

"THE BLACK HAND AT ST. FRANK'S!" E. S. BROOKS' Latest Thriller of
Mystery and School Adventure— **INSIDE.**

The **GEM** 2^d

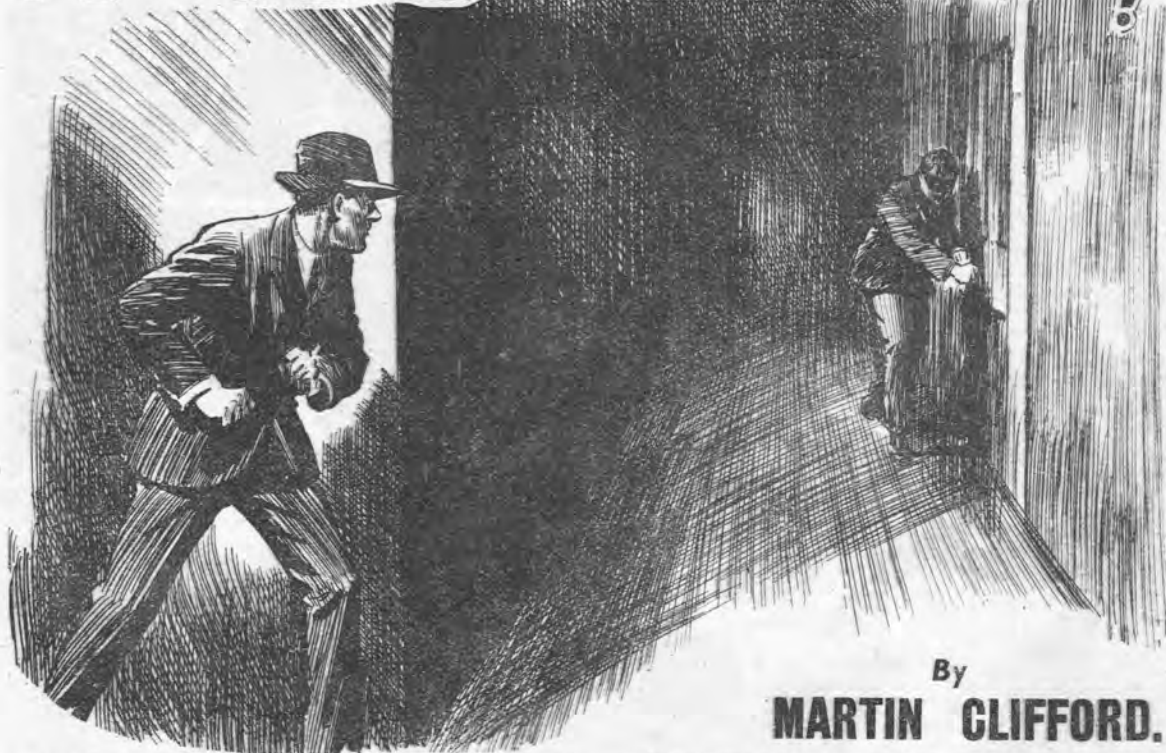
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See the Super St. Jim's Story Within—Featuring a Mystery Cracksman and Ferrers Locke, Detective!

WHO IS "X," THE MYSTERY CRACKSMAN? THERE'S A SENSATION AT ST. JIM'S—

MR. "X" UNMASKED!



By

MARTIN CLIFFORD.

Ferrers Locke moved silently to the opening of the alcove and looked along the passage. The unknown individual who had passed him had stopped outside the Head's study. The door was locked; but faintly through the darkness came a sound. Click! The mystery man had picked the lock!

CHAPTER 1.

Detective D'Arcy!

"IT'S up to us, deah boys!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's made that remark quite suddenly.

He had been sitting silent for some time, which in itself was an unusual circumstance. There was a buzz of voices, however, in Study No. 6, in the School House, and the silence of Arthur Augustus had passed unnoticed.

Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther of the Shell, had dropped in for a chat with the Fourth Formers, and they were all talking at once. They were talking about a recent happening at St. Jim's, which had excited the whole school, and each fellow was giving his own views, without paying much attention to the views of anybody else.

Hence it happened that D'Arcy's remark, when he came out of his deep reflections at last, passed unheeded.

Tom Merry and Blake were both stating their opinions, and Monty Lowther was laying down the law; Herries, too, was talking, and tapping the table with his finger, to emphasise his remarks.

Arthur Augustus polished his famous monocle and jammed it into his eye and glanced at his companions in a reproving way.

"It's up to us, deah boys," he repeated.

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"This is how I look at it——" said Tom Merry.

"My opinion is——" remarked Manners.

"I thought at the time——" said Blake.

"If Towser had been called in——" said Herries.

"You see——" said Digby.

"I thought all along——" said Monty Lowther.

"Bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus rose to his feet. "I weally wish you would pay a little attention, deah boys! I made a wemmark!"

"That's all right, Gussy," said Lowther. "So did I. So did we all. There's no law against making remarks."

"Pway don't be an ass, Lowthah! I make a wemmark. I wemmarked that it is up to us!"

"What is?" asked Tom Merry.

"It is up to us to look into this mattah!" said Arthur Augustus firmly. "If you will have the gweat kindness to leave off chattewin' for a few minutes I will explain my views."

"Go, hon!"

"I tell you what!" said Blake, with the air of a fellow making a good offer. "You go out into the passage and explain your views, Gussy. Shut the door after you, and then you won't be interrupted."

"Good egg!" exclaimed Tom Merry enthusiastically. "There's the door, Gussy!"

"Hear, hear!" said the rest of the juniors.

Arthur Augustus did not move.

"I wegard you as a set of asses!" he said. "I have been thinkin' this mattah ovah while you chaps have been talkin'. The Head has been wobbed."

"That's ancient history," said Manners.

"The Head has been wobbed," pursued Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, unheeding. "A vewy valuable picture has been taken out of his study. The Head has been goin' about lookin' like a moulthin' owl evah since he lost his Wembwandt. The police have been lookin' for the thief, and looking for the picture. They can't find eithah. Therefore, I wepeat that it is up to us!"

"You thinking of painting the Head a new picture?" asked Monty Lowther innocently.

"No, ass!" said D'Arcy. "You fellows will wemembah that I used to study detective bisney at one time for amusement, and I thought at the time that I should make a wippin' detective if I had the time for it——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I see nothin' whatever to cackle at in that wemmark. The poor old Head has lost his Wembwandt, and he's taken it as much to heart as if he had lost a new toppah. The Head is a good old sport, and I wegard it as our duty to wally wound him."

"Well, we could rally round him all

"Thank you," said Mellish of the Fourth, passing as Lowther made that remark.

Monty Lowther looked round, not at all abashed.

"Hallo! I didn't know you were there, Mellish," he remarked. "Queer thing that you always happen to hear what a fellow is saying. Listeners never hear any good of themselves, do they?"

"Oh, rats!" said Mellish.

"It is queer!" said Lowther argumentatively. "You're a rotten slacker, and you can't play footer for toffee. You wouldn't take a place in the House Eleven if it were offered to you. You'd rather hang about smoking cigarettes behind the woodshed. Now, your cousin is a ripping footballer, and a splendid chap all round. My advice to you is to take him as a shining example, and play up to him."

Mellish sneered.

"Thanks! When I want your advice I'll ask for it!" he said. And the cad of the Fourth walked away.

"I'm going to Kildare's study for the note," said Tom Merry. "You chaps wait for me here. We'll go on to Glyn House after meeting Mr. Locke at the station."

"Right you are!"

Tom Merry went to Kildare's study. He came back in a few minutes with the note for Captain Mellish. He found Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and Manners and Lowther at the window. D'Arcy had his topper in his hand, and he was the last word in sartorial elegance.

"I'm comin' with you, deah boy," he remarked, as Tom Merry came up. "I want to see Mr. Fewwabs Locke again, you know. Now I'm takin' up detective work—"

"Now you're whatting?" asked Tom Merry.

"Takin' up detective work," said Arthur Augustus, with dignity. "In the cires, I shall be glad to have a consultation with Mr. Locke."

The Terrible Three chuckled. Ferrers Locke, the famous detective, was coming down to St. Jim's to take up the case of the missing Rembrandt. Ferrers Locke was an old acquaintance of Tom Merry & Co.; hence their intention of meeting him at the station. What the famous detective would think of the idea of a consultation with Arthur Augustus D'Arcy could not be imagined.

"Come on, then," said Tom Merry, laughing. "Bring your notebook. You may be able to tell by the time the train comes in whether Mr. Locke will be able to find the picture."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Or by the colour of his eyelashes what he's had for breakfast," Monty Lowther remarked.

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Sexton Blake can do these things, you know."

"Weally, you ass—"

The juniors walked out of the School House. Arthur Augustus frowned a little as he caught sight of his minor in the quadrangle, punting the footer to Jameson and Curly Gibson of the Third.

Arthur Augustus was clean and neat, almost to fastidiousness, but Wally was decidedly the reverse. There was so much mud upon Wally that it was not really easy to recognise him. Recent rain had left the quadrangle in a muddy state, and a good deal of the mud was being transferred to the persons of Wally & Co.

"Pway wait a minute, deah boys, while I speak to my minah," said D'Arcy. "Wally!"

Wally looked round.

"Hallo, Gus!"

"You are in a shockin' state, you young wascal! Pway go in at once and make yourself a little cleanah!" said Arthur Augustus severely.

Wally grinned.

Jameson had sent the footer whirling back, and Wally stopped it with his head. The footer was thick with mud, and Wally's head was not in a much better state when he had stopped the ball with it.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated D'Arcy.

"Stop it, you young ass!"

"I have stopped it," said Wally innocently.

"You misappwehend me. You are in a disgustin' state—"

"Oh, don't you begin, Gussy!" said Wally imploringly. "Give us a rest, old man!"

"Weally, Wally—"

"Pass that ball!" roared Jameson.

"Wally, you young boundah, I insist—"

"Oh, rats!" said Wally cheerfully.

"Run away and play, Gussy!"

"Bai Jove!"

To be told to run away by his minor was a little too much.

Arthur Augustus strode towards the muddy fag. Wally did not retreat. He held the ball in his hand, and calculated the distance for a full volley.

"Look out, Gussy!" roared Tom Merry, reading Wally's nefarious purpose in his grinning face. "Look out, you ass!"

"I wese to be called an ass! I—ow! Ow!"

D'Arcy was within six feet of Wally. Wally dropped the ball and met it with his boot as it fell. Right into the face of the swell of St. Jim's it whizzed.

Arthur Augustus gave a wild yell, and staggered backwards. His silk topper fell off behind him, and Arthur Augustus landed upon it as he fell. There was a terrific crunch as the topper was reduced into a curious imitation of a concertina.

"Ow! Bai Jove! Ow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Gweat Scott! Ow!"

"Pass the ball!" yelled Curly Gibson.

"Let's have our ball, D'Arcy major!" shouted Joe Frayne.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Wally ran up and recovered the ball, and punted it over to Jameson. Arthur Augustus staggered to his feet. He rubbed the mud from his face and gasped.

The Terrible Three roared.

"Oh! Bai Jove! There is no cause whatevah for wibald laughtah!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "Ow! Where is my hat?"

"Ha, ha, ha! You've been sitting on it!"

"What?"

Arthur Augustus looked at the wreck of the beautiful topper, and his wrath overflowed. He made a wild rush at Wally, and the scamp of the Third fled at top speed.

Arthur Augustus dashed wildly in pursuit.

"Well, if we wait for Gussy to chase round the quad, we shall miss the train!" Monty Lowther remarked, grinning. "Come on!"

The Terrible Three walked down to the gates. Wally, Jameson, Curly, and Joe Frayne disappeared round the New House, and D'Arcy halted, panting.

"Wait for me, deah boys!" shouted the swell of St. Jim's.

"Buck up, then!"

"I shall have to go and wash and change my waistcoat and get a new toppah, deah boys. I shan't keep you waitin' more than half an hour!"

"That you jolly well won't!" shouted Tom Merry. "You jolly well won't keep us waiting half a minute, my son. Ta-ta!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

But the Terrible Three were gone.

CHAPTER 3.

Enter Ferrers Locke.

"RAIN!" growled Monty Lowther. It started before the juniors were half-way down the lane. Thick clouds were rolling across the sky, but the rain had been holding off for some time, and Tom Merry had hoped that they would be able to get into Rylcombe before it started.

But by the time they reached the cross-roads it was coming down, and coming down more heavily every moment.

The Terrible Three halted under a tree.

"Oh, blow!" said Manners.

"Might have brought an umbrella!" grunted Tom Merry. "You chaps never think of anything!"

Monty Lowther looked up at the sky.

"It's going to be pretty thick," he said. "I think we'd better get into shelter while it lasts. After all, we've got lots of time to get to the station."

