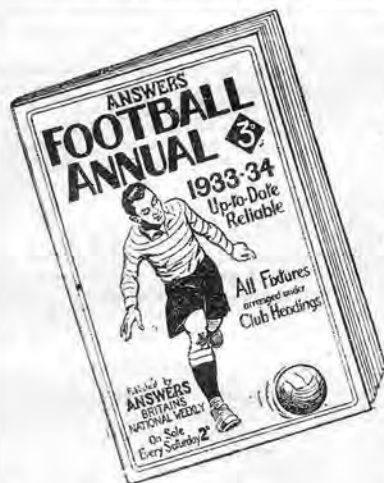
Skimpole disappeared into the barrel.

"Gweat Scott!"

(Continued on page 19.)

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HALLO, chums. It's a great story this week, isn't it? There's another just as good coming along next Wednesday, believe me. Martin Clifford fairly excels himself in

"THE D'ARCY CUP!"

in which Tom Merry & Co. decide to take up a new sport in water-polo. When I tell you that Skimmy is the referee, you can imagine the sort of things that happen! Don't miss this ripping yarn, whatever you do. Jerry Garrison and Fusty carry their war against Jasper Privett a stage further in our thrilling Western adventure yarn,

"RED STAR RANGER!"

of which further chapters appear next week. Potts, the ever ready office boy, will be on parade once more, and there will also be another column of readers' jokes (for each of which I pay half-a-crown) for those who like a good laugh. Finally there will be another interesting page from my notebook.

NOT TOO OLD AT EIGHTY-THREE.

Mr. George Smith, of Merton, Surrey, is eighty-three years old, or should it be young? For this amazing fellow likes nothing better than having a flight in an aeroplane, and he spends all his spare money on this form of amusement. The only thing that upsets him is that he can only afford to have two flights a week, but those he has regularly. Most men of Mr. Smith's age are content if they can have a fire and a bit of tobacco to while away their leisure, but this chap says that he would far rather go without tobacco than without his flight! He even says that each flight makes him feel ten years younger—perhaps he has found a new recipe for restoring youth!

NO FOOLIN'!

Here is a strange story—one of those stories which make people say that truth is stranger than fiction, for if anyone had put this story in a book people would have said it was impossible! But it really happened. To start with we must go back to last September, when Hendon became a borough, and there were great celebrations of the occasion. Among other things a great many toy balloons were let loose, bearing the names of certain of the local tradesmen, and one of them even reached Norway, while others were found in various places. Naturally, after all these months, no one expected to hear any more about them—but one day a week or two ago a firm of tailors received a balloon which bore their name. It had been sent from Yarmouth by James Duckford, of the fishing boat Maureen—he had found it inside a cod caught in the North Sea!

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,326.

A WHALE OF A JOB!

The Natural History Museum in South Kensington has some fine whales, and just recently these whales have been allotted a special room to themselves in a new building. There it is, a fine room, labelled "Whale Room," but it's empty—there aren't any whales in it! The trouble is that moving whales is no ordinary job, and in this case it would cost fifteen hundred pounds to move the whales to their new home, for they are much too big to be moved in one piece. The museum has decided to move them later on, but the job will take six months, for it necessitates the employment of experts who can take the whales to pieces and then put them together again in their new home.

A MAN AND HIS DOG.

Here is a story of a dog's devotion to its master. It happened in Australia. A man was brought to hospital in an ambulance, and his cattle dog, Bluey, followed him there and sat down outside the gate. Now, after five years, the dog is still there, though his master died soon after he reached the hospital. One of the hospital attendants feeds Bluey every day, and he is the only man whom Bluey will allow to go near him—he does not like other people. And all day long Bluey sits there, waiting, waiting for his master: he never sleeps during the day—he just waits.

HIS REWARD.

There was a man who was fond of horses. He had one himself which pulled his cart about, but as time went on and things progressed he found it necessary to sell his horse and buy a motor-car. He did this, but his love for horses did not die, and he decided to keep his horse trough always full for the benefit of any thirsty horse who might be passing that way. Then one day his clothes caught alight, and it seemed that he would be burnt to death, but all of a sudden he remembered the trough and rushed out and jumped into it—it saved his life!

THE MISSING DOCK.

How would you like to buy a thing for two hundred and fifty pounds and then when you went to collect what you'd bought you couldn't find it? That is what has recently happened to the Long Island Lighting Company of New York. They bought a dock, and when they last saw it it was nearly under water, but now they can't find it at all! And what is more, they are now having arguments as to whether a dock which has vanished still exists or not. What do you think?

GREAT NEWS!

Here is some splendid news for all my readers. In a few weeks' time I am giving away a splendid FREE GIFT with every copy of the GEM! It is a really

splendid gift and one which will please every boy and girl who gets it! What is it? Well, I'm not going to tell you about that just yet—I'll keep you guessing for a bit!

While on the subject of Free Gifts let me remind all my readers that Messrs. Cadbury Bros. are contributing no less than a quarter of a million of the Dairy-milk Chocolate Bars for the consumption of readers, who buy the GEM from beach-sellers, kiosks, and other such places at most of our popular seaside resorts. In addition they are giving pound boxes of their delicious assorted chocolates as prizes at our Concert Party, Cinema, and Gala Competitions. So when you go to the seaside, don't forget to remember this splendid offer.

A SURPRISE!

A man who went to the assistance of a taxicab-driver, when his cab overturned, had an unpleasant surprise. The cab overturned and a man rushed forward and started to drag the driver clear of the wreckage. To his amazement the driver struggled out, hit his rescuer on the nose—and then bolted! What with the blow on the nose and the shock of the driver's behaviour, the man was somewhat dazed. But later it turned out that the man who had been driving the taxi had no right to have been doing so!

LEG-THEORY.

Albert Hanning, of Reading, writes to say that he is of the opinion that there is nothing wrong with leg-theory bowling. He agrees that it is impossible for any but the very best bowlers to make any use of it, but he thinks that a really good batsman who is not afraid of it can score easily enough. His father has told him of the time when Warwick Armstrong brought his team over here, including MacDonald and Gregory, who used to bowl bumpers which frequently got up round the batsman's head. Frequently this did not pay, for our batsmen, particularly Hobbs, used to get the balls away to the boundary.

George Ericks, of Tottenham, on the other hand, says that he thinks that leg-theory bowling should be banned because it is causing trouble between this country and Australia, and he thinks that the Test matches should be considered before anything else. I quite see George's idea, and there is a lot to be said for it, though it would have to be understood that if we banned it in future, that ban in no way censured D. R. Jardine and his men.

"THE BROTHERHOOD OF THE BRAVE!"

Safe in their fortress headquarters, the notorious "Brotherhood of the Brave" plot further ruthless crimes, but little do they realise that Rupert Waldo, the "Robinhood Crook," whom they are pleased to welcome as a new member of their gang, is working not for them—but against them! Risking his life at every step and knowing that if he is caught by the police while he is a member of the gang he will get no mercy, Rupert Waldo is determined to put an end to the series of terrible crimes committed by the infamous Brotherhood. This thrilling story of the chums of St. Frank's appears in this week's issue of the "Nelson Lee Library," on sale everywhere, price twopence. Take my advice, chums, and get yourselves a copy right now!

YOUR EDITOR.

Miss Priscilla's Bodyguard!

(Continued from page 17.)

"Oh!"

"Bai Jove! Are you drownded, Skimmay?"

"Ow!"

Arthur Augustus peered down through the gloom. The succession of "Ohs!" and "Ows!" from the barrel seemed pretty clear proof that Skimmay wasn't drowned.

"Are you hurt, Skimmay?"

"Yes, you idiot!"

"Weally, Skimmay—"

"There isn't much water in the barrel!" gasped Skimpole. "But—but I have received a shock. Come down and help me out."

"I am afraid I cannot, Skimmay."

"You can stand on the edges of the barrel to get down."

"I was not thinkin' of that. You have applied an oppwobvious expression to me. I wefuse to be chawactewised as an idiot."

"Oh!"

"Unless you immediately withdwaw that oppwobvious expression, it will be impos for me to accompany you any farthah, and I shall weturn immediately."

"Ow! Come and help me out!"

"I am waitin' for your apology," said D'Arcy, in his most stately manner.

"You—you ass—"

"Good-bye!"

"Hold on, D'Arcy—hold on! I—I apologise!"

"Oh, vewy well, then we can wemain fwiends."

"Come and help me out."

"Certainly, deah boy!"

Arthur Augustus cautiously lowered himself down, rested his feet upon the edges of the rain-barrel, and gained the ground. Then he grasped Skimmay, and dragged him over the edges of the barrel.

"Come on, Skimmay."

"Ow—ow! I am hurt!"

"Would you wathah stay there?"

"No, you— Ahem! No, D'Arcy."

"Then make an effort, deah boy, and get out."

With the School House swell's assistance Skimpole managed to clamber out of the barrel. He gasped for breath as he landed on the ground.

"Dear me! What a fearful experience!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"However, a detective must be prepared to take risks," said Skimpole. "Let us go on. I do not think we have been missed in the bed-room."

Skimpole was right. As a matter of fact, the keenness of the St. Jim's juniors was dying out a little as the hour grew later. Sleepiness was creeping upon some of them. Herries was the first to yield. He said he would lie down for a bit, so as to be fresher when the time came for action. Three seconds later he was fast asleep, and looked as if nothing short of a cannon would have awakened him.

Digby was the next. He followed Herries' example, with the same intentions and the same result.

Manners gave a chuckle as he heard sounds of Digby's deep breathing.

"The ass!" he said. "He won't wake up in a hurry. I feel a bit sleepy myself, but I'll just take a rest in this ripping armchair. I won't lie down."

And Manners took a rest in the armchair, and was sound asleep in less than three minutes.

Noble, Blake, and Lowther remained awake, and they, taking warning by the others, did not "rest." They remained talking, every few minutes going to the door to listen for a sound below.

Blake came back from the door with bated breath a little later.

"Time!" he muttered.

"What is it?"

"I heard a door close."

"Good!"

And in a moment the three were widely alert and ready for action. On tiptoe they stole to the door, and passed out upon the landing.

CHAPTER 13.

An Unexpected Meeting!

"HUSH!"

"Weally—"

"Quiet!"

"My deah Skimmay—"

"Pray shut up, D'Arcy! I heard somebody move."

"Why didn't you say so at first, you ass!"

"Hush!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The two amateur detectives paused, and listened in the dark shade of the trees in the long, wide garden of Laurel Villa.

There was a sound of someone moving in the garden—there was no doubt about that. The two juniors were pushing cautiously through the shrubberies towards the patch of lawn where lay the old sundial, and they were careful to keep in cover. The individual whose movements they detected seemed to be doing the same.

"Bai Jove!" whispered Arthur Augustus. "It's some body cweepin' through the shwubbewy."

"Yes, that's it!"

"It's bound to be the blackmailah."

"Certain!"

"Let's cweep forward and then suddenly spwing on him."

"Good!"

"Come on, then!"

"Wait a moment," whispered Skimpole, struck by a sudden thought. "You know that according to Determinism—"

"Blow Determinism!"

"But I am a Determinist."

"Wats!"

"I am bound to stand by my principles. According to Determinism, everybody is the victim of the combined influence of his heredity and environment—"

"More wats!"

"And therefore," pursued Skimpole, unheeding, "therefore he is not morally to blame for any of his actions."

"Pway don't begin talkin' wot now."

"This isn't rot—this is Determinism."

"What's the diffewence?"

"You see," went on Skimpole, without replying to the question, which was a rather difficult one for anybody to answer, "you see the thought occurs to me should I be justified as a Determinist in causing the arrest of a man who is driven to bad deeds by his heredity and his environment?"

D'Arcy chuckled softly.

"Yaas, deah boy! You can put it down to your own heredity and environment, you know. You couldn't be to blame."

"Dear me! That is a very intelligent remark for you, D'Arcy. I hardly expected it of a fellow of your limited mental powers."

"Bai Jove!"

"Under the circumstances, I need have no hesitation in seizing the villain. Come on!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

And Skimpole, reassured in his mind, led the way through the shrubbery again. D'Arcy followed, grinning in the darkness. Privately, he regarded Determinism as sheer nonsense, and that particular moment for starting a discussion on the subject as particularly ill-chosen. As he confided to Blake afterwards, he had replied to Skimmay's "wot" with some more "wot" which quite satisfied Skimmay.

The moon peeped over the top branches of a big apple tree, and fell on the edge of the shrubbery. It fell also upon a slinking figure.

Skimpole grasped D'Arcy by the arm as he saw it.

"There he is!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Seize him!"

They sprang forward.

The slinking figure suddenly straightened up and turned towards them with a startled exclamation.

Skimmay stopped with a slight laugh.

"It's all wight, Skimmay. I know this chap."

"Is it not a stranger?" exclaimed Skimpole, greatly disappointed.

"Wathah not!"

"Who is it?"

"Chap named Snope."

Algy Snope it was. He looked at the two juniors in an extremely uncertain way, and in the moonlight his cheeks were very white—perhaps because their sudden appearance had startled him.

"You!" he murmured.

"Yaas, wathah! What are you doin' here?"

"I—I—I came to—to—to see Tom Merry!" stammered Snope.

D'Arcy grinned. He had heard from the juniors about that little encounter in the lane, and he had rather believed that Snope would avoid further meetings with Tom Merry if he could.

"Weally, Snope—"

"I—I—I wanted to see him—"

"Wathah a cுவious time for payin' a visit," remarked

D'Arcy. "Tom Mewwy goes to bed as a wule at half-past nine, and it is nearly ten now."

"Yes; but—but—"

"You are lookin' for twouble, I pwesume?"

"N-no."

"You came here to play some twick on Tom Mewwy, I suppose?" said Arthur Augustus. "I wathah think I can see through you, deah boy."

"I—I—I—"

"Or pewwaps it was to tell us that you accept the challenge to a ewicket match?" remarked the swell of St. Jim's sarcastically.

Algy Snope seemed to clutch at the straw, as it were.

"Yes, yes; that was just it!" he exclaimed eagerly.

"Sewiously, deah boy?"

"Yes, certainly. You see, I—I had to stay late at Mr. Jones, going over the books, and—and I couldn't get away sooner. I just looked in the back way, in—in case Tom Merry might be still up, as—as I didn't like to ring at the door at this time of night. I—I've spoken to the Ramblers, and they are willing to meet Tom Merry's team."

"Bai Jove, that's good!" said D'Arcy. "You wan a wisk of bein' taken for a burglah, you know, but it's all wight. Good-night!"

"Good-night, sir! Are you staying out later?"

"That is weally no business of yours, my friend."

"N-no; but—but—"

"I pwesume I can take a moonlight stwoll in a garden if I like with my friend Skimmay?" remarked Arthur Augustus.

"Yes, but—but it's chilly, and—and if you caught cold you—"

"Well?"

"You'd have to stand out of the cricket match, you know."

"Bai Jove, that's vewy true! We'd bettah go in, Skimmay."

"But—" began Skimpole.

"Don't argue, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, linking arms with the genius of the Shell. "We shall both be wanted for the match, and we can't wisk catchin' cold in the garden. Come in!"

"But—"

"Come in, you ass!"

And Arthur Augustus walked Skimpole off towards the house. As they disappeared into the shrubbery, Algy Snope smiled a peculiar smile. He did not leave the garden; he settled himself down in a shadowy spot on the edge of the shrubbery, within sight of the sundial, which glimmered faintly in the moonlight.

CHAPTER 14.

Tom Merry's Disguise!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY marched Skimpole away through the shrubberies, the genius of the Shell vainly murmuring protests. They were quite out of sight of the spot where they had met Snope, when D'Arcy halted at last in the shade of a big tree.

"Pway stop that idiotic stwugglin', Skimmay."

"I am not going in, D'Arcy. I refuse to go in. If you wish to go in, you can go in alone."

"Upon second thoughts, Skimmay, I will not go in," said D'Arcy thoughtfully. "You had bettah do so, and I will cawwy on the mattah alone."

"I refuse—"

"Wats! I know you are a feahful ass at ewicket, but we shall want you in the team. You can't play if you catch a cold."