"Good! Cut across into the barn!"

"That's the idea!"

The old barn was only sixty yards from the road, and a gap in the hedge gave admittance to the field. The Shell fellows turned up their collars preparatory to making a dash through the rain.

Tom Merry uttered a sudden exclamation. From the lane leading away from the main road in the direction of Glyn House, a figure had suddenly emerged. It was that of a tall, soldierly looking man, with a raincoat on, and the collar turned up. He had a large cap pulled well down, but the fellows knew him at once.

It was Captain Mellish, a guest at Glyn House, and cousin of Mellish of the Fourth, the man who had played for the St. Jim's juniors in their footer match with the Fifth Form the previous Saturday.

Captain Mellish did not glance in the direction of the juniors, who were standing close to the tree at the side of the road. He crossed the road and passed through the gap in the hedge, and hurried towards the old barn in the field. In a moment the hedge hid him from sight.

"He's going to get shelter from the rain, too," said Manners. "You'll be able to give him Kildare's note now, Tommy, and save going to Glyn House. No catch walking there in this rotten rain!"

Tom Merry nodded.

"Good!" he said. "Come on, let's run for it!"

They ran along the hedge to the gap the captain had passed through. They caught a glimpse of the tall figure just disappearing into the barn.

It struck Tom Merry as curious that Captain Mellish should be going there for shelter from the rain, after coming from the direction of Glyn House. It would not have taken him much longer to get back to the house, since he had come from that direction. But the junior did not give the circumstance two thoughts.

The juniors ran quickly across the intervening fields towards the barn. The barn was an old building, used only as a shelter for cattle. There was no door to it, the doorway standing wide open to wind and weather.

The tall figure of the captain had disappeared inside.

The juniors had almost reached the barn when Monty Lowther caught his foot in a trailing roof and stumbled.

Manners and Tom Merry turned back for him. As they did so, they heard the voice of Captain Mellish from the open doorway of the old barn.

"Have you waited for me?"

"Yes, captain," said another voice, harder and rougher than the cultivated tones of Captain Mellish. "But it's all right. I s'pose you couldn't get away?"

"I had to be careful, Nat."

There was a chuckle.

"I s'pose so, captain."

"Take the packet—just as it is! I can't stay a minute, but I must tell you about the telephone business."

Another chuckle.

"Hallo, my young friends from St. Jim's!" he exclaimed.

"Yes!" gasped Tom Merry, shaking off the raindrops like a Newfoundland dog. "We're getting out of the rain, sir."

"Coming down in bucketfuls!" said Monty Lowther.

"Groogh!" gasped Manners.

The captain laughed.

"Yes, it's rotten weather," he said.

The juniors glanced at the man the captain had been talking to. He was a powerfully built fellow with a very square jaw, and little, sharp eyes half-hidden under thick brows. He was glancing at the St. Jim's fellows with suspicion in his looks.

"It's all right, Nat, old man," said the captain easily. "These young gentlemen are from the school. We can

me on Saturday? I shall be coming up by the afternoon train, and you can expect me at five. Take the letter I've given you to the colonel."

"Yes, sir," repeated Mr. Perkins.

"I think that's all," said the captain. "If there's anything else, I'll send you a wire. How is the bulldog?"

"Going on splendidly, sir," said Perkins. "Likewise the pup!"

"Good! Well, good-bye, Perkins!"

"Good-bye, sir!"

The captain nodded to the juniors, and moved towards the doorway.

"Just a minute, sir," said Tom Merry.

"I've got a letter for you."

"A letter for me?" repeated Captain Mellish.

"Yes, sir—from Kildare."

"The captain of the school?"

"Yes. He'll be rather cut up when



"I refuse to be called an ass!" said Arthur Augustus, striding towards his minor. "I—ow! Ow!" He was cut short as the muddy football, kicked by Wally, hit him full in the face. D'Arcy gave a wild yell and staggered backwards.

Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther looked at one another. They understood now that Captain Mellish had not gone into the barn for shelter from the rain. He was keeping an appointment there with another man.

The Terrible Three were undecided for a moment. They were close to the doorway now, and they did not want to appear to be interested in what did not concern them. But the rain was coming down in great drops now, and they had to have shelter.

Tom Merry coughed loudly as a warning to the captain that there were other ears to hear.

There was a sharp exclamation inside the barn.

The tall figure of the captain reappeared in the doorway just as the chums of the Shell plunged in. They almost ran into him.

For a second there was a strange look on the captain's face. But it was only for a second; it was gone almost before the juniors observed it. Then he smiled.

go on with our business; I haven't a minute to stay."

"We didn't mean to be in the way, sir," said Tom Merry awkwardly. "We saw you come into the barn, and thought you were getting out of the rain."

Captain Mellish nodded.

"Oh, no!" he said. "I came here to meet Mr. Perkins. But Mr. Glyn is expecting me back, so I'll get on, if you don't mind. I was telling you about the telephone, Perkins," the captain resumed. "They've charged me for nearly twice as many calls as I really had, and unless the matter can be settled, I shall have the telephone removed from my quarters. It's as much trouble as it's worth, anyway, and as I'm so seldom at home, I don't use it much, either."

"Yes, sir," said Perkins.

"In future, I shall have it disconnected while I'm away," went on the captain. "You'll see to that?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you'll have my rooms ready for

he knows you're going on Saturday, sir. He's asking you to play for St. Jim's on Saturday afternoon," said Tom Merry, as he handed the captain Kildare's letter.

The captain looked thoughtful.

"H'm! I dare say it could be arranged," he said, as he opened the letter and glanced through it. "I should, like to please Kildare, if possible."

The letter ran:

"Dear Captain Mellish,—If you are still down here on Saturday, would you care to play for St. Jim's First? We have a very tough match for the afternoon, against Wayland Ramblers, and we should take it as a great honour if you would play for us."

"Yours sincerely,

"ERIC KILDARE."

"By Jove!" said the captain. "I should like another game before I go! Yes, I think I'll come over on Saturday

and lend a hand against the Wayland Ramblers, Merry. I saw them play the other day, and they're hot stuff—rather a big team for schoolboys to tackle—eh?"

"Oh, I think St. Jim's First will handle 'em all right, sir!" said Tom Merry. "Our First Eleven is a jolly good team, you know. But if you play for Kildare, there won't be any doubt about it—they'll be wiped out."

The captain smiled. "In that case, I'm bound to play," he said. "Yes, certainly I'll come. I can easily go up by a later train. Tell Kildare he can rely upon me."

"Thank you, sir. It will be ripping!" "So you need not expect me at my quarters till the evening, Nat," said Captain Mellish.

"Yes, sir," said Perkins. And he left the barn, careless of the rain.

Captain Mellish turned to the St. Jim's juniors with a smile.

"Perkins used to be in my regiment," he explained. "He is my servant now, and looks after my quarters while I'm away. But what are you young fellows doing out in the rain?"

"We're going to the station to meet Mr. Locke, sir," said Tom Merry.

"Ferrers Locke, the detective, do you mean?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Ah! Mr. Glyn told me he was coming down," said the captain. "Your headmaster expects him this afternoon, I understand?"

"Yes; he's coming by the three o'clock train."

"Very good! You may mention to him that I shall come over to the school this afternoon," said Captain Mellish. "You see, as I was one of the persons keeping watch at the time the picture was stolen, I am keenly interested in the matter, and Mr. Locke may like to ask me about it, as well as the others."

"I'll tell him, sir."

"Good!"

And, with a nod, the captain left the barn, and walked over towards Glyn House.

The Terrible Three watched his tall figure disappear in the mist of rain.

Monty Lowther had a somewhat curious expression upon his face.

Tom Merry looked at him.

"What are you thinking about, Monty?" he said quietly.

"Queer thing that Captain Mellish should meet his servant here, instead of having him at Glyn House," said Lowther.

Tom Merry nodded.

"No business of ours," remarked Manners. "That fellow Perkins may be an old soldier, and a good servant, but he doesn't look it. Looks more like a giddy boxer than a valet, to my mind. But I dare say Captain Mellish knows his own business best."

"I shouldn't wonder," said Tom Merry, laughing.

The Shell fellows watched and waited for the rain to cease. The shower passed over, and as soon as it was clear the Terrible Three left the barn and hurried on to the station.

Three was chiming out from the church as they arrived, and a few minutes later the train came in.

The chums of the Shell were on the platform to meet it.

Tom Merry caught sight of a face at a window as the train stopped, and ran towards the carriage.

It was a clear-cut, thoughtful face, with clear, steady eyes, and a slight wrinkle between them—the face of Ferrers Locke, the famous detective.

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"Here we are, sir!" said Tom Merry cheerfully, as he opened the carriage door.

Ferrers Locke alighted.

He shook hands with the Terrible Three with a smile.

"So you've come to meet me?" he said.

"Yes, rather, sir! Quite like old times to see you again," said Tom Merry. "And I hope you will be able to find the Head's picture for him, sir."

"I shall try," said Ferrers Locke quietly.

And he left the station with the juniors.

CHAPTER 4. The Mystery!

DR. HOLMES, the Head of St. Jim's, was seated in his study.

The Head's face was clouded and troubled.

He was not working, though it was unusual for him to be idle. He seemed to be mastered by troubled thoughts.

As he sat at his writing-table, his gaze turned alternately upon the window with a view of the quadrangle, and upon the picture-frame which hung upon the wall opposite him.

The frame was empty, but inside it were tags and rags of canvas, showing where a picture had been roughly slashed out.

That frame had held a real Rembrandt—a masterpiece of the famous Dutch master, and the apple of the Head's eye.

The frame remained; the picture was gone. And since the robbery Dr. Holmes' face had been clouded.

It seemed as if he would never get over his loss. It was not only the monetary value of the picture, though that was considerable, as the Head had refused two thousand guineas for his Rembrandt. But it had been his most treasured possession—and now that it was gone, it was almost as if his child had been taken.

Dr. Holmes was the kindest and most gentle-hearted of men, but when he thought of the theft of his picture, his eyes gleamed with anger. He had never hated anyone in his life, but now he came very near to hating the unknown cracksmen who had robbed him of his treasure.

A dozen times that day Dr. Holmes had been at the telephone, asking whether any progress had been made in the search for the cracksmen. And always the same answer had come—that nothing had been discovered.

The police did not add that they expected to discover nothing, but the Head knew that without being told. The mysterious cracksmen, who was known to the police as X—whose name, whose appearance, they did not know—had baffled Scotland Yard for years, and was likely to baffle them still.

Dr. Holmes' Rembrandt was only one more item to the list of his loot. Only a few days before the mysterious cracksmen had stolen a gold statuette from Glyn House, and had left no clue. The Head's picture had been taken now, and there was no clue—not the shadow of one.

The police were baffled, and the Head's slender hope rested upon Ferrers Locke, the famous private detective. But the hope was very slender indeed. What could Ferrers Locke hope to effect when the police of the whole country were baffled?

All the St. Jim's fellows sympathised with the Head in his loss. Only D'Arcy,

it is true, thought of playing detective, and trying to recover the picture for him. But all the fellows were sorry.

There was a tap at the door at last, and the Head rose eagerly.

Toby, the School House page, showed in the gentleman Tom Merry had met at the station.

"Ferrers Locke!" exclaimed the Head.

He shook hands with the detective. Ferrers Locke's glance wandered to the empty frame.

"Yes," said the Head, with a nod, "that is where it was—my Rembrandt, Mr. Locke, if you can recover my picture for me, you shall name your own fee. I know that considerations of that kind do not appeal to you very much, but I shall be grateful—more grateful than I can say. And if you could lay that unknown scoundrel by the heels, it would be a service to the whole country."

Ferrers Locke smiled slightly.

"It is a big task," he said.

The Head sighed.

"I know it—I know it!" he said. "The chance of success is very remote—I am aware of that. But I would leave no stone unturned—so I have sent for you."

The detective sat down as the Head pulled a chair to the fire for him.

"I came as soon as I could," he said. "I was absent when your letter came. I was not able to get here before to-day. I understand that the robbery took place on Saturday?"

"On Saturday night—at exactly midnight," said the Head.

The detective smiled.

"You are very exact," he said.

"Ah, I see you do not know the story yet," said the Head.

"No; I depend upon you for that. I have only just returned to England from abroad, as a matter of fact."

"Then I had better explain the thing from the beginning."

"Please do."

"You have heard of X, of course?"

"Who has not?" said Ferrers Locke, with a smile. "The man has made himself a kind of fame. He is undoubtedly a very clever and determined scoundrel; he has genius, which he has misapplied. He is the most dangerous kind of criminal; he has talents which might have made him famous in another way. The strangest thing is that the police have not the remotest suspicion of his real identity. They would not even know that he calls himself X, but for his trick of leaving his card with an 'X' inscribed upon it in the place where he commits his robberies. A very interesting criminal. I shall be glad of the opportunity of measuring strength with him."