"I am not going to catch a cold."

"It's damp in the garden, deah boy, and you know you're in wotten bad condish. You nevah do keep yourself fit."

"I shall not go in!"

"I insist!"

"D'Arcy—"

"I weward you as bein' undah my care," said D'Arcy, in quite a fatherly tone. "You see, you're not in good form like myself. You are such a skinny, thin, knock-kneed sort of wastah, you know, that it is necessawwy for you to take ewevy care of yourself."

"I will not go in!"

But Arthur Augustus was not to be argued with. When he assumed his fatherly manner and began to look after people, he was past argument.

"Now, Skimmay, I twest you will not force me to cawwy you."

"You ass—"

"I wefuse to be called an ass! I've got to look aftah you. If you catch a cold you may die of pneumonia, or somethin'."

"I shall do nothing of the sort! I—I—"

"Pway don't be such an argumentative beast, Skimmay! THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,326.

I nevah knew such a feahfully obstinate boundah as you are!"

"I tell you—"

"Hush! There's somebody comin'."

"Quiet!"

Skimpole hushed, and so did D'Arcy. The dispute was forgotten for the moment. A footstep sounded very clearly on the garden path.

It could not be Snope, who had been left behind at the bottom of the garden. Who was it? Was it the mysterious blackmailer at last?

The juniors crouched deeper into the shadow of the tree. The path ran past the tree, and the moonlight glimmered upon it.

In a minute or less they would see who it was.

They waited with bated breath.

A figure loomed up past the laurels, and the juniors recognised a shawl and a bonnet they had seen before.

"Bai Jove!" murmured D'Arcy. "Miss Pwiscillah!"

"Dear me!"

"Quiet! Don't startle her!"

The form passed by in the moonlight. The shawl concealed the face, as if the old lady were carefully guarding her head from the chance of a chill.

Both the juniors wondered what Miss Fawcett was walking alone in the garden at that hour for. The sight of a little leather bag in her hand enlightened them. They remembered the threatening letter and its conditions.

The figure disappeared down the garden.

"Bai Jove!" murmured D'Arcy. "She's takin' the cash to the blackmailah!"

"Undoubtedly!"

"It's wotten! I wondah Mr. Fix or Mr. Dodds didn't spot her."

"Perhaps she hasn't consulted them about it."

D'Arcy knitted his brows.

"Look here, Skimmay, the wascal is not goin' to have that money!"

"Certainly not!"

"If you will be vewy careful not to catch a chill, I will let you come back and watch the sundial with me for the blackmailah."

"I shall certainly watch the sundial, D'Arcy, and I regard your interference with my personal liberty as—"

"Wats! Come on!"

They stole back through the shrubs again. They were particularly careful this time to make no noise, for fear of startling the old lady. If Miss Fawcett had suddenly seen moving forms in the shrubbery, she might have fainted.

"Look out!" whispered D'Arcy suddenly.

"What—"

"She's comin' back."

They crouched low in the shadows. The footsteps were returning along the path. The figure in the shawl came through a belt of trees.

But it did not go up to the house. Standing in the shadows, it divested itself of the shawl and the bonnet, throwing them upon the ground. When the skirt followed D'Arcy began to gasp. But he gasped more than ever the next moment, when he discerned the form of Tom Merry in the place of that supposed Miss Fawcett.

It was not the old lady at all. It was the hero of the Shell in her guise!"

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus could not resist that slight ejaculation, so great was his amazement at the transformation.

Tom Merry was seen to give a sudden start.

His glance was fixed upon the spot where the two amateur detectives crouched in the shadows of the shrubbery.

"Come out!" he said, in a whisper—low, but very distinct.

They did not stir.

"Come out, you ass! I know you're there!"

"I wefuse to be called an ass!"

"What are you doing here?"

"Twackin' down the blackmailah!"

Tom Merry laughed silently.

"Have you seen anybody in the garden?"

"Nobody as yet, exceptin' that chap Snope."

"Snope!"

"Yaas, Algy Snope, you know."

Tom Merry started violently.

"Algy Snope! What was he doing here?"

"He came to see you, weally, to tell you that he and his club were acceptin' the challenge on Saturday."

"Oh!"

"It's all wight."

"Is it?" said Tom Merry, with a peculiar look. "Good! Now you chaps had better get in and go to bed."

"Are you sewious, Tom Mewwy?"

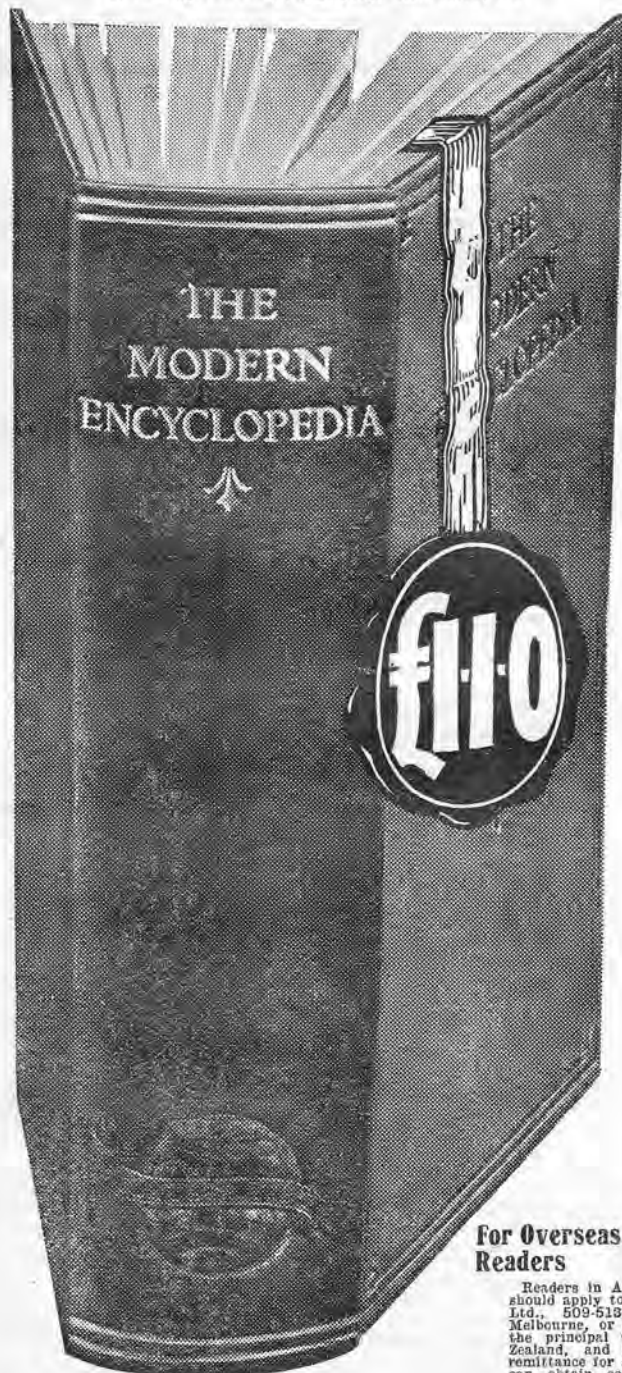
"Of course I am."

"You are not jokin'?"

(Continued on page 22.)

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Miss Priscilla's Bodyguard!

(Continued from page 20.)

"Certainly not."

"Then I can only regard the suggestion as an insult!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with a great deal of dignity.

"We are here to—"

"Speak in whispers, you duffer!"

"I refuse to be called a duffah!"

"Look here—"

"We are here to twack down the blackmailah. We are goin' to do so. You can come with me, if you like, and Skimmay can go in to bed."

"I shall do nothing of the sort!" said Skimpole.

"But I shall not wequiah your help, Skimmay, if Tom Mewwy comes with me."

"I regard you as an ass, D'Arcy."

"Weally, Skimmay—"

"Oh, shut up!" said Tom Merry. "Look here, it's a serious situation now. I went down to the sundial in Miss Fawcett's shawl to lead the blackmailer to suppose that the money was there if he was watching."

"Good!"

"Inspector Fix and Mr. Dodds have gone round to the side-path to watch the dial from the side nearest the gate. I am going to watch on this side."

"We will watch, too."

"Well, if you will, I suppose I can't lick you now, as it will make a row—"

"I should uttably refuse to be licked."

"Oh, come on, and shut up!"

And the three juniors crept down the garden cautiously.

CHAPTER 15.

The Blackmailer!

INSPECTOR FIX snorted softly as he lay in the shadow of the shrubbery, on the lower edge of the little lawn at the end of the garden.

The inspector was not feeling comfortable.

He had been ensconced in that position for ten minutes before the disguised Tom Merry had appeared to place the bag on the sundial.

The inspector was a townsman born and bred, and he had a great dislike to roughing it in the country. The grass in the garden was damp, and damp trickled from the laurels.

Mr. Fix had taken the precaution to bring a big travelling rug with him to spread on the ground, and this saved him from catching a chill, but he was not comfortable, and when he was not comfortable he snorted.

But he snorted very softly now.

It was probable that at any moment the blackmailer might appear to take the bag from the sundial, and the inspector did not wish to give the alarm.

Mr. Dodds, sitting on another rug, with his back against a tree, with an unlighted pipe in his mouth, waited patiently.

From where they had taken cover the two men had a clear and uninterrupted view of the sundial, upon which the moonlight was falling more clearly every moment.

They had clearly seen the disguised junior advance and place the bag there, and then disappear in the shadows towards the house.

Had other eyes seen him?

Was the blackmailer lurking in the shadows there, or was he coming at a later hour to examine the spot and ascertain whether his demand had been complied with?

It was quite possible that the vigil would last all the night, and at the prospect the inspector could almost have groaned aloud. It was possible, too, that the rascal might not be caught by so shallow a trap—that he might "smell a rat," and not come at all.

The inspector, judging by what clues he had, had decided that the blackmailer was some local person, more fool than rascal, and had laid his plans accordingly.

His theory, however, might be erroneous, and in that case he might have his vigil and the risk of rheumatism for his pains.

In that case it was likely to go hard with the blackmailer when the gentleman from Scotland Yard finally did catch him.

"Nothing yet?" murmured the detective.

Mr. Dodds touched his arm.

"Look!"

Inspector Fix drew a deep breath.

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From the shrubbery on the farther side of the little lawn a dark shadow moved out into the moonlight. It was a masculine form, but the face could not be seen, for a soft felt hat was pulled down over it as to completely conceal the features.

The figure advanced rapidly towards the sundial.

They watched him breathlessly.

It was undoubtedly the blackmailer, and he had been waiting the last ten minutes to give the supposed Miss Fawcett time to get back to the house. Now he was coming to take the money—or, rather, the bag. The bag, as a matter of fact, only contained paper, and would have been a very small prize for any blackmailer.

"It's our man!" murmured the inspector.

"Undoubtedly."

"Wait till he's taken the bag, and then rush at him!" muttered Mr. Fix. "You get between him and the gate, and I'll tackle him on this side."

"Very good."

The dark figure reached the sundial. A hand was stretched out to take the bag. The next moment the valuable prize was thrust into a pocket, and the figure turned away.

Like arrows shot at the same moment, the inspector and Mr. Dodds leaped out from cover and dashed upon the rascal.

He swung round with a gasping exclamation of alarm, his quick, nervous ears detecting the slight sounds they made.

"Oh!"

It was a gasp of almost agonised fear that escaped the rascal as the two men rushed up to him. For a moment he looked wildly round, like a hunted animal seeking a way of escape; but the athletic figure of Mr. Dodds cut him off from the way to the gate, and Inspector Fix, a little slower, was coming straight at him.

There was only one way to go, and he went that way. He swung off and dashed up the garden towards the house at a frantic speed.

There were paths round the house leading to the front garden and the lane beyond. The rascal had a chance yet if he could gain on his pursuers. His face had not been seen.

The three burst through the shrubbery, and there was a sudden yell.

Tom Merry sprang at the fleeing rascal and missed, catching his foot and rolling into the shrubs. Mr. Dodds stumbled over him and rolled headlong. Arthur Augustus and Skimpole, too confused by the sudden alarm to note exactly whom and what they were attacking, hurled themselves upon the inspector and brought him to the earth.

"Got him!" gasped Skimpole.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Mr. Dodds staggered to his feet.

"Sorry, sir!" gasped Tom Merry.

"All right! After the rascal!"

"This way! We've got him!" shouted D'Arcy.

The curate turned towards him.

"D'Arcy! Skimpole! How—"

"We've got him, sir!"

"Help!" gasped a muffled voice. "Get these young fools off! I'm being squashed!"

"Bai Jove! It's Fix!"

"Dear me! This is the second time that troublesome detective has caused us to make a mistake!" murmured Skimpole, slowly getting off the inspector's head.

Inspector Fix staggered to his feet.

"Have you got him?"

"No."

"After him!"

Mr. Dodds was already racing up the garden. They dashed after him, but there was little chance of capturing the rascal now, and they knew it. With the start he had gained, and the darkness to help him, he was not likely to be overtaken by his pursuers. But suddenly from the black shadows near the house rose a wild uproar.

There was a bumping and a scrambling, a yelling and a shouting, and the shrieks of a terrified man.

"My hat!" gasped Tom Merry. "The other chaps are out!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Buck up!"

"We've got him, then!" muttered the inspector.

They dashed on at top speed.

Close by the house, where the side path ran between rows of trees, a heap of sprawling and struggling forms appeared on the ground.

Three or four forms were sprawling there, and the uproar and the struggling was simply terrific.

"Bai Jove! They've got him!"

Kangaroo detached himself from the struggling mass, jumping up breathless.

"We've got him all right."

A weedy figure lay gasping on the ground, with the

grasp of Blake and Lowther fast upon him. The inspector knelt down, and there was a click as the handcuffs fastened upon the wrists of the prisoner.

At the touch of the cold metal the courage of the wretched blackmailer seemed to desert him suddenly—or, rather, the frantic excitement which had taken the place of courage when he felt himself seized by the juniors.

He lay helpless, breathing faintly, and moaning like one wounded, or like an animal shrinking from the lash.

"Get him into the light," said the inspector grimly. "Let us see his face."

The slouched hat had fallen off in the struggle, and the prisoner was bareheaded. He was dragged into the moonlight, and the rays fell upon his white terrified face.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy uttered an exclamation.

"Bai Jove! You've made a mistake, aftah all!"

"What?"

"This isn't the blackmailah, deah boys!"

"Who is it, then?" asked the inspector grimly. "Do you know him?"

"Yaas, wathah! It's Algy Snope!"

CHAPTER 16. Algy Owns Up!

"SNOPE!"

"Algy!"

"Greet Scott!"

"My only hat!" murmured Tom Merry. "So this is the giddy sport, and this is how he raises the tin for betting on the races, is it?"

"Bai Jove! What a widiculous mistake!" said Arthur Augustus fatuously. "I am sowwy you have been handled in this wuff way, Snope. You are wathah an ass, I know, but this is weally too wuff!"

"Yes, it is too bad!" said Skimpole, with a look of annoyance. "But the worst of it is, that while we have been wasting time upon this person the real criminal has probably made his escape."

Snope gasped and gasped. The words would not come out at first.

"It's—it's all a mistake!" he got out at last. "I—I—"

"Of course, it's all a mistake," agreed D'Arcy. "I recognised that as soon as I saw your chivvy, deah boy!"

"Of course," said Skimpole, with a nod. "We have been wasting time—"

"Ass!" murmured Tom Merry.

"Weally, Mewwy—"

"Master D'Arcy can tell you why I was here!" gasped Snope. "I—I came to speak to Tom Merry—to tell him that we accept his challenge to a cricket match on Saturday."

"That's wight!"

"Yes, I remember you told us so when we saw you in the garden half an hour ago," said Skimpole. "Quite right!"

"Bring him into the house," said the inspector.

"My dear sir—"

"Come!" said Mr. Dodds.

"My deah Mr. Dodds—"

"I am afraid you are a little too credulous with this person, D'Arcy," said the curate. "He is the black-mailer."