"I hope you will succeed," said the Head. "The man is an impudent scoundrel. He adds impudence to dishonesty. There was a robbery at Glyn House, a place near here, last week, and it was known that this man X was the perpetrator. That day I received a telephone message from him."

"From the cracksmen?"

"Yes, Captain Mellish, a gentleman who is staying at Glyn House, came here to give me a warning, as he had heard of my valuable picture. I was talking the matter over with Mr. Railton, my Housemaster, when the telephone bell rang. You may judge of my amazement when I found that I was speaking to X over the telephone."

"I should say so!"

"He told me explicitly that he would steal my picture on Saturday night at twelve o'clock precisely."

The detective whistled softly.

"That is in keeping with his character," he said. "I have heard of his sending a telegram to a nobleman whom he intended to rob—and he carried out the robbery in that case."

"And in this case!" said the Head. "We were not sure that it was not a hoax. But to make certain of the safety of the picture, we waited up that night and watched over it."

"And it went?"

"Yes."

"This is very interesting," said Ferrers Locke. "Pray give me all the details. How many of you were here?"

"Five in all—myself, Kildare of the Sixth, Inspector Skeat, of Rylcombe, Mr. Railton, my Housemaster, and Captain Mellish. You are acquainted with all of them excepting Captain Mellish. Captain Mellish is—or, rather, was—an officer in the Indian Army, and he is cousin to a boy in the Fourth Form at this school. He had been here on that afternoon, playing football for a junior team—he is very popular with the boys—and he offered to stay and watch with us—and I was glad to have him."

The detective nodded.

"Tom Merry mentioned the gentleman to me to-day," he said. "He is coming here this afternoon, in case I want to ask him questions."

"Ah! Then you will see him!"

"Yes. Describe what happened on Saturday night, sir."

"We waited up and watched. You can imagine our feelings as twelve o'clock came round. There was an iron burglar-proof shutter fastened over the window, and every window and door in the House had been carefully examined. There was a mastiff turned loose in the quadrangle, and a policeman with the porter in the lodge, and two more officers on duty in the road. That, in addition to the five of us waiting here! One would have said that the picture was safe enough."

"Indeed, yes."

"Almost on the stroke of twelve he came."

"You saw him?"

"No. He was seen by nobody but Captain Mellish, who caught only a glimpse of him. The captain heard him in the passage; we heard nothing. The captain gave the alarm. He threw the door open—he had his revolver in his hand. Both of them fired—there were several shots—but the cunning rascal fired at the lights, and they went out. We had not thought of that."

"Naturally he would want to work in the dark."

"Yes. There was great confusion. We were stumbling over one another in the dark—none of us knew quite what was happening—and when we obtained lights the man was gone. He cannot have been inside the House a few minutes—perhaps not two minutes."

"How did he get away?"

"The window in the passage was smashed through with a chair, and he must have jumped out into the quadrangle. Captain Mellish was convinced that one of his shots struck the rascal, but no blood was seen anywhere."

"Was Captain Mellish wounded—you say there was shooting on both sides?"

"He had a scratch on his cheek—a bullet had narrowly missed him." The Head shuddered. "I should never have forgiven myself if he had been injured. He was really the only one of us to keep his head in the excitement."

"And the picture—"

"In the excitement and confusion we had forgotten the picture. But when

we looked at it—never dreaming that the villain had succeeded in his design—we saw that the picture had been cut out of the frame. Up till that moment I had not thought that the burglar had succeeded in entering the study, and I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw that the picture was gone."

Ferrers Locke glanced at the empty frame.

"An extraordinary story!" he said.

"It is amazing! It seems like a dream to me now," said the Head. "The lights were extinguished so suddenly that nobody had a chance of seeing the cracksman. Captain Mellish had a glimpse of him, as I said, but that was all. He had an impression that he was a short, thick-set man, but he is not sure of even that."

The man jumped out through the window, in the passage."

"Yes."

"Was he seen to do so?"

"No; but we heard the crash of the glass."

"And the mastiff in the quadrangle?"

"That is very curious. The dog appears not to have heard him, seen him, or scented him. He had extraordinary good fortune."

"How did he escape from the quadrangle? The school wall is high."

"He climbed over by means of the ivy."

"Ah! Traces were found?"

"Yes. Captain Mellish found the place—the ivy had been dragged loose."

"And the policemen in the road?"

"Saw nothing."

"They were upon the spot?"

"They were patrolling up and down outside the wall. No part of the wall could have been out of their sight for more than a few minutes."

"Yet they saw and heard nothing?"

"Nothing."

"And how did the cracksman gain admission to the House? You say that all the doors and windows were fastened?"

"All of them! And afterwards, Inspector Skeat made a round of the House, and all the fastenings were found intact. The smashed window, of course, was not be sure about; sash and glass were broken, and it may have been by that window that the thief entered."

"A most extraordinary thing, sir."

"Most extraordinary."

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in!" said the Head.

Captain Mellish entered.

CHAPTER 5.

X on the Phone!

CAPTAIN MELLISH shook hands with the Head, who introduced him at once to Ferrers Locke. The captain turned to the detective with a very pleasant smile.

"It is a real privilege to meet you, Mr. Locke," he said. "I've heard a great deal about you, but have never had the pleasure of seeing you before. I hope I am not in the way? If I am, please say so, and I will retire." The

(Continued on the next page.)

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captain laughed his frank, pleasant laugh. "I came over because I thought you might care to have my account of what happened here the other night. But my time is my own; I can wait. I have a cousin in the Fourth Form here, and I will look him up if you are busy."

"Not at all, Captain Mellish," said the detective. "Dr. Holmes is giving me the details of the strange affair of last Saturday, and I should like to have your account, too."

"Very good," said the captain, seating himself. "I do not know that I can tell you any more than Dr. Holmes, but every little helps, I suppose."

"Undoubtedly."

"Then fire away!" said the captain. "I know you detective gentlemen have a way of drawing out unsuspected items of information by asking leading questions. Many trifles that to a layman appear insignificant, have an importance for the trained mind."

"That is very true," said the Head. "It is quite possible that Mr. Locke may elicit something, even from one of us, which has escaped our own attention entirely."

"I hope so," said Mr. Locke. "You were here, I understand, with four others, captain?"

"Just so."

"And you were the first to hear the enemy?"

"Yes; I heard him in the passage."

"You have quick ears?"

"A man has to be quick of hearing on the Indian frontier, where I had my training. We get all our senses sharpened up out there," said Captain Mellish, with a smile. "Still, I would not say I am quicker than the others who were present."

"Oh, but you are!" said the Head. "Not one of us heard the slightest sound. Even when you threw the door open I thought you must be mistaken. Though it proved otherwise."

"You fired at the man, I understand?"

"Yes—and hit him! I am sure of that."

"No traces of blood seem to have been discovered," remarked Ferrers Locke.

"No; it was not so bad as that. But I feel quite sure that at least one of my bullets went home," said the captain.

"I am a good shot, and it was a close range. The light, of course, was very uncertain."

"You fired first?"

"Yes—I had to. You see, the man had a revolver in his hand, and he was about to fire. I thought I was a target, but it turned out that he was firing at the electric light in the passage. We fired almost together—indeed, it sounded like one shot, as Mr. Railton observed afterwards."

Dr. Holmes nodded.

"Then the light went out?"

"In the passage—yes. I brushed against the man as the others rushed out into the passage in the dark. Then a bullet came through the doorway and smashed the light here, and the study was in the dark, too. It all passed in a second. But I had no idea that the man had contrived to enter the study itself—till we found the picture gone afterwards."

"You saw the man?"

"The merest glimpse."

"Describe him as well as you can."

"I have an impression of a short, thick-set man—I think with a moustache. I caught the glitter of his eyes, but I would not swear to their colour."

"You could not hazard a guess?"

"Well, blue, I think—but I could not be certain."

"That description, however, is something for the police to work upon," remarked Ferrers Locke thoughtfully.

"Yes; they have it, such as it is. But it was all very vague."

"It is somewhat odd, is it not, that no one else saw the man—because to fire into this room and smash the lamp, he must have appeared near the doorway. The passage was in darkness, but there would be some light from the doorway."

"Yes, that is true. I was in the passage, stumbling against the man at the time, as far as I can make out. I was confused, of course, and the impression left upon my mind is not very clear of that precise moment."

"Naturally!" said Ferrers Locke, with a nod. "You were in the study, Dr. Holmes?"

"Yes."

"Yet you did not see the man as he fired in?"

"No; I cannot say I did. I remember catching a glimpse of the captain, then there was the report of the pistol. If I did not know that Captain Mellish was a good shot, and that the cracksman was deliberately aiming to put out the light, I should have fancied that it was a random bullet from Captain Mellish's pistol that struck the light here and smashed it."

"Oh, that is too bad!" said the captain, laughing. "I am too careful to fire at random. Dr. Holmes; a random bullet might have hit you instead of the lamp."

"I should like to see Mr. Railton and Kildare," said Ferrers Locke.

"I will send for them at once."

Dr. Holmes rang, and Toby was sent for the Housemaster and the captain of the school.

Mr. Railton and Kildare arrived together.

They could add but little to what the others had related. Neither of them had seen the cracksman. But they admitted that it was very singular that they had seen nothing of him when he fired into the study and smashed the lamp. But the whole affair had passed in such a whirl of excitement and alarm that they hardly knew what they had seen and what they had not seen.

"Where was the inspector?" asked Ferrers Locke.

"He was in the study all the time, blowing his whistle," said Mr. Railton. "He was still here when we obtained lights."

"Then he must actually have been within a few paces of the thief when the picture was cut out of the frame!"

"Undoubtedly!" said the Housemaster.

"Yet he did not hear—"

"He was blowing his whistle very loudly, as a warning to the officers outside, and that probably drowned the sound made by the cracksman's knife."

"Yes, very likely. It was in the dark, too, and he saw nothing."

"Nothing?"

"How the man got into the House is a mystery," said Mr. Railton. "I can vouch for it that every door and window was secured, and they were found so afterwards."

"Excepting the window in the passage here?"

"Yes; that was smashed—the chair that stands in the corner of the passage, farther along, was used for that purpose."

"The corner of the passage is some way from the window?"

"About ten or twelve feet."

"And the passage, then, was in darkness?"

"Yes."

"Yet the thief, a stranger to the school, saw the chair at that distance, fetched it, and used it to smash in the window."

"It appears so."

"Bless my soul!" said the Head. "It is very extraordinary. But you would not suggest, Mr. Locke, that the cracksman had any knowledge of the interior of this House—that he had any opportunity of exploring the place?"

"It is very singular, at all events. He

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could not have smashed out the window without some heavy article, and it looks as if he knew the chair was there."

"Perhaps he saw it when he entered—if he entered by that window?" said the captain reflectively.

"That window is flush with this study window, I think. If the thief entered by that window, he would be entering from the open quad—and you tell me there was a dog loose there. Was the dog near the House?"

"Yes, indeed," said the Head. "I remember hearing him under my window only a few minutes before the alarm."

"Barking?"

"No; he was not barking."

"Then he was not alarmed?"

"I suppose not."

"Yet at that moment the cracksmen must have entered by that window—only a few yards from this, in the same wall."

"Yes; it is very peculiar."

"It seems impossible that he could have entered by the passage window, considering all the circumstances," said Mr. Railton, very thoughtfully. "Yet all the other windows and the doors were found intact."

"You have formed some theory already, Mr. Locke?" said the captain, with his keen, brown eyes on the detective's face.

Ferrers Locke smiled.

"Not exactly a theory," he said; "but it is possible that after sending that impertinent telephone message which gave you all the impression that he was coming to the House at midnight, the thief may have contrived to conceal himself in the building, and may have been lurking in some empty room or garret for hours before the alarm."

The Head started.

"By gad!" cried the captain. "We never thought of that—and the inspector never thought of it, either, by Jove!"

"Upon my word," exclaimed Mr. Railton. "It is quite possible! In a rambling building like this, it would be easy enough for someone to slip in after dusk, and remain concealed—there are old rooms that are never entered."

"By George!" said Kildare.

"I did not say so," said Ferrers Locke; "I suggest it as a possibility. It would account for the fact that the man was in the House, with no apparent means of entering. But we shall see. I—"

The detective broke off as the telephone bell rang.

"Pray excuse me for a moment!" said the Head.

He crossed to the telephone and took up the receiver.

"Yes!" he said.

He listened, and an expression of utter amazement came over his face. He turned to the others, without putting the instrument down.

"Mr. Locke!" he exclaimed.

"Yes?"