"But—"

"The inspector and I have been on the watch for him, and we saw him take the bag from the sundial."

"But—but—"

"It is in his pocket now."

"Bai Jove!"

"I am afraid there is no doubt of his guilt."

"But—but—" gasped the swell of St. Jim's, in astonishment. "He—he told us—"

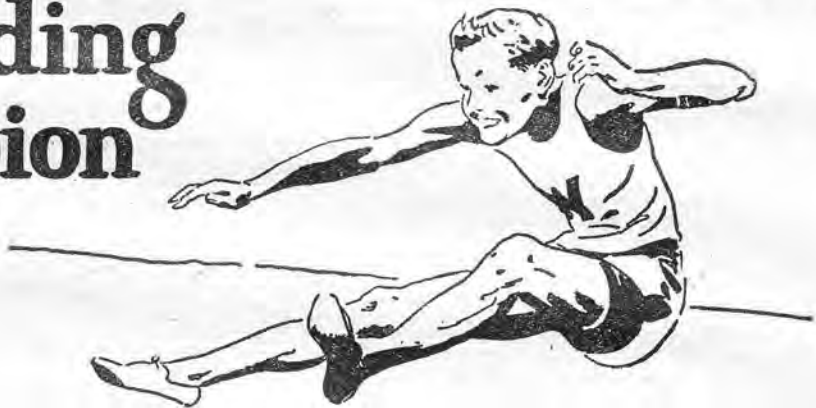
"I am afraid he was deceiving you."

"Bai Jove! I nevah thought of that, you know. Do you think the uttah wascal was tellin' me an untruth, Mr. Dodds?"

"I fear there is no doubt about it."

(Continued on next page.)

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"Bai Jove! Pway take those things off his wists, Inspector Fix, while I give him a feahful thwashin'!"

The inspector laughed.

"He has enough to face, Master D'Arcy, without a thrashing," he said.

D'Arcy's look altered at once.

"Yaas, wathah; I forgot that! Upon second thoughts, I will not give him a thwashin'. But it was extremely wotten of him to tell me an untwuth."

"Pray stop a minute!" said Skimpole. "It is quite impossible for this gentleman to be guilty. It does not agree in the least with any of my theories."

"Go hon!" said Blake.

"Bring him in," said Mr. Fix.

"Moreover," pursued Skimpole, talking as Algy was walked gently towards the house, the handcuffs clinking on his wrists—moreover, even if he is guilty, according to all the theories of Determinism he is not culpable, as he was irresistibly driven to commit this crime by the combined force of his heredity and his environment."

"Oh, ring off!" said Kangaroo.

"What would you do with a blackmailer, then?" asked the Cornstalk chum, who had not heard as much of Skimpole's "isms" as the other fellows, being newer to St. Jim's.

"Ahem!"

"Would you allow him to run loose and blackmail?"

"Certainly not!"

"Then you would shut him up somewhere?"

"He would be—be segregated."

"That is, shut up by himself?"

"Yes."

"And deprived of his liberty?"

"Yes."

"So that he couldn't do it any more?"

"Exactly!"

"Well, that's what's going to happen to him now," grinned Kangaroo. "He's going to be shut up by himself where he can't do it any more."

"There is a difference."

"Where?"

"Well, you see—"

"Yes, I see," agreed Kangaroo. "I always suspected that Determinism was a lot of bosh, and Determinists a set of cranks; and now I know it for certain."

"Really, Noble—"

"Oh, scat!"

"But—"

"Give us a rest!"

The prisoner was marched into the house. He went with hanging head and a dejected face. He had ceased making denials. His guilt was so clear that it was only in the first terror that he had thought of denying it.

He knew that the game was up, and that knowledge utterly crushed him.

Algy Snope was not of the stuff to which heroes are made. He could punt on the racecourse, and make wonderful breaks on the billiards-table, and stay up till one o'clock in the morning, drinking and smoking, and keeping up a wonderful appearance of enjoying it; but when he found himself in danger, all his nerve went utterly.

The smart sportsman, the leader of the choice spirits of the Bird in Hand, the class of fashion in Huckleberry Heath—what was he now?

He seemed to have shrunk to half his size as he tottered along in the midst of his captors.

His face, always pasty in colour from the late hours and smoking and general bad habits, was now as white as a sheet of notepaper, and his eyes seemed to have sunk into his head. His lips were hanging loose and flabby, and tears trembled on his eyelids.

Algy, the sportsman, was facing the music with less nerve than the smallest fag at St. Jim's would have shown.

Brandy and water and cheap cigarettes could not buck him up to stand a trial like this.

He staggered rather than walked in through the french windows, and sank almost in a heap into an armchair.

His whole look was so ghastly that the juniors felt a thrill of pity for him.

His crime had been mean and cowardly, and yet it was probably as much the outcome of sheer stupidity as of wickedness.

"I—I can't stand this," murmured Blake. "I—I wish they'd let the poor rotter go."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Algy caught the muttered words, and he looked up eagerly, with wild hope flushing his pasty face.

"Speak a word for me!" he muttered brokenly. "For mercy's sake, don't let them send me to prison!"

His glance swept eagerly round the circle of faces. Only Mr. Fix's was hard and grim. The curate of Huckleberry

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Heath looked pityingly, but he had no authority in the matter. The decision rested with Mr. Fix and Miss Fawcett.

There was a rustle as Miss Priscilla entered the room. The old lady had remained up, with a palpitating heart, waiting for the announcement of the capture, if it should be effected.

She glanced in surprise at the crowd of juniors in the room.

"My dear boys—"

"We all had a hand in it, Miss Fawcett," said Kangaroo blandly. "The rotter would have got away otherwise. We've got him!"

"The rascal is captured, Miss Fawcett," said Inspector Fix gravely.

Miss Priscilla looked at the prisoner.

"My goodness! This is Mr. Jones' young man!"

"It is the blackmailer."

"Surely there is some mistake?"

"None!"

"Bless my soul!"

Snope looked eagerly at the astonished old lady.

"Miss Fawcett—"

"Is that—that the dreadful man?" said Miss Fawcett, in wonder.

The juniors could not help grinning. Algy Snope did not look much like a dreadful man at that moment. He looked more like a whipped dog.

"Miss Fawcett—don't let them send me to prison!"

CHAPTER 17.

A Chance for Algy!

MISS PRISCILLA looked at the white-faced, trembling wretch in the chair, and then at the grim countenance of the detective.

The juniors drew back from the scene.

The abject terror and misery of Algy Snope had touched their hearts, and they were inwardly determined that something should be done for the poor wretch, and if the inspector did not give way, they meant to interfere somehow.

But for the present they drew away from the scene, and left Miss Fawcett to deal with the grim-faced gentleman from Scotland Yard.

Tom Merry had a suspicion that Mr. Fix's grim looks were assumed for the purpose of striking a wholesome terror into the heart of the amateur blackmailer, but he could not be quite sure.

"Has the bad boy confessed?" asked Miss Fawcett.

Even in his abasement Algy could not help giving a sort of wriggle as she said that. For the choice spirit of the village, the chief of the local sports, to be alluded to as a bad boy, was too humiliating. But he did not speak.

"You confess?" said Mr. Dodds.

Algy bowed his head.

"Yes, sir."

"Have you anything to say in extenuation—anything that may justify Miss Fawcett in taking pity on you?"

Algy gasped for breath.

"Yes—yes, sir! I—I—I'll tell you all about it! I—"

He broke off.

Tom Merry glanced round at his comrades.

"Let's go out," he murmured. "The poor rotter doesn't want to tell us all his private affairs. Come on!"

"Yaas, wathah! I veward that as vewy good form on your part, Tom Mewwy."

"Oh, rats!"

"Well, I can do with some sleep," remarked Blake. "It's fatiguing, capturing blackmailers in the middle of the night, though, of course, a chap likes to lend his aid to fellows from Scotland Yard, who aren't quite up to their business."

"Yaas, wathah!"

And the juniors crowded out of the room. But they did not go to bed. They were too anxious to know the verdict upon Algy.

The door closed behind them.

"Shall I go?" asked Mr. Dodds, glancing at Miss Fawcett.

The old lady shook her head.