"Come here—quick!"

"What is it?" The detective strode towards him.

"The cracksmen—X!"

CHAPTER 6.

The Mystery Man's Warning!

EVERY voice in the study uttered the exclamation at once.

"X! The cracksmen!"

This was also uttered by Mr.

Railton.

"Well, by Jove!" said Captain

Mellish. "Ten to one he knows Mr.

Locke is here, and this is a piece of sheer cheek!"

Dr. Holmes motioned to Ferrers Locke to take up the second receiver, the telephone being fitted with two.

The detective obeyed.

He heard now the voice that was coming through to the Head.

"Are you there, Dr. Holmes?"

"Yes."

"Is your detective with you?"

"Yes; Mr. Locke is here. Are you indeed the robber, as you have said, or is this some hoax?" gasped the Head.

A chuckle was audible on the telephone.

"You asked me that question last time, Dr. Holmes."

"It is really he!" exclaimed the Head.

"By Jove!" said the captain. "Whoever heard of such a thing! I've met some cool johnnies in different parts of the world, but this takes the cake!"

"My hat, he does!" murmured Kildare.

The voice came along the telephone.

Ferrers Locke listened to it keenly.

It was a harsh voice, so far as he could make it out at all—the wires disguised the real tones to a great extent.

"Send your detective to the phone!"

went on the voice.

"He is there!" said the Head.

"Good! Let him speak!"

"Speak, Mr. Locke!"

The detective nodded.

"You are there, Ferrers Locke?"

"I am here," said the detective quietly.

"You know who I am?"

"Yes; you are X, the cracksmen."

"Correct."

"What do you want?"

Another chuckle.

"Nothing. I've got what I want. I learned that you were coming down to look for the lost picture."

"How did you learn that?"

"It's the talk of the neighbourhood," said the voice. "Everybody knows it. I do not think Inspector Skeat is pleased."

"Indeed! Why not?"

"Because he thinks you may succeed where he has failed. But he need not be alarmed."

"Ah!" said Ferrers Locke quietly.

"You think there is no cause for alarm?"

"None at all."

"We shall see."

"As soon as I heard you were coming, I determined to ring you up. It is a pleasure to have a talk with Ferrers Locke, the famous detective—with a few miles of telephone wire between, of course!" And the speaker chuckled.

"Yes; that is a necessary precaution, in the circumstances," said Ferrers Locke.

"You have come down to look for the picture?"

"Yes."

"And for me?"

"Probably."

"Well, the best thing you can do for Dr. Holmes is to advise him to come to terms. I am going to sell the Rembrandt over the water for three thousand guineas."

"Well?"

"But if Dr. Holmes chooses to pay two thousand for it, he can have it—and my promise not to touch it again."

"The rascal!" murmured the Head.

"Dr. Holmes declines your offer," said Ferrers Locke.

"Then he will never see his

Rembrandt again."

"Possibly not."

"I suppose you are full up to the

(Continued on the next page.)



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FATTY'S WIN!

Redfern of St. Jim's offered to bet sixpence that no one could eat fifteen doughnuts at one sitting. Some time later Fatty Wynn accepted the bet. As Fatty finished the last doughnut, Redfern said that he had thought the feat impossible.

"So did I," said Fatty, "until I tried it a few minutes ago in the village!"

Half-a-crown has been awarded to Miss I. Mabe, 105, Hubert Grove, London, S.W.9.

STRATEGY.

Sergeant (to recruit): "Now, you understand, if anything moves you shoot."

Recruit: "Yes, sergeant. And if anything shoots, I move!"

Half-a-crown has been awarded to J. Toff, 11b, Cliffe Avenue, Westbrook, Margate.

SALESMANSHIP!

Customer: "Are you sure those eggs are fresh?"

Grocer (to assistant): "Feel those eggs, George, to see if they are cool enough to sell yet!"

Half-a-crown has been awarded to T. McQuillan, 10, Tennyson Road, St. Marks, Cheltenham.

TOMMY'S EXAMPLE.

Teacher: "Tommy, can you give me an example of a monologue?"

Tommy: "Please, sir, mother and father talking!"

Half-a-crown has been awarded to J. Gisligham, 2, Tintagel Crescent, East Dulwich, London, S.E.22.

DATED!

Diner: "What is this pudding supposed to be?"

Waiter: "That is date pudding, sir."

Diner: "Seems more like out-of-date pudding to me!"

Half-a-crown has been awarded to D. Hollowell, 83, Gunner Street, Buckland, Portsmouth.

GETTING HIS MONEY'S WORTH.

Scotsman (in shop): "I want one o' yere attache cases at five-and-six."

Shopman: "Shall I wrap it up, sir?"

Scotsman: "Nae, put the paper and string inside!"

Half-a-crown has been awarded to A. Bishop, 55, Ashbourne Grove, East Dulwich, London, S.E.22.

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chin with clues, like the gentleman from Scotland Yard," remarked the voice on the wire.

"Yes; we are all the same," said Ferrers Locke grimly.

"You are on the track?"

"I hope so."

"Good! When do you expect to have the handcuffs on the celebrated X?"

"Within twenty-four hours, I hope."

"Ha, ha, ha! Quick work, Mr. Locke!"

"Quite so!"

"Allow me to give you a warning. X will be a dangerous man to run down. If you should, by a miracle, get me cornered, it will be exactly as much as your life is worth!"

"I shall risk that!"

"One of you, at least, had a narrow escape the other night. I fully expected to see it in the papers that a dead man had been left behind when I took the picture!"

"You will be pleased to hear that Captain Mellish received a mere scratch."

"It would have been his own fault if it was worse, and the same applies to you. Not that you are ever likely to see me unless I choose!"

"We shall see."

"Bah! You do not even know whom or what to look for; I am as great a mystery to you as to the police!"

"You are mistaken; I have a description," said the detective calmly. "You were seen here on Saturday night."

"Nonsense! By whom?"

"Captain Mellish."

"And he has described me?"

"Yes, if you are X."

"May I hear the description?" went on the voice, in mocking tones.

"Certainly!"

"Well, I am listening!"

"Short, thick-set, with a moustache and blue eyes."

"By Jingo!"

It seemed to be an involuntary exclamation from the man at the other end of the wire.

Dr. Holmes looked at the detective with very bright eyes.

"That touches home, Mr. Locke!" he whispered. "The description is accurate. The man was taken by surprise when he heard it!"

"It seems so."

There was a pause on the telephone. Captain Mellish had gathered what was being said on the wire from what he had heard Dr. Holmes and Ferrers Locke say.

"Is it quite judicious to let the man know that we have his description?" the captain asked. "Of course, I am not counselling you, Mr. Locke; you know better than I do. But it occurs to me that he may now adopt a disguise which otherwise he might not have thought of doing."

The detective smiled.

"If he is a short man he cannot become a tall one, at all events!" he said.

"No; that is true!"

"Besides, Mr. Locke, has surprised him into the admission that the description is correct—a fact we were not aware of before," said the Head. "That was your object, Mr. Locke?"

"I did not speak without an object, certainly, sir," said the detective, with a smile.

The voice was heard again.

"Well, search if you like, Mr. Locke; good luck to you! You are measuring strength with X, who has defeated the police for years, and will defeat them for many years yet. If it is a battle between you and me, I am sorry for you. You are wasting your time; you may as well go back to London."

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"Thank you!"

The line went dead; apparently the cracksmen had rung off.

Ferrers Locke rang up the exchange immediately.

"Hallo!" came through in a feminine voice.

"Is that the exchange?"

"Yes."

"Can you give me the number that was just speaking? I am a detective, and it is a very important matter."

"You were rung up from the railway station call-office."

"Thank you."

Ferrers Locke put down the receiver. Captain Mellish was watching him with a curious gaze.

"You could ring up the station-master," the captain suggested. "He might have noticed—"

"Useless! X knows whom he is dealing with, and he is long gone; and undoubtedly he would be in disguise. The nerve of the man is extraordinary. I do not think that any case has hitherto occurred in which a criminal had the hardihood to ring up the detective engaged in tracking him down."

"X is a very unusual character altogether!" the captain remarked, with a nod.

"He is, indeed! Now, Dr. Holmes, may I ask you for a complete and detailed description of the missing picture?"

"Certainly!" said the Head.

The others understood that their presence was no longer required, and they left the study.

Ferrers Locke was left alone with the Head. He remained for some minutes in deep thought after the study door had closed.

"The picture—" began the Head.

"Never mind the picture for a moment, sir. You listened carefully to the voice that was speaking to you just now?"

"Yes," said the Head, in surprise.

"Was it the same voice that spoke to you last week, and warned you that X was about to pay you a visit?"

Dr. Holmes hesitated.

"You are not quite sure?"

"No; but if it is X, it must be the same voice."

"Yes, undoubtedly," said Ferrers Locke, with a nod. "Now, about the picture."

And for the next quarter of an hour the Head was plunged into an accurate description of the missing Rembrandt—a description of which Ferrers Locke did not hear two words. His thoughts were very busy while Dr. Holmes was speaking.

CHAPTER 7.

Assistance Accepted!

"TEA'S ready!"

"Pway don't wait for me, deah boys!"

"Oh, we won't!" said Blake cheerfully. "But I suppose you're coming to tea, aren't you?"

"Not just at pwsent!"

"Aren't you hungry?" demanded Tom Merry.

"Yaas, a little bit peckish."

"Then why don't you come to tea?"

"I'm waitin'!"

"Then what are you waiting for?"

"Fewwers Locke!"

The juniors looked at D'Arcy in astonishment. He was standing at the end of the passage that led to the Head's study, leaning in an elegant attitude against the wall. His eyeglass was turned towards the door of Dr. Holmes' study.

"You're waiting for Ferrers Locke?" repeated Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Oh, you're thinking of bringing him to tea in the study?" said Blake.

D'Arcy shook his head.

"I am not thinkin' of anythin' so fivivolous, deah boys!"

"Then what—?"

"I have already acquainted you with the fact that I am goin' to look into the case of the missin' picture, deah boys!" said D'Arcy, with dignity.

"But the picture wasn't in a case!" said Monty Lowther. "It was just ripped out of the frame by the giddy cracksmen!"

"Pway don't be an ass, Lowthah!" said Arthur Augustus, as the juniors chuckled. "This is not a time for wotten puns! I am goin' to speak to Mr. Locke about it, and I twust he will allow me to help him in the mattah! I believe I shall be able to give him gweat assistance!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I see no cause whatevah for wibald laughtah!" said the swell of St. Jim's. "Pway wun away and have tea; Mr. Locke will not want to be bothahed by you youngstahs."

"Oh, come and have tea!" said Tom Merry. "Captain Mellish is staying to tea in the study, and you've got to ask Mellish of the Fourth to come! It's only fair to have him, as we've captured his cousin."

"You can ask him, deah boy."

"No, I can't. The feed's in your study, No. 6, not in mine. I can't invite Mellish to tea with you!"

"Then Blake can ask him."

"Yes; but we want it done in your unrivalled manner," said Tom Merry solemnly. "Mellish is rather touchy, you know. He knows we don't like him, and if he refuses to come it will make it rather awkward about entertaining the captain. We want you to put it to Mellish in your best Vere de Vere manner!"

"There's somethin' in that," said the swell of St. Jim's thoughtfully.

"Come on, then!"

"Bai Jove! Here's Mellish!"

The cad of the Fourth was coming along the passage, and Arthur Augustus beckoned to him.

"Mellish, deah boy!"

"Hallo!" said Mellish, stopping.

"We shall all be honahed if you will come and have tea in our study," said Arthur Augustus. "We shall take it as a gweat favah."

Mellish looked at him suspiciously.

"What are you getting at?" he demanded.

"Nothin', deah boy! We want you to come to tea, that's all."

"What for?" persisted Mellish.

"Well, your cousin is coming, and we should like you, too."

"Oh, rats!" said Mellish. "I suppose you're going to jaw footer all the time! I'm going to tea with Crooke!"

"Weally, Mellish—"

"I've promised Levison and Crooke," said Mellish loftily. "Crooke will stand a better tea than you chaps, too. Crooke's got plenty of money."

"Bai Jove!"

"So you must excuse me!"

And with that courteous negative, Mellish walked on.

"Nice boy!" murmured Monty Lowther. "How his family must eye him—I don't think!"

"Bai Jove! I wegard Mellish as a wude wottah!" said Arthur Augustus. "Howevah, I have done my best, deah boys."

The juniors looked at one another. They did not want Arthur Augustus to wait for Ferrers Locke, but there

seemed to be no way of preventing him.

Tom Merry thought it out.

"You're really taking up this detective business, then, Gussy?" he said.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Then I'll tell you what; come and tell us all about it over tea," suggested Tom Merry. "Captain Mellish will be very glad to hear about your—your methods. The cracksman wounded him the other day, you know, and he must be awfully keen to lay X by the heels! He will be glad to know that you are on the track."

Arthur Augustus nodded.

"Very good, deah boy! I will join you as soon as I have seen Mr. Locke."

"Better come now!"

"Imposs, deah boy!"

"Look here, you silly ass!" exclaimed Blake. "If you talk rot to Mr. Locke he will sit on you! You've got to keep off the grass!"

Arthur Augustus turned his eyeglass upon Blake with lofty disdain.

"I trust Mr. Locke will be glad of my expert assistance," he said, "and I regard you as an uttiah ass, Blake!"

"Are you coming?" roared Blake.

"No, I am not coming!"

"Then we'll carry you!"

"I wefuse to be cawwied!"

"Collar him!" said Blake.

The juniors closed in upon the swell of St. Jim's.

Arthur Augustus backed away, and put up his hands and pushed back his beautiful white cuffs.

"I trust you will not compel me to thrash you, deah boys!" he said.

"Yes, I can see you thrashing the lot of us!" said Tom Merry cheerfully.

"Now, take an arm or a leg each, and heave away!"

"Hands off, you wottahs! Ow!"

"Collar him!"

"Bai Jove! Ow—ow!"

There was a wild struggle, and

Arthur Augustus was swept bodily off the floor. He struggled furiously in the grasp of the juniors, and in the terrific din the fellows did not hear the Head's door open, or see Ferrers Locke come down the passage.

The detective stopped, and looked at them with a smile.

"Ahem!" he said.

"Oh!" ejaculated Tom Merry.

"Mr. Locke!"

The juniors let go Arthur Augustus as if he had suddenly become red-hot.

It was rather unfortunate that they should have let go suddenly at that moment, for D'Arcy was raised a foot from the floor, all ready to be carried away.

He dropped.

Bump!

"Yawwooh!"

"Pray don't allow me to interrupt you, my dear boys!" said Ferrers Locke blandly.

"Ow! Bai Jove! Wow!"

"Er—er—h'm!" said Blake.

Arthur Augustus sat up.

"You silly asses!" he roared. "You fwightful wottahs! I— Oh, bai Jove! Is that you, Mr. Locke?"

"Yes, it is I," said the detective, smiling.

Arthur Augustus scrambled up. He bestowed a wrathful glance upon the grinning juniors and then turned to the detective.

"I was waiting to see you, Mr. Locke," he said.

"Indeed!"

"Yaas, wathah! I was goin' to come to the station and meet you, sir, but I was detained by a—an accident."

"Thank you for the intention," said Ferrers Locke.

"I want to speak to you about a wathah important mattah, sir," said Arthur Augustus. "If you have a few minutes to spare—"

"Oh, you ass!" murmured Blake.

"Oh, you chump!" murmured Tom Merry.

"Ring off, Gussy!"

"Dry up!"

Ferrers Locke looked surprised.

"What is it?" he asked. "I have no time to lose. I am going over to Glyn House now; but if you have something to say to me—"

"It's about the wobbewy, sir," said D'Arcy, unheeding the looks of the other fellows.

"You know something about that?"

D'Arcy coughed.

"Ahem! No, not exactly, sir, but I—"

"Oh, you ass!" murmured Tom Merry.

"Pway don't intewwupt me, Tom Mewwy. As a mattah of fact, sir, I am vewy gweently intewested in detective work, and I want to help look for the Head's missin' picture, sir. I want you to let me help you in lookin' into the case, sir."

The juniors held their breath.

That offer from a junior schoolboy to a celebrated detective was so unheard of that they would not have been surprised if Ferrers Locke had told Arthur Augustus D'Arcy exactly what he thought of it.

But the thunder did not come.

Ferrers Locke smiled.

"That is very kind of you, D'Arcy," he said.

"Oh!" murmured Tom Merry. "My hat!"

"The fact is, sir, that the Head has been so cut up by his picture goin', sir, that we all feel vewy wotten about it," said D'Arcy confidentially, "and I weally think, sir, that I have some gifts as a detective."

"Quite possibly," said Ferrers Locke.

"I shall be very pleased to accept your assistance, D'Arcy."

The juniors gasped.



The St. Jim's First Eleven forward line was sweeping towards goal when Captain Mellish, who was about to shoot, was seen to stumble. His foot turned under him and he fell heavily to the ground.

Arthur Augustus gave them a triumphant glance.

"Jollay good, sir!" he exclaimed. "You can rely upon me."

"I am going over to Glyn House about the matter now," said the detective calmly. "Get your hat and come along with me."

"Yaas, wathah, Mr. Locke!"

And Arthur Augustus rushed away for his best topper.

Tom Merry & Co. looked at Ferrers Locke. They could hardly believe their ears. That the famous detective really considered that D'Arcy could be of any use in helping to investigate the case seemed incredible. But it was still more likely that Ferrers Locke was amusing himself by pulling D'Arcy's leg.

The juniors simply could not make it out.

Ferrers Locke chatted pleasantly with them while D'Arcy was gone for his hat. When the swell of St. Jim's returned, Ferrers Locke walked away with him.

Tom Merry & Co. watched them crossing the quad. Ferrers Locke with his steady stride, and D'Arcy as if he was walking on air.

Tom Merry drew a deep breath as they disappeared out of the gates.

"Well, my hat!" he exclaimed. "What does that mean?"

"What silly ass was it said the age of miracles was past?" murmured Monty Lowther.

"Mr. Locke must be pulling his leg," said Blake.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"It's not that," he said. "But I'm blessed if I can make it out. Let's go to tea."

And they went.

CHAPTER 8.

A Surprise Departure!

CAPTAIN MELLISH had consented to stay to tea in Study No. 6, and the juniors had excelled themselves in the preparation of a feed worthy of such a guest.

Fatty Wynn of the New House had been invited to take charge of the feeding arrangements, and Fatty Wynn had accepted that invitation with alacrity.

Figgins and Kerr, Fatty's special chums, of course, had been asked to come to the feed, too.

Quite a little army, in fact, was collecting in Study No. 6 with Captain Mellish, and Tom Merry went along to the Sixth Form passage to Kildare's study to ask the captain of St. Jim's.

The head of the Sixth, of course, was not in the habit of having tea in junior studies, but this was a special occasion, as Captain Mellish was present.

Tom Merry found Kildare in his study, conning over a list of names. It was a list of players for the Wayland match on Saturday.

Kildare gave him an inquiring look as he tapped and entered.

"We're just going to have tea," Tom Merry began.

Kildare looked surprised.

"Well, you're quite at liberty to have tea without notifying me," he said.

Tom Merry laughed.

"But we want you to come," he said.

"Thanks. I can't."

"It's a very special tea—"

"I can't come."

"And Captain Mellish is there."

"Oh!" said Kildare, his expression changing.

"And I thought you might like to have a jaw with him about the footer

on Saturday," said Tom Merry, laughing.

"Oh, good!" said Kildare. "I'll come!"

"It's all ready!"

Tom Merry looked very pleased as he marched into Study No. 6 with Kildare. It was not often that a junior could secure the head prefect of the School House for tea in a study.

The juniors looked properly impressed.

Captain Mellish shook hands with Kildare in his frank, pleasant way.

"You had my message?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," said Kildare. "You're playing for us on Saturday?"

"Yes."

"We're jolly glad," said Kildare. "I watched you playing for the juniors last Saturday, you know. It was ripping! Wayland Ramblers are a strong team, and you'll find it a good match."

"I enjoyed the match last Saturday," said Captain Mellish. "I wish I could see that cousin of mine playing footer more. It would do him good."

"I'll take him in hand, if you like," said Kildare.

"It would be a good thing," remarked the captain.

"All's ready!" said Fatty Wynn, turning a crimson face from the fire. "The rashers and the eggs are done to a turn. Have you opened the jam, Lowther?"

"Yes. Here you are!"

They sat down to tea. There wasn't too much room in Study No. 6 for so large a party, but room was made for the two distinguished guests, and the rest of the fellows did the best they could.

"Where's D'Arcy?" asked Figgins.

"Isn't he coming?"

Tom Merry laughed.

"No; he's taken up the case."

"Taken up the case?" repeated Figgins.

"Yes. He's offered his services to Mr. Locke to help look for the missing picture and the missing cracksman."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Captain Mellish and Kildare joined in the laughter.

"What on earth did Mr. Locke say?" asked Kerr.

"That's the queerest part of it," said Tom Merry. "He's accepted."

"Accepted?" shouted Figgins.

"Yes."

"Go hon!"

"It's a fact," said Tom Merry.

"Blessed if I can make it out myself, but it's true."

"Mr. Locke must have a peculiar sense of humour," said Captain Mellish, smiling.

"He's pulling Gussy's leg," said Manners.

"Well, they've gone over to Glyn House to investigate," said Tom Merry.

"To Glyn House?" said the captain.

"Yes. You remember Mr. Glyn had something stolen a day or two before the robbery here. I suppose Mr. Locke is going to look for that. It was a gold statuette, or something very valuable. Young Glyn said it was worth a thousand quid."

"By Jove!" Captain Mellish exclaimed suddenly. "I quite forgot. A man is calling to see me at Glyn House this afternoon, and I shall miss him!"

The captain rose to his feet.

"I must ask you to excuse me," he said. "I shall have to hurry off. I'm sorry."

"But you haven't had your tea, sir," said Fatty Wynn.

The captain smiled.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I had forgotten my appointment. I am sure you will excuse me."

"Yes, sir, if you must go," said Tom Merry reluctantly.

"Good-bye, my lads! Good-bye, Kildare! I shall see you on Saturday." And the captain hurried off.

His sudden departure surprised the juniors, and quite spoiled that tea-party. They had made so many preparations for doing honour to the gallant captain, and it was too bad to lose their distinguished guest all of a sudden in this way.

"Well, that's rotten!" said Blake.

"What a sell!" said Figgins.

"Never mind. Pass the eggs!" said Fatty Wynn.

"I suppose you haven't got a sudden appointment, have you, Kildare?" Digby asked a little sarcastically.

"No," he said, "I'll finish my tea."

And Kildare and the juniors finished their tea without the captain.

Captain Mellish was striding away towards Glyn House, and he had reached the millionaire's mansion before tea was over in Study No. 6.

CHAPTER 9.

D'Arcy's Duty!

FERRERS LOCKE seemed deep in thought as he left St. Jim's.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy did not venture to interrupt the detective's meditations. He walked beside Ferrers Locke in silence, occasionally glancing up at the face of the detective.

Arthur Augustus was exceedingly proud and exceedingly pleased at the acceptance of his offer to assist. He would have stated his views on the case at full length if the detective had asked for them. That, however, Mr. Locke omitted to do.

They had reached the turning in the lane which led to Glyn House before the detective broke the silence. There he paused, and turned to the swell of St. Jim's with his kind face.

"So you want to help me?" he asked.

"Yaas, wathah, sir!"

"You think you have an aptitude for detective work, eh?"

"I twust so, Mr. Locke," said Arthur Augustus modestly. "I have wead many detective stowies, and pwactised makin' deductions and things. I believe I am wathah a keen observah, you know. F'winstance—"

"Well, for instance?" said Ferrers Locke, with a smile.

"F'winstance, Mr. Locke, I can tell somethin' about your journey down here, some conclusions which I have awwived at by deduction."

"I shall be very pleased to hear your conclusions, D'Arcy."

"Vewy good, sir. You came down in a cawowed cawwiage."

"Anything more?"

"Yaas, there was an old lady next to you."

"Indeed?"

"Yaas, wathah, sir! I deduced all that from your appeawance."

"Extraordinary, D'Arcy!" said Mr. Locke. "Will you tell me how you did it? I am not above learning, even in my own profession."

"Oh, I shouldn't think of twyin' to teach you anythin', Mr. Locke," said Arthur Augustus, with becoming modesty. "I deduced it in this way. I observe that there is a long, grey hair on your coat."

"Oh!"

"Now, you couldn't have picked that up at St. Jim's," said D'Arcy sagely.

"Therefore, I deduce a crowded way-way cawwiage, and an old lady next to you. The crowded state of the cawwiage brought her so near you that one of her grey hairs was left on your coat."

"Amazing!"

"It comes from practice, sir."

Ferrers Locke laughed.

"I am afraid that your practice has not made your deductions perfect, D'Arcy," he said. "As a matter of fact, I was in an empty carriage coming down."

"Oh!" said D'Arcy.

"The grey hair you have observed upon my coat," said Mr. Locke, as he brushed it off. "was probably left there by my dog. He often leaves hairs over me."

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus looked so dismayed that Mr. Locke burst into a laugh again.

"Never mind," he said, "practice makes perfect, and if you keep on, no doubt you will arrive—somewhere."