"Pray remain, Mr. Dodds. I depend upon you for advice."

"Very well."

Mr. Dodds sat down.

Algy looked relieved by the departure of the juniors. Abashed as he was, he felt that he could not speak freely before them.

"Well, have you anything to say?" said the inspector grimly.

"Ye-es. I—I hope Miss Fawcett will pardon me," stammered Algy. "I—I never meant to do her any harm—I—I only wanted the money."

"We know you never meant to carry out your silly threats," said Mr. Dodds quietly. "But Miss Fawcett did not know it, and she was very much alarmed."

"Very much," said Miss Fawcett. "Not so much for myself, as for the dear children."

"I—I am very sorry, ma'am. I—I was so awfully in want of money."

"Why so?" said the curate. "Mr. Jones pays you the ordinary rate of salary, I believe, and you are a lad without any one dependent upon you."

"I—I—I'm in debt."

"Indeed!"

"I—I—I've been losing money," stammered Algy, the old, old miserable story coming out at last. "I—I owe money at the Bird in Hand, and—and I've been unlucky on the—the races. I—I—I—"

"Come, you had better be frank," said Mr. Fix, who saw very clearly that there was something more serious behind.

"Make a clean breast of it."

"But—"

"Come, get on!"

"But—but—"

"Nothing you say now shall be used against you," said the inspector.

"Thank you!" stammered Algy. "I—I had to pay some of the debts, and I took some of old Jones' money to pay them."

Miss Fawcett gave a little shriek.

"You have robbed your employer?"

Algy burst into tears.

It would have astonished the "giddy sports" of the neighbourhood to see their great chief with the water running helplessly down his ashen cheeks.

"I—I took it only for a time!" he gasped. "I—I expected to bring off a—coup at the races the same week; but—but my horse came in fifth, and—and I lost. If I don't get money by the end of the month, I—I shall be found out. Oh dear—oh dear! I shall be sent to prison!"

"Well, I must say you're a pretty fair specimen of an all-round blackguard!" said the inspector. "Debts at a public-house, debts on the races, robbing your employer, and blackmail at the finish!"

"Oh dear—oh dear!"

"He is more a fool than a rogue, as you surmised yourself from seeing the letter, Mr. Fix," said the curate. "I have had him under my observation for some time. He is a silly lad, and thinks himself very clever, and he has been led into this from a silly, conceited desire to keep up his reputation among the foolish and worthless lads he associates with."

Algy writhed.

He had sometimes had some plain speaking from Mr. Dodds, but never anything quite as plain as this before. The inspector nodded. He had come across many Algys in his experience, and he knew exactly what they were like.

"I do not know how to express my detestation of this wretched boy's actions," said Miss Fawcett; "but—but I should like to be merciful."

"I won't ever do it again!" wailed Algy. "Only give me a chance!"

"Inspector, what do you say? You will let me give him a chance?"

Inspector Fix smiled. He had no desire to take a silly, crying boy to the county gaol with him as a prisoner. The case was as ridiculous as it was contemptible. Algy had had a terrible fright, and, under careful management, that would probably do him more good than a turn in prison, which would probably turn him into a confirmed criminal by closing all honest paths to him.

And little Mr. Fix, in spite of his grim looks, had a tender heart enough.

"Well, if you wish to treat him leniently, Miss Fawcett, I—"

"I do—I do!"

"Yet I don't know," said Mr. Fix, hesitating a little for Algy's benefit. "A rascal who tries to blackmail, and writes letters in invisible ink—"

"It was that put the idea into my head," wailed Algy. "I—I read of a chap doing it in the 'New York Boys' Buster,' and there was a recipe for making the ink."

"You young fool!" exclaimed the inspector, his gravity breaking down. "What you want is a hiding, not arrest!"

"I—I—I'd rather have a hiding, please!"

"Perhaps we can give him a chance," said the inspector thoughtfully. "Suppose we leave him to Mr. Dodds? Of course, I am taking a serious step in doing this."

"It is indeed kind of you, Mr. Fix. I am sure we can trust Mr. Dodds to look after this bad boy."

The bad boy writhed.

"If he is left to me," said the curate, "I will do my best. We must first ascertain whether he is willing."

"Oh, quite willing, sir—quite willing!" panted Algy.

"Mind, I shall not deal easily with you," said Mr. Dodds sternly. "In the first place, you will give up drinking."

"Yes, sir."

"You will give up smoking till you are turned twenty."

"Yes, sir."

"You will cease to visit public-houses on any pretext whatever."

"Yes, sir."

"You will keep regular hours."

"Yes, sir."

"You will give up associating with rowdy companions, except for the purpose of trying to bring them to more decent ways."

"Yes, sir."

"You will keep clear of the races, and never bet either on horses or cards."

"Yes, sir."

"Very good! That is all."

Algy looked at him in wonder.

"But—but you haven't said anything about coming to church, sir. I—I'll come to church every Sunday."

"No, you won't!" said Mr. Dodds. "I make no conditions on that point. You can suit yourself exactly. It would do you good; but I want no hypocrisy, Snopce."

"Ye-es, sir."

"Then I think we can call the matter settled."

"But—but—but—"

"Well?"

"I—I am twelve pounds behind with my accounts, sir," faltered Snopce.

"I will see to that," said Miss Fawcett. "It would not be fair to Mr. Jones to leave him in ignorance of the fact—"

"You won't tell him?" shrieked Algy.

"He must be told," said Miss Fawcett gently. "We must be fair; but I will find the money for you to repay, and I will use all my influence with Mr. Jones to induce him to keep you in his employ. If it is unpleasant for you, you must regard that as part of your punishment. I cannot help you to deceive your employer."

"Oh, very well!" murmured Algy.

And so it was settled.

The inspector removed the handcuffs, and Mr. Dodds conducted the amateur blackmailer to the door.

Gladly enough Algy fled.

The juniors of St. Jim's saw him go, and they went to bed in a much more contented mood, with the knowledge that the young rascal was being given another chance.

The capture of the "dreadful man" had quickly followed the arrival of the juniors at Laurel Villa, but they stayed till the end of the week all the same. On the Saturday afternoon they played the Ramblers at cricket. It was a changed and subdued Algy when they met on the cricket ground.

Algy was unable to meet their eyes, but the juniors made no allusion whatever to what had passed, and treated him with perfect courtesy, so he soon regained his courage.

The match was farcical. The juniors, with only nine on their side, simply walked over the Ramblers, who played eleven.

But the match showed Algy something of what cricket was like when it was well played, and it put new ideas into his head.

After the match he spoke to Tom Merry in a way Tom had never expected from the redoubtable sportsman.

"I've been a silly ass," said Algy in a low voice. "I'm going to run straight now. Mr. Jones has treated me very decently, though he keeps a sharp eye on me now. Miss Fawcett has settled it for me. What a wonderful old lady she is! I shall never forget how she has treated me!"

"Good!"

"I've dropped the 'sports,'" said Algy, with a grimace.

"Some of them have dropped me, too, I'm going in for cricket seriously this season. When you come down again we'll play you, if you like, and I think we'll give you a better game."

"Agreed!" said Tom Merry heartily.

And they parted on the best of terms.

And when the juniors took the train to return to St. Jim's, along with Miss Fawcett and Mr. Dodds, on the platform to see them off, was a weedy figure—without a cheap cigarette—waving a friendly hand, and Tom Merry waved back again to Algy Snopce, the "dreadful man" whom they had come to Huckleberry Heath to discover.

THE END.

(Don't miss next week's ripping yarn of St. Jim's:—
"THE D'ARCY CUP!" It's a real tip-top story!)

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THRILLS GALORE IN OUR WESTERN ADVENTURE YARN.

RED STAR RANGER!



By
JOHN SPENCER.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED :

JERRY GARRISON and **FUSTY**, his pal, are wrongfully outlaced by **JASPER PRIVETT**, the rascally Mayor of Red Rock. The pals know that Privett is in league with bandits in the mountains, led by a man named Slade. Jerry and Fusty find the bandits' stronghold and blow it up while the bandits are away on a raid. Returning from the raid, Slade and his gang are forced to bury the gold they have stolen from Mongoose Bank. Later, the two pals dig it up and return it to Mongoose at dead of night. Squint Lane, one of Privett's spies, gets on the 'phone at once and tells Privett what has happened.