"But—but you think I shall be of some use to you in this case, Mr. Locke?" asked the junior anxiously.

Mr. Locke nodded.

"I hope so, D'Arcy."

"You can rely on me to do anything I can, sir."

"I am sure of that, although I do not think it will be in the line of making deductions. Now, D'Arcy, I am going to confide in you."

Arthur Augustus felt his very ears burn with gratification.

"Oh, Mr. Locke!" he gasped.

"About your abilities as a detective I will say nothing; but certainly you can be of use to me, if you choose."

"Anything, sir."

"Very good. Now, I suppose that in the School House at St. Jim's there are some empty rooms—rooms that no one ever enters?"

Arthur Augustus looked surprised.

"Plenty of them, sir," he said. "Lots of the gawwets aren't used, and then there's the punishment-room—Nobody's Study, as we call it. Nobody evah goes in there."

"Unless some boy is confined there for punishment, I suppose?"

"Yaas; but it doesn't happen once in a blue moon, sir. Lumley-Lumley was shut up there the othah week, but it's not likely to be used again—hardly."

"Where is that room?"

"It's at the corner of the Fourth Form passage, Mr. Locke. There's a deep recess, and a door at the end of it, and that's the door of Nobody's Study. You wouldn't notice it goin' down the passage—the recess looks like an alcove."

"Good! Where does the window look out?"

"On a nawwow passage between two walls, sir—part of the School House and the gym. You can't see it from the quadwangle."

"Very good. Is there any way of getting to the window?"

"Oh, no; it's a sheeah wall."

"No way of climbing?"

"Not unless a wope was let down from the window."

"Suppose, D'Arcy, that I wanted to get into that room, unknown to the school—even to the Head himself?"

"You, Mr. Locke?" exclaimed D'Arcy, in astonishment.

"Yes."

"Bai Jove!"

"Could I rely upon you to leave your dormitory without exciting an alarm, and let a rope down from that window for me?"

"Gweat Scott!"

"Well?" said Mr. Locke.

JUST MY FUN

Monty Lowther
Calling



Hallo, everybody! Did you hear about the Scot who was too mean to pay for a holiday, so he stayed at home and let his mind wander? I hear Mickey Mouse films call for a staff of 300 artists engaged on mass production. Shouldn't it be "mouse" production? Then there was the chef who went "high hat." And the Scot who asked for an excursion platform ticket. "Have you ever had anything hung in the Royal Academy?" asked the artist's friend. "Only in the cloak-room," replied the artist lugubriously. A naturalist claims to have discovered a new species of mosquito. We suspect, however, that the mosquito discovered him first. Skimpole says he has caught a perfectly circular fish. He can make neither head nor tail of it. How's this: "You know," said the unskillful golfer, "I really think I'm improving. Can you see any difference, caddy?" "Yus, you've 'ad your 'air cut!" responded the

caddy. As the perfect butler said when he alighted on telegraph wires: "Dear me, I must tell the master the kitchen boiler has blown up!" Six shots were fired at a Mexican president. Their presidents go in by ballot and out by bullet. The new maid at St. Jim's is very discreet. She "breaks it gently!" Skimpole says when taking a bath it is handy to have something to slip on. Ah, the soap? "What shall I call my new landscape?" asked Cutts of the Fifth. "Why not call it 'Home'?" suggested Tom Merry. "Why?" asked Cutts. "Because there's no place like it!" grinned Merry. Then there was the bandit who, after raiding a shop, rang up "No sale" on the cash register. The latest definition of a crooner is that he is an impersonator of bath water running out. Gurgle, gurgie! An American visitor thinks our railway tunnels are marvellous. Funny, we can't see much in them. "Yes, sir, that is our finest chicken soup!" said the waiter to the irate diner. "Well," replied the diner, "all I can say is the chicken must have walked through it on stilts!" A Scottish laird is nearly 100 years old. He is saving himself. A cross-eyed judge was examining three cross-eyed prisoners. "Where were you at the time of the crime?" asked the judge, addressing the first man. "I was at home," answered the second man. "I wasn't speaking to you!" snapped the judge. "Gosh!" said the third man. "I never opened my mouth!" Keep mum, chaps!

"Yaas, wathah, sir! But why—" The detective made a gesture. "My assistants are not allowed to ask questions, D'Arcy." "Pway excuse me, sir. But do you weally want me to do that?" asked the astounded swell of St. Jim's. "I think so." "I'll do it, sir, like a shot!" "Very good. You will not mention the matter to anyone—even to your closest chum?" "Not a whisper, sir." "You know the old saying, D'Arcy—that a man who has a secret to keep should not only hide the secret, but hide the fact that he has one." "I undahstand, sir." "Not a syllable on the subject—not a whisper!" "I will be careful, sir." "Good! Now, to-morrow night—say at eleven o'clock—can I rely upon you to do this for me?" said Mr. Locke quietly.

"Yaas, sir." "You will obtain a rope without attracting attention—I am sure I can rely upon you," said the detective, with a keen glance at the swell of St. Jim's. "Yaas, wathah, sir! I flathah myself that I am a fellow of tact and judgment."

"Then I shall depend upon you." "Yaas, Mr. Locke." "Describe the situation of the window to me, so that I shall be able to find it after dark without trouble."

Arthur Augustus did so, and the detective listened keenly. Ferrers Locke knew St. Jim's pretty well, and he was satisfied.

"Quite clear," he said. "I rely upon you, then. And not a word—either to any fellow belonging to St. Jim's or to anybody else."

"Not a word, sir." "You may hear that I have gone back to London," said Mr. Locke. "Whatever you hear, it is to make no difference to this arrangement."

"Yaas," said D'Arcy. "You understand perfectly?" "Perfectly, sir." "Very well. Now I will leave you." The detective shook hands very warmly with Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. Arthur Augustus was in the seventh heaven. He intended to keep his word to Mr. Locke most carefully, but afterwards—when it was all over, and the detective's scheme, whatever it was, had been crowned with success—then the swell of St. Jim's would enjoy his triumph. He would have proved to the unbelieving St. Jim's fellows that he had been able to help Mr. Locke, after all.

Arthur Augustus held his head very high as he walked back to St. Jim's.

Ferrers Locke, with a thoughtful expression upon his clear-cut face, turned into the lane that led to the big metal gates of Glyn House, and a few minutes later arrived at the millionaire's residence. He was shown in at once to Mr. Glyn.

CHAPTER 10.

The Detective's Device!

MR. GLYN was in the library when Ferrers Locke was shown in.

The millionaire greeted the famous detective warmly.

"I am very glad to see you, Mr. Locke!" he exclaimed. "It appears that Dr. Holmes and myself have both called upon you for your services at the same time."

The detective nodded, with a smile.

"Yes; and as both cases are in connection with the same criminal, I am fortunately able to handle both at once," he said.

"I am glad of that," said the millionaire, rubbing his hands. "Scotland Yard seems to be able to do nothing; but I have faith in you, Mr. Locke."

"I hope I shall justify it, sir."

"I hope so, indeed. Look at this!"

The millionaire opened a drawer in his desk and took out a telegraph-form. He spread it out upon the table before the detective.

Ferrers Locke glanced at the dead-black writing of the telegram:

"Handed in at Charing Cross at 5 p.m. Will call for diamond necklace Thursday evening. Expect me at eleven.—X."

The millionaire gazed at Ferrers Locke as he read the telegram.

"When did you get this?" asked Mr. Locke.

"Half an hour ago."

"Then, when you sent for me—"

"I did not know then that I was to have a second visit from X, but I feared it. I told you in my letter that I had purchased a diamond necklace for my daughter Edith. It is a well-known necklace, and has an historic as well as an intrinsic value—but the money value is seven thousand pounds."

"That is a large sum—a temptation to our friend the enemy," said the detective, with a smile.

"Yes. I should not have been surprised if the cracksmen had heard of it—the sale was mentioned in several papers, so he would have no difficulty in getting the information—and I wished to consult you about it, Mr. Locke. As I stated in my letter, the necklace will be delivered to me to-morrow morning. What astounds me is the insolence of this thief in warning me of his intention to steal it. That is the most singular circumstance about this criminal. He telephoned to Dr. Holmes that he was going to steal his Rembrandt, and in spite of the watch that was kept, he succeeded. In the same way, he sent a wire some time ago to Lord Westwood, and stole the bonds he threatened to steal. It appears to amuse him to steal his plunder while a watch is being kept upon it, for the watch, of course, must add to his danger in making the attempt."

A peculiar smile glided over Ferrers Locke's clear-cut face.

But it was gone in a second, and the millionaire, who was looking at the telegram, did not notice it.

"Now, what would you advise me to do, Mr. Locke?" asked Mr. Glyn. "Of course, I could wire to the jeweller's not to deliver the necklace to-morrow. But that would only be putting off the evil day; it must be delivered some time, and when it is delivered X will know about it—"

"Yes, that would not improve matters in any way; it is useless to postpone the contest, if the contest is to come."

"I want you to advise me what to do. As I told you in my letter, the necklace will be here to-morrow. X declares that at eleven to-morrow night he will be here to take it. What do you advise?"

"Let it be delivered."

"And then—keep a strict watch to-morrow night, I presume?"

"Undoubtedly."

"You will remain?"

"I think so. And Captain Mellish—doubtless he would like an opportunity of measuring strength with the rascal again?"

"Undoubtedly; he is very anxious for a chance at him. He is leaving my house on Saturday to return to

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town, so this will be his only opportunity. And he will be a good man to help; he is a dead shot."

There was a tap at the door, and Captain Mellish looked in. He had just arrived from St. Jim's. He coughed slightly.

"H'm! I did not know Mr. Locke was here," he said. "If I'm in the way—"

"On the contrary, please come in," said Ferrers Locke. "We were just speaking about you."

"In my favour, I hope!" said the captain, laughing.

"Yes. There will have to be a watch kept here to-morrow night, and Mr. Glyn and I both think that if you care to run the risk a second time, you are exactly the man to help."

"By Jove, I shall be glad! I owe the cracksmen an account, as you know," said the captain, lightly touching his cheek where a slight scratch was still visible on the sunburnt skin.

Ferrers Locke nodded. "Look at that telegram!" he said.

Captain Mellish read the telegram.

"Jove, that fellow's insolence knows no bounds!" he exclaimed. "Surely this must be bluff? He could never venture upon such a feat a second time."

"It may be bluff; but I shall keep a watch, all the same," said the millionaire. "And Mr. Locke will be here also, and I shall have a couple of my strongest footmen in the room, too." "A good idea," said the captain. "I shall be only too happy to help. It would be infamous if Miss Glyn were to be robbed of her necklace."

Ferrers Locke crossed to the door, opened it, and glanced into the passage. Then he closed the door again, and came back quietly.

Mr. Glyn and the captain were watching him curiously.

"I suppose there is no danger of being overheard in this room?" asked the detective, glancing round at the panelled walls.

"None," said Mr. Glyn. "Surely you do not imagine, Mr. Locke, that the cracksmen has a confederate in the house?"

"I do not think so, but it is possible, and I am in the habit of leaving nothing to chance, Mr. Glyn!"

"Quite right," said Captain Mellish, with a nod of approval. "Quite right!"

The detective lowered his voice.

"I have an idea," he said. "We shall keep strict watch to-morrow night—to capture the cracksmen, if possible—but the necklace need run no risk."

"How so?"

"It will not be in your safe."

"Ah! I had better leave it in the jeweller's hands?"

Ferrers Locke shook his head.

"No. Depend upon it, X has his eyes open, and he will know whether the necklace has been delivered or not."

"That is very probable," the captain remarked. "It is amazing how the rascal seems to get his information."

"Probably he or a confederate will keep watch upon the jeweller's place, and satisfy himself whether the necklace has been delivered. No, the necklace must be delivered here," said Ferrers Locke. "That is essential."

"But then—" said the millionaire. "But it need not remain in the safe here. When it is here, I will take it—"

"You?"

"Yes; I shall be going over to St. Jim's, to consult with the Head about the missing picture, you know. Even if the cracksmen is watching the house, as is quite possible, he will see nothing suspicious in that; but I shall take the



"Eleven!" cried Mr. Glyn. The strokes chimed out a moment—the hour at which the mysterious cracksmen tensely. Would

diamonds with me, and ask Dr. Holmes to keep them locked up in his safe for the night. They can be fastened up in a packet, and even Dr. Holmes needn't be told what the packet contains. I will simply ask him to mind it for me. No one, but ourselves, will have the slightest suspicion that the necklace is at the school. The cracksmen will make his attempt here, and we may capture him; but if, with his usual wonderful luck, he succeeds in getting at your safe—he will find nothing there."

Mr. Glyn burst into a laugh.