(Now read on.)

The Spy!

"**T**HAT a true bill?" asked Privett, when he had recovered from the shock.

"True bill, boss. Had to let you know. Mean-whiles, I'll keep my eye on the sheriff, and pass over the latest info when it's safe to do it."

"Okay, Squint! And let me know if any gold's being shipped by road anywhere. We've gotta make up for that loss—see? And we're going to get the Ranger, even if I have to use every gunman in Red Rock to do it!"

Lane put back the receiver, and, hearing footsteps approaching, leapt to his feet, leant against the desk, and stuck his hands in his pockets as Sheriff Hugo Ennis came strolling in.

"'Mornin', Squint!" said the sheriff, as he slumped into the chair. "What you make out of the Red Star Ranger bringing back that gold?"

"Stole it. Then got cold feet, and brought it back, scared."

"Mebbe you're right," said the sheriff brightly; "but it seems so odd he should steal the gold, get away with it, and then bring it back, that I'm wonderin'."

The sheriff found the seat of the chair hot. Without looking up at Squint he reached for the telephone. That was warm, too, from handling.

"Bin hyar long, Squint?" he asked casually.

"No," answered Lane. "Just kem in." He strolled to the door, waved a hand, and said he was going along to have a peep at the crowd at the bank.

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A minute later the sheriff found the door leading to the back room locked. He hadn't locked it, but somebody else had. Who was it, and why? And to whom had Squint Lane been telephoning?

The sheriff lolled in his chair, thinking hard. He had never liked Squint Lane, and lately he had begun to distrust him. Perhaps he had never trusted him. He didn't like men with cross eyes.

From thinking of Lane, the sheriff's thoughts switched to the Red Star Ranger, Jerry Garrison. Odd that the Ranger should have robbed the bank with the help of Joe McKraw and a masked gang, and then, for no apparent reason, brought the gold back and pinned a notice on the bank door. It sort of didn't seem sense. But it showed that Jerry Garrison and Joe McKraw were not far away from Mongoose, and his duty as sheriff was to go and get them. And, besides, there was a reward of 10,000 dollars for anyone who could take them, dead or alive.

Softly whistling a tune, the sheriff opened that back door, went out into the yard, and threaded his way to the stables where his horse was stalled. He would go and find Jim Rawson, a man whom he could trust, then round up the vigilants and go hunting for Jerry Garrison and his pal, he decided.

But when he reached the stables and swung the door open wide and stepped in, he found three ponies there instead of only one, and two men in addition, each of whom stuck the cold ring of a six-gun slap against his ribs.

"Now, stick 'em up, sheriff!" said Jerry Garrison cheerfully, whilst Hugo Ennis raised his hands up high. "We want to have a little private talk with you."

The Sheriff Goes Riding!

THE Sheriff of Mongoose scowled at the curly-headed outlaw and his bandy-legged old-timer pal, Joe McKraw, who swiftly relieved him of his guns.

"Time was when you and me were pals, Fusty," said Hugo Ennis, "and now you're an outlaw, a bank robber, and very like a murderer. But you can't get away with this."

"Hugo," retorted Fusty, "I allus thought you wuz a man of sense."

"That I am."

"Don't look like it to me. I suppose you reckon Jerry Garrison an' me robbed the bank?"

"Shore you did; then brought the gold back becos you got scared."

"Scared nothing!" grinned Fusty. "True, we brought the gold back; but we took it from the gang who buried it up the mountains, and then Jerry hyar stuck up a notice on the bank door saying we never did it. Hugo, I threw in my lot with Jerry Garrison 'cos he was given a raw deal by Jasper Privett, the crook Mayor of Red Rock, and what we're aimin' at is clearin' our names of the dirt that's smudged 'em, and drivin' Privett out of town."

"Talk's cheap," said the sheriff. "You've gotta show me."

"That's what we're gonna do," said Fusty. "So supposin' you saddle up and we all go ridin'?"

The sheriff cocked his ears, listening, but as no sound came that promised rescue, he obeyed, and a few minutes later rode out of the yard into a back street with Fusty on one side of him and the Red Star Ranger on the other.

Hugo Ennis hoped to be able to attract the attention of his pals and turn the tables on his captors, but nobody seemed to notice him. He thought of making a dash for it, but if he did Joe might shoot, and once Joe was his pal. He used to like Joe McKraw. And Jerry Garrison, the Red Star Ranger, was supposed to be a killer. Better humour the joke, he decided; and, besides, he was curious to know why he had been kidnapped like this. The Red Star Ranger and Joe McKraw had risked their lives to capture him beyond the shadow of a doubt, and the situation was interesting.

Only Squint Lane saw the sheriff ride by, and as Squint recognised the men who rode each side of Hugo Ennis he stared aghast.

"Flamin' snakes!" he moaned. "If that ain't the sheriff with Fusty Joe McKraw and the Red Star Ranger! An' whar in heck can they be ridin' to?"

He made a beeline to a near-by shop and rang up the Mayor of Red Rock. Within a minute he was handing out the news to Jasper Privett, and giving the mayor another scare.

As soon as they reached the open road the sheriff turned to Fusty.

"Pr'aps," he grated, "you'll tell me where we're makin' for?"

"The mountains. Hugo, we're going to show you things. We're going to prove that we're not bandits, but fightin' on the side of law and order."

The sheriff eyed Joe critically, then turned to glance at Jerry Garrison, and he liked the look of both.

"I'm willin' to learn!" he grunted.

"Jerry," said McKraw, "show him that red star."

Jerry Garrison swept open his coat and showed a bright, blood-red enamel star pinned to his shirt, and Hugo Ennis widened his eyes as he recognised it.

"Why, that's the star Sim Ross, the Sheriff of Red Rock, uster wear!" he said.

"It's the star Sim wore when he was killed," said Joe solemnly. "Remember how Sim uster swear by me, Hugo? Waal, get this. Sim was shot in a bank hold-up the day Jerry rid into Red Rock Town. A gunman named Al Rivers plugged him an' I took the star from Sim when he died. Jerry, hyar, got Rivers, and I gave him the star 'cos I thought he wuz the right man to wear it."

"They say Jerry Garrison planned that bank raid and shot Sim," said Hugo Ennis.

"That wuz Jasper Privett's lyin' tale, Hugo," Joe McKraw averred. "Now, let me tell you why we're takin' you up to the mountains. It's becos Jasper Privett, Mayor of Red Rock, runs the gang that robbed the Red Rock Bank. He had Sim shot 'cos Sim was beginning to suspect him. He aimed at hangin' Red, hyar, because Jerry knew it was Rivers shot Sim, and he aimed at provin' Red was head of the gang that robbed the bank. I helped Red get away, and now we mean to get the mayor."

"It was Privett put out them reward bills against you and the Red Star Ranger, Joe?" questioned Hugo Ennis.

"Shore! An' get this. Privett is head of the gangs of bandits who have been robbing banks and holding up trains in these parts for years. His head man is named Slade,

and Slade and a gang lived in an unknown fort up in the mountains till Red and me found it and blew it up. We did that after Slade and his gang rode into Mongoose to rob the bank. When Slade and his men got back and found they couldn't cross the chasm that led to their fort, 'cos me and Jerry, hyar, blew up the bridge that spanned the gap, they buried the gold among the rocks. Red and me found it there, and rode with it to the Mongoose Bank, where Red left it with a little note for you, sheriff."

As he spoke Joe McKraw pulled the sheriff's guns out of his deep pockets and handed them back.

"There are yore guns, Hugo," he said. "We were pals once. Hope we'll be pals again."

The sheriff broke the guns, examined the cylinders, found them fully loaded, and thrust them into his holsters. The look he gave Joe and Jerry was now mild.

"I never knew you tell a lie, Joe," he said, "and what you say sounds like truth. Know any of the crooks who work in with Jasper Privett back in Red Rock?"

"A half-breed named Sam Paulo is one," growled Joe, his face clouding. "Guess you've got some of the same kidney, spyin' on you back in Mongoose."