"Excellent!" he cried. "Excellent!"

Captain Mellish was silent.

"You do not approve of the idea, captain?" asked Ferrers Locke, looking at him.

"Yes, I approve," said the captain.

"But I cannot help thinking that the cracksmen may get wind of the transfer in some manner."

"In what way?"

"Ah, do not ask me that!" said Captain Mellish, laughing. "I cannot account for his cunning. But certainly he has marvellous means of keeping himself posted. He may suspect you are taking the necklace there, if he is watching the house and sees you leave."

"I do not think it likely. At all events, the diamonds will be safer there than here—you must admit that."

"Yes, no doubt that is the case."

"The idea is excellent!" exclaimed Mr. Glyn. "We shall have the chance

time, discussing in low tones the plans for the morrow.

CHAPTER 11.

The Practice Match.

TOM MERRY & Co. came out of the Shell Form Room after morning lessons the next day, and made a rush at once for the quad.

The day was fine and bright, and the St. Jim's fellows were rejoicing.

"We're going to have a fine weekend, after all, Kildare," said Tom Merry, as he passed the skipper of St. Jim's in the passage. "The match will be all right."

"Yes, rather!" said Kildare.

"Sure you don't want me to play centre-forward?" asked Tom Merry, and he dodged away, laughing, as the Sixth Former reached for his ear.

The sun was shining in the quadrangle, and if the fine weather continued there would be every chance for a good match on Saturday afternoon. The whole of St. Jim's were looking forward to it. The Wayland Ramblers' match was one of the most important the St. Jim's First played; the fact that Captain Mellish was playing for St. Jim's lent it, of course, an additional interest.

Mellish was swanking considerably about it. Mellish never played footer himself; he hated the game, and every other form of manly exercise. But he was very proud of his cousin's exploits, and he shone in the reflected glory of the captain.

Mellish had come in lately for a very unusual amount of attention and politeness from the other fellows. They did not think much of Percy Mellish, as a rule. But, as Blake remarked, one was bound to be civil to a chap who was the cousin of such a ripping footballer and splendid fellow generally as Captain Mellish was.

Jack Blake came out of the School House with an old footer under his arm, for a punt about.

Kildare and the seniors were going down to the senior ground for some regular practice. Blake had just dropped the ball in the quad, when he gave a shout.

"Hallo! Here's the giddy captain—and Ferrers Locke!"

"Bai Jove," exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, "both of them!"

Ferrers Locke and Captain Mellish had entered the gates, and were coming towards the School House. Ferrers Locke was walking with one hand in his coat pocket.

There was something in that pocket which the detective did not mean to leave out of his fingers.

"Buck up, D'Arcy!" said Tom Merry. Arthur Augustus turned his eyeglass inquiringly upon the Shell fellow.

"I fail to undahstand you, Tom Mewwy," he said.

Tom Merry nodded towards the detective.

"Mr. Locke has come over to consult you, I expect," he said. "He wants you to bring your mighty brain to bear on the case, of course."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors roared.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—" he began.

"You will be able to tell by the mud on his boots whether he's had his lunch or not, and then you'll know whether to ask him to come into the tuckshop!" Monty Lowther remarked.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Ferrers Locke nodded to the juniors, and went into the House.

Captain Mellish caught sight of Kildare coming out of the House with a footer under his arm, and crossed over to him.

The St. Jim's skipper greeted him very warmly.

"I thought you would be at practice to-day," the captain explained, "and so I walked over with Mr. Locke. As we're going to have a pretty stiff match on Saturday, I thought it just as well to practise with you a bit. It will give me some idea what the rest of the team is like."

Kildare looked very gratified.

"You're very kind, sir," he replied. "I never expected you to take so much trouble over a schoolboy match."

"What's worth doing is worth doing well," said the captain, smiling. "Besides, as a matter of fact, there's nothing I should like so much as a little footer practice to-day."

"You can lend me some togs, I suppose?"

"Certainly, sir! Come to my room."

A few minutes later Captain Mellish walked down to the footer ground with Kildare. As soon as the news spread that the captain was at practice with the seniors, there was a crowd round the ground at once.

Shell, Fourth and Third quitted their various occupations to crowd round and watch the captain play.

"Now we're going to see some footer!" said Blake emphatically.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Hear, hear!" said Wally. "Make room for us, you Shell bouncers. Sorry if I'm treading on your feet, Gussy!"

"Ow! You young rascal!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You frightful young ass, you've spoiled all the polish on my boot!" howled Arthur Augustus.

"Oh, don't you begin, Gussy!"

Arthur Augustus made a rush at his exasperated minor, but Wally dodged away in the crowd.

Arthur Augustus paused, breathing hard.

"Pway lend me your handkerchief to wub my boot, Lowthah," he said.

"Eh?"

"My boot is all dirty!"

"Can't you use your own handkerchief?"

"It will spoil it, deah boy!"

"Why, you—you—" said Lowther, almost stuttering with wrath. "What about mine?"

"Weally, deah boy, what a fellow you are for arguin'! I considah—"

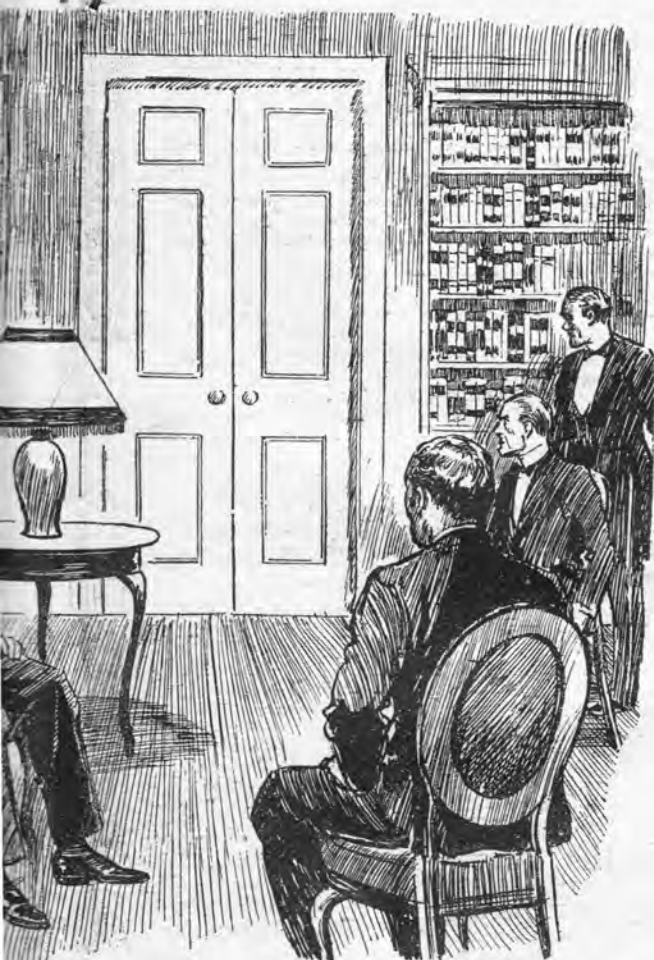
"There goes the leather!"

"Bravo!"

"On the ball, captain!"

All eyes were on the tall figure of the captain. Kildare's team was playing a scratch eleven from the Fifth and Sixth. There were some good players in the scratch team—Rushden of the Sixth, Cutts of the Fifth, and others.

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out softly from the clock on the mantelpiece. It was a thrilling moment when X had promised his visit! The men on watch listened Would X keep his word?

of capturing the thief, without the risk of losing the necklace."

"But—" began the captain.

"Oh, come, captain, don't throw cold water upon an excellent idea," said the millionaire.

"But what would you say if you heard on Friday that X had paid his visit to the school instead of this house, and that the diamonds were gone?" said the captain.

"Impossible, my dear fellow!"

"Well, of course, Mr. Locke's judgment is the best," said the captain frankly. "I hope the affair will turn out successfully. And, by Jove! I should like to get to close quarters with that scoundrel once more!"

And the three of them sat for some

But they did not have much chance against the First Eleven, especially as such a fine player as Captain Mellish was assisting the St. Jim's First.

"Bravo, captain!"

"On the ball!"

"Hurrah!"

The captain scored twice, amid roars from the crowd.

Kildare's eyes sparkled as the team lined up after the second goal.

Captain Mellish was making hay of the scratch players, and Kildare's heart was light as he thought what a rod in pickle the captain was for the Wayland Ramblers on Saturday.

"Bai Jove, he's a wippin' playah!" Arthur Augustus remarked. "Fancy that splendid chap nearly bein' potted by a wascally burglah!"

"But you're going to hunt the burglar down, aren't you, Gussy?" Monty Lowther remarked.

And the juniors chuckled.

"My hat, now they're going!" exclaimed Tom Merry, his eyes on the game.

Kildare's forward line was sweeping towards goal. Captain Mellish was about to shoot when he was seen to stumble. His foot turned under him, and he fell heavily to the ground.

CHAPTER 12.

Crooked!

THERE was a shout of alarm at once.

The players ceased immediately and gathered round the captain, who lay helplessly on the ground, supporting himself on his elbow.

There was a drawn look upon his face, his features twisted as if in an effort to keep back a cry of pain.

Kildare bent over him.

"Are you hurt, sir?" he exclaimed.

The captain suppressed a groan.

"My ankle!" he said. "Clumsy as that I am, I'm afraid I've twisted it."

"Oh, what rotten luck!"

Kildare may be pardoned if he was thinking as much about Saturday's match as about the captain. He saw all his golden prospects gliding away like a dream at the thought that the captain was "crooked."

"Can you get up, captain?" asked Darrell.

"I—I'm afraid not. The ankle's twisted."

"I'm sorry!"

"It was my own fault!" groaned the captain. "The ground's a bit slippery there. Hang the luck! Help me up on the other foot, will you? Get me into the House. I must sit down."

The footballers raised the injured man.

He stood upon his left leg, leaning heavily upon Kildare and Darrell.

He turned a painful look upon the dismayed seniors.

"I'm sorry to bother you like this," he said. "Don't mind me. Go on with your practice."

Kildare and Darrell helped the captain to the School House. The captain hopped between them.

"I hurt my ankle in India," he explained. "A fall from a horse in the hills. It has played me tricks like this before—confound it!"

A crowd of fellows followed him into the House. All the juniors were looking very much concerned. They had an impression that the captain was suffering more pain than he cared to

show, and some of them knew what a sprained ankle was like.

Captain Mellish was assisted into Kildare's study.

He sat down in the armchair.

"I'm all right now," he said. "Run back and get on with the game. Yes, I insist."

"But if the injury's bad, you'd better see a doctor, sir," said Kildare.

"Oh, I don't think it's so bad as that! But I'll see. But go back and get on with your practice; you don't want to let it affect the game—and I won't have your time wasted."

And as the captain insisted, Kildare & Co. left him.

"Tell Mr. Locke, when he comes out of the Head's room, that I've hurt my ankle and shan't be able to walk back to Glyn House with him," he said. "Tell him I'll borrow the Head's car, and drive over later."

"Yes, sir," said Tom Merry.

Tom Merry met Ferrers Locke ten minutes later, and gave him the captain's message.

"Captain Mellish injured!" said Ferrers Locke. "I am sorry to hear that."

"Yes; he slipped as he was taking a kick," said Tom Merry.

"Taking a kick?" repeated Ferrers Locke.

"He was practising footer with the seniors," Tom Merry explained. "He's going to play for the First Eleven on Saturday against Wayland Ramblers—if he's not crooked, of course."

"Oh, I see!"

"It will be rotten if he's crooked," said Tom Merry ruefully. "Rotten for him, of course, and rotten for the team. Langton's crooked, you know, and Captain Mellish was going to play in his place. Of course, Kildare would have left anybody out to play the captain, but Langton was out, anyway, as it happened. Rotten, isn't it?"

"Very," said Ferrers Locke. "Where is the captain? I will see him."

"He's in Kildare's study—this way!"

Ferrers Locke looked very concerned as he entered Kildare's study.

The captain had his injured leg resting across a chair and had pulled down the sock, and was rubbing the ankle with embrocation which Blake had thoughtfully brought him.

There was a smell of embrocation in the study, and two or three juniors were standing looking on at the operation.

Captain Mellish glanced up at the detective with a rueful smile.

"This is rotten luck, isn't it?" he said. "It's all right about to-night, though—I shall drive back presently, Locke, and I shan't want my feet to-night—only my hands, if there's anything at all to do."

"It's hard lines, though," said the detective. "I'm sorry. I suppose it hurts?"

The captain made a grimace.

"Well, it's not pleasant," he said, "but it's not so bad as it might have been. There is no swelling; it's simply a twist of the old sprain, I think. I shall be all right presently."