"Caught one of 'em at it this mornin'," said the sheriff. "Name of Squint Lane. But a pal of mine named Jim Rawson is watchin' him. We know he phones Red Rock reg'lar."

Sheriff Hugo Ennis, looking almost human, edged his big brown pony closer to Paintbox, on whose back rode Jerry Garrison.

"Say, Jerry," he said, "I've kind of took a likin' to you, though you and Fusty, hyar, did turn yore guns on me this mornin'. You shot Sim Ross' killer, hey? Do you swear you're not a bandit?"

"Never have bin. Hope I never shall be," answered the Red Star Ranger. "The only thing I ever did wrong was shoot a half-breed who was illtreating a white gel, and that got me outlawed in one state. Glad I did it, all the same."

"I know this man Slade. He's often rid into Mongoose. You say him and his gang robbed the Mongoose Bank?" pursued the sheriff.

"Sure!" answered the Red Star Ranger. "And they all work for Jasper Privett, Mayor of Red Rock."

The sheriff gave a grunt that almost signified belief.

The Ride in the Mountains!

THE Red Star Ranger on his untiring pony, Paintbox, led the way through unknown trails and wild passes to somewhere beyond Misfire Canyon, to a place where Hugo Ennis had never been.

Up they climbed, and on they rode, until at last Red led the now excited sheriff to a spot where the shattered ruins of a drawbridge spanned a narrow gorge. Pulling his horse up here, the sheriff saw the ruins of the fort buildings, stables, armoury, and stores which Red had demolished a day or two ago.

Then Fusty told how they had come upon the place.

And leaving the gorge behind them, Jerry Garrison, at a hand gallop, wound in and out, and up and down more unknown tracks and trails, until they came to the natural arena set among the rocks where, Red said, Slade and his men had buried the gold they had stolen from the bank at Mongoose.

They walked their horses round the place.

"Look!" said Jerry Garrison, pointing out countless shoe marks. "The ponies Slade and his men rode did those. And here are the ashes of the fires they lit. Here's where they buried the sacks of gold coin and the gold bricks. We rolled these boulders back after we'd taken the gold out of the holes."

"It proves a lot," admitted the sheriff, "but as far as I can see, it don't clear you of the robbery. I'm sorry, Garrison, but—"

Fusty had pricked up his ears and was riding his pony up a slope which led out of the arena. As the sounds he heard echoed more clearly, he checked his pony with a "Whoa, Jenny!" and, advancing cautiously, peered out from behind a sheltering rock. What he saw made him blink, back the dun pony, turn and ride with slack reins back to the sheriff and the Red Star Ranger.

"There's a whole army of horsemen coming up the trail," he said, in a hoarse whisper. "From along thar you ken look down miles of mountain. I saw two motor-cars on a track on one of the lower trails. Slade's with the gang. I recognised him by his white hat. Jasper Privett's with 'em, too. Now, what about that for proof, sheriff?"

"It proves Privett and Slade are on the mountains," said the sheriff. "I s'pose they're huntin' the Red Star Ranger."

"You'll make yore head ache, Hugo, thinkin'," said Jerry Garrison, with a grin. "Let me show you where to

hide the ponies. Then you can watch these guys, and, maybe, you'll learn something thataway. Kem on!"

The Red Star Ranger led the way to a little pocket among the rocks where he and Fusty had hidden their ponies when watching Slade and his men burying the gold bars and the gold in the arena less than four and twenty hours ago. There the ponies were tied up together. The three crept back to the arena and hid in the rocks above it.

They had scarcely settled themselves down when into the arena came Slade at a canter, followed by between twenty-five and thirty horsemen. Sheriff Hugo Ennis' lips tightened as he recognised Jasper Privett, the Mayor of Red Rock.

The burly mayor was seated astride a rather frail-looking pony. His face was damp from the exertion of riding, his complexion like wax. But fire smouldered in his shifty eyes, and as he jostled his way among the horsemen, he barked out:

"Now, you say you buried the gold bars and the gold bits hyar. Show us the place, Slade!"

"It's there!" said Slade, pointing.

"Squint Lane said on the telephone," snarled Jasper Privett, "that the Red Star Ranger and McKraw took the gold back to the bank in the night. Root up those rocks. Dig up the ground. And if I find Lane has lied, and sent us up here on a fool's errand, by gosh, I'll pump him full of lead!"

"The seat was hot, the telephone was warm. And Squint Lane was there," Jerry Garrison heard Hugo utter. "I'm sold by one of my own men!"

Jerry Garrison looked down again into the arena. There the men who had leapt from their ponies were lifting the rocks and tossing them aside. Some, with spades brought for the purpose, were shovelling away the soil. In front of the ever deepening hole, astride their horses, Slade and Jasper Privett sat side by side.

"Well, what about it, Slade?" snarled the Mayor of Red Rock impatiently.

"It's no use yore diggin'!" bellowed Slade, crimson to the rim of his big hat. "The gold's not thar. Lane's tale must be true. The Red Star Ranger and McKraw must have dug it up and taken it down to the bank."

The mayor looked darkly round at the men.

"Boys," he snarled, "they won't interfere with us much longer. After this, there's only one thing we can do; hunt 'em till we find 'em and then shoot on sight."

Slade pointed in the direction of the gorge and the ruined fort.

"An' don't forget, boys," he roared, "Jerry Garrison and Fusty blew up our hidin' place. We owe 'em a hangin' for that!"

"Where're we gonna hunt, boss?" asked one of the men who had been digging, leaning on his spade.

"Down in Mongoose," barked Jasper Privett. "Just before we started Squint Lane rang through again. He said the Red Star Ranger and Joe McKraw were in Mongoose with the sheriff. But I didn't listen to all of his

gab. I wanted to kem up hyar and fetch the gold in case Squint Lane lied. Slade, I'm headin' back to Red Rock in the car. You and the boys ride into Mongoose. See Hugo Ennis. We can't guess what kind of a tale the Ranger and Fusty have bin tellin' the sheriff; but whatever it is, call their bluff and get the sheriff an' his vigilants to hang 'em up high, without trial. He'll do it, if you make enough fuss. He's all for law an' order!"

Jerry Garrison, as they heard, dug his elbow into the sheriff's small ribs.

"Did you get that, Hugo?" he whispered hoarsely.

"Shut yore trap!" hissed the sheriff. "I'm not the big sap they take me for."

Jasper Privett rode his horse away, throwing up his arms as he went.

"Remember," he roared, "I want the Red Star Ranger shot and skinned alive and hanged!"

After the horsemen had departed, and it was safe to move, the Sheriff of Mongoose led the way very thoughtfully back to the ponies.

"What you going to do, sheriff?" asked Fusty. "Rouse the vigilants and battle it out with Slade and his gang, and then ride over to Red Rock and put one over on the mayor?"

But Ennis shook his shaggy head.

"We can't order it that way," he said. "What'd the town think? But I've an idea. Supposin' I was to get the bank to send a consignment of gold by road to Red Rock? I'd contrive that Squint Lane and some of them traitors should know of the plan. The gold would be sent by road in a fast car. If Slade and Privett know of it they'll most likely lay an ambush, shoot up the car, and—"

"Steal the gold?" growled Fusty.

The sheriff grinned.

"No. There won't be no gold," he said. "I'll have a second car driving a minute after the first. Mobbe we'll stage a battle, and if we do some of them guys are gonna get killed."

"Hugo," said the Red Star Ranger, "what are you going to have in the car instead of gold?"

"Vigilants—all armed, an' crack shots," said the sheriff.

"An' you call me Hugo again, an'—"

His hand sought his gun-butt.

"Well, it's your name," said Jerry Garrison laughingly. "But I'll make a bargain. Let me drive that car that's supposed to carry the gold through, an' I'll quit calling you Hugo. Hugo. I want to figure in that shoot-up, sheriff."

"And let me go with Jerry, sheriff!" pleaded Fusty.

"We're pals. If he's rubbed out I shan't wanta stay behind—see?"

"I'll think about it," growled Hugo Ennis. "But you guys sorta forget that you're outlaws."

(The Sheriff of Mongoose has sure thought out a great plan! Jasper Privett will have to look out for himself! More thrills next week!)

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