"Good! I'm staying over here to-day," said Ferrers Locke. "I shall be able to take care of you when you go back."

"Oh, good!" said the captain.

Ferrers Locke walked away with a thoughtful brow. He returned to the Head's study and found Dr. Holmes there.

Dr. Holmes was looking at the empty frame of his Rembrandt, and he smiled ruefully as the detective came in.

Ferrers Locke glanced at the safe in the study.

"You are thinking of your packet?" asked the Head. "It is quite safe. You saw me lock it up."

Ferrers Locke nodded.

"Yes; that is all right. But I'm going to ask you a favour, sir."

"You have only to ask. You have told me that you have a hope of recovering my Rembrandt, and if you do that I am your debtor for life," said the Head earnestly.

"I am staying down here over to-morrow," Ferrers Locke explained, "but I have some work to do—a long report of a case, which I cannot put off, and I shall have time to attend to it if I may have the use of a room, pen, and ink here."

The Head smiled.

"You may command everything in the place, Mr. Locke," he said. "I will see that you are undisturbed in the library."

"You are taking a class this afternoon, sir?"

"Yes, the Sixth."

"Could I venture to ask you to let me use your study while you are in the Form-room? I should prefer it to the library."

The Head looked surprised.

"Quite so; as you wish," he said. "I shall be very pleased to place my study at your disposal, Mr. Locke."

Ferrers Locke did not seem to notice the Head's surprise.

"Thank you very much," he said. "I have my papers with me, and I can set to work as soon as you are finished with the study."

"You will lunch with me?"

"Thanks, I have lunched already."

The Head glanced at his watch.

"Then you may install yourself here now," he said. "I am just going to lunch."

"Thank you once more."

Ferrers Locke was left alone in the Head's study.

He drew a packet of papers from his pocket and laid them on the table and placed a pen and inkstand close at hand.

But he did not write. Anyone who had observed the detective would have guessed, perhaps, that the papers, the work, were only a blind, and that Ferrers Locke's real wish was to remain in the Head's study. Perhaps he was thinking of the diamond necklace in the packet in the safe.

The cheery voices in the quadrangle died away as the Form-rooms filled for afternoon lessons, and the quadrangle and the passages became silent after a while.

Ferrers Locke took a volume from the Head's bookcase. He sat and read. He read on patiently till the door opened and Dr. Holmes came in.

Lessons were over at St. Jim's for the day.

"Busy?" asked the Head, with a smile.

"No, I have borrowed one of your books," said Ferrers Locke, smiling, too. "Captain Mellish has not yet returned to Glyn House."

"He—he is resting in Kildare's study."

"A very unfortunate accident."

"Very," said the Head.

"I will go to see him now."

Ferrers Locke made his way to Kildare's study. He found Captain Mellish, who had changed out of his football things, with his injured leg propped on a chair, having tea with Kildare, Darrell, and Rushden.

(Continued on page 18.)



Let the Editor be your pal. Write to him to-day, addressing your letters :
The Editor, The GEM, The Amalgamated Press, Ltd., Fleetway House,
Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

HALLO, chams! Have you noticed how popular school tours abroad are becoming? Personal experience is the best teacher, and it is far more interesting and exciting learning the geography and history of a foreign country by visiting its shores. Free-and-easy holiday tours are a welcome change from the monotonous routine of the class-room, and to the schoolboys who are lucky enough to undertake them they are calculated to be more beneficial to the health and in acquiring knowledge. There is an association which organises these tours, and the cost of them is no more than a fortnight's holiday at the seaside.

Back in August a large party of schoolboys from all parts of England went on a tour of Scandinavia, and the cost for each one was only four pounds fifteen. I bet those boys had the holiday of their lives, and learnt in two or three weeks far more about the places they visited than they would have learnt in two or three years in a school-room. I expect some of them could tell their masters a thing or two when they returned!

EDUCATIONAL FLIGHTS.

A really modern method of learning geography has been tried out in Holland. This was an aeroplane flight by a party of schoolboys and a master over the section of the country being dealt with in the lesson, so that the boys could study at first hand the towns and rivers pointed out to them. It's a novel and thrilling way of learning geography, but the expense of such a lesson must be too much for it to become a regular feature of school work. However, it is a step in the right direction.

A more ambitious educational flight was experienced some months ago by a party of schoolboys and schoolgirls. In an air liner they went on a tour across Europe and Africa, seeing all the "sights" in comfort in the shortest possible time. That's the sort of holiday many boys dream about, but—who knows?—in years to come it might be more than a dream.

"WASHED OUT!"

Talking about holidays, in next week's sensational school story the chums of St. Jim's become very fed-up when incessant rain robs them of their two weekly half-holidays. The juniors are compelled to remain indoors, and, as someone remarks, they look like being reduced to playing marbles in the passages unless the rain stops. But the steady downpour keeps on, and the climax comes when the River Rhyl overflows its banks. St. Jim's is soon flooded—the quad and the whole of the ground floor, including the Form-rooms, become under water. And that's when the excitement and the fun starts! You'll simply revel in this latest yarn of Martin Clifford's. Look out for it.

"THE BLACK HAND AT ST. FRANK'S!"

In our popular St. Frank's serial the mystery of Gallows Mere keeps taking

thrilling turns. But in next week's chapters—the most exciting yet—events are all too thrilling for Handforth & Co., whose investigations have ended so disastrously by their falling into the hands of the sinister people at Gallows Mere. Who they are and what their game is still a mystery, and in attempting to solve it the St. Frank's boys are in danger every minute. Dr. Zangari and his gang will not hesitate to "remove" those who know too much about their secret affairs!

To complete this splendid number, there will be more half-crowns awarded for readers' jokes, and Monty Lowther "does his stuff" as usual. Don't forget to order your GEM in advance, chums.

A NEW CRAZE.

It's funny how some unusual happenings will sometimes start a craze. Australia has taken up the new stunt of barrow-pushing. It all started with a man making a bet with another that he could push him in a barrow up a mountain in eight days. The pusher won the wager of twenty pounds, and so much publicity did the freak feat get that barrow-pushing has spread to several places. One man recently undertook to push a friend in a barrow 100 miles in ten days. And when a barrow race was organised in a town in Queensland it had to be stopped by the police because it was likely to upset traffic. Other towns, too, have "fallen for" the new craze; but, like many others, it will peter out for something new to take its place.

LUCK—GOOD AND BAD.

I heard the other day of an amazing coincidence. A man was standing on a ladder, working, when he suddenly slipped and fell. Fortunately, he was uninjured. Now here's the amazing part of the story. It was afterwards discovered that the man's brother, who was miles away, fell from a ladder at the same time! But he was not so lucky—he received serious injuries.

Fate was kinder, however, to a Middlesbrough man, who, it seems, bears a charmed life. Already he has fallen from heights of eighteen and twenty feet without suffering injury. But recently he fell forty feet from a gasometer—and all he got was a broken nose!

THE EDITOR.

PEN PALS COUPON

14-9-35



A free feature which brings together readers all over the world for the purpose of exchanging topics of interest to each other. If you want a pen pal, post your notice, together with the coupon on this page, to the address given above.

Fred Bennett, 66, Mansfield Street, Ashton-u-Lyne, Lanes; age 15-16; cyclists; Manchester.

Miss M. Parkins, 19, Upper Cox Street, Metz Villas, Balsall Heath, Birmingham; girl correspondents; overseas; age 15-18.

Wilfred Blinston, 123, Peelhouse Lane, Widnes, Lanes; dance bands; old "Magnets."

P. Sharplin, Te Puna, Tauranaga, New Zealand; age 14-16; stamps, coins, match brands.

Miss Gwen Ballard, 61, Flexmere Road, Lordship Lane, Tottenham, London, N.17; age 15-17; films, books; Canada, Australia, Hollywood; girl correspondents.

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Ted Bissett, 43, Rectory Road, Fulham, London, S.W.6; stamps.

Miss Anne Duckworth, 14, Kenilworth Square, Smithills, Bolton, Lanes; girl correspondents; age 15-16; football, cricket, hockey.

Miss Hazel Gibbs, Bosecombe, Station Road, Mowbray, South Africa; British Isles, India, Switzerland; sports, hiking, mountaineering; age 14-16; girl correspondents.

Leon Dufour, 8, Rite Cokart, Que'vrain, Hainault, Belgium.

Miss Marie Searson, 48, Columbia Avenue, Sutton-in-Ashfield, Notts; age 14-16; girl correspondents; America; sports, music, films, stamps.

Miss Agnes A. Whitelaw, 381, Wellshot Road, Tollcross, Glasgow, E.2; age 14-16; girl correspondents; anywhere.

Miss Ethyle Sharp, Lislea, Kincoira Avenue, Knock, Belfast; girl correspondents; age 13-16; riding, film stars.

Miss M. Banks, The Rectory, Wittersham, Kent; girl correspondents; age 17-18; films, cycling.

Ray Thompson, Elder Street, Wallaroo, South Australia; cigarette cards, stamps, match brands; U.S.A., Africa, or elsewhere.

R. Kennedy, 35, Alma Road, Sheerness, Kent; age 16-18; photos, films.

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In spite of his injury, the captain was in good spirits and the tea-party was very cheerful.

"Still crocked?" asked the detective. The captain nodded.

"I'm afraid so," he replied.

"Then we cannot depend upon you for to-night?"

"Oh, yes, I shall drive over," said Captain Mellish. "If I should feel that it would be too much for me, I will ask Dr. Holmes to give me a bed here. But I do not think it will be as bad as that. The ankle is better already."

"Right! I hope you will be able to come—I think you will be needed."

"Depend upon me to do my best."

And Ferrers Locke withdrew, leaving the captain talking football with the three Sixth Formers.

CHAPTER 13.

At the Eleventh Hour!

"A H, you are late! Where is the captain?"

Mr. Glyn greeted Ferrers Locke anxiously as he came into the room.

It was nearly dinner-time at Glyn House, and the millionaire had been growing uneasy.

"I am sorry to say that the captain cannot return," said Ferrers Locke. "He was doing some football practice at the school, and slipped and strained his ankle."

"How very unfortunate!"

"Yes. He is going to drive over later," said Ferrers Locke. "It is possible, however, that he will not feel up to it and, in that case, Dr. Holmes will give him a room for the night. He asked me to make his excuses to you."

The millionaire nodded. "That is all right," he said. "But it is very unfortunate. I depend upon Captain Mellish more than anyone else for the work we have before us to-night—excepting yourself, of course, Mr. Locke," he added hastily.

The detective smiled.

"No need to make that exception," he said. "Captain Mellish is exactly the man for what is to be done to-night. But if he cannot come, we must do the best we can without him. X has promised us a visit at eleven?"

"Yes."

"You have telephoned to Inspector Skeat?"

"Yes; he has promised to come."

"And you have a couple of strong footmen?"

"Yes. There will be four of us and the inspector."

"Four should be enough," said Ferrers Locke. "For myself, I think it would be judicious for me to be on the watch outside the house."

"Well, I suppose four in the room here will be enough for anything that can be done at all," the millionaire remarked. "But if you should meet him singly, Mr. Locke, he is a dangerous character."

"I know he is; but I do not think he will get the better of me."

"He goes armed."

"So do I," said Ferrers Locke, with a laugh.

"I should not like harm to come to you, Mr. Locke!"

"You may rely upon me for that!"

Ferrers Locke dined with the millionaire. The millionaire's daughter, Edith, and Mr. Wodyer were at dinner with them. Mr. Wodyer was Edith's fiancé, and had once been a Housemaster at St. Jim's. He was well known to Tom Merry & Co., and he had heard them speak of Ferrers Locke, and so he was

much interested at meeting the famous detective.

He had learned what was "on" for this evening, and over dinner he had asked Ferrers Locke's permission to be one of the party on the watch.

Ferrers Locke assented at once.

"Quite the thing," he said. "You can take Captain Mellish's place."

"Captain Mellish is not returning, then?" asked Mr. Wodyer.

"No; I think he will not return so late as this. He hurt his foot in playing football at the school, and he is crocked."

When Miss Glyn had retired, the men discussed their plans for the evening. Mr. Wodyer had a heavy malacca cane, and the millionaire carefully loaded a handsome nickel-plated revolver. Inspector Skeat arrived later in the evening. The inspector was looking very grim. He had been one of the party keeping watch at St. Jim's on the night that the Rembrandt was stolen, and he nourished a bitter resentment towards the mysterious cracksmen who had so easily and so completely defeated him.

Inspector Skeat met the famous detective with much respect in his manner. They took up their posts in the millionaire's library, into the wall of which was let an iron safe. That was the safe which would have contained the diamond necklace, but for Ferrers Locke's device of transferring the jewels to the safe at St. Jim's.

There were french windows from the library to the terrace outside, and they were closed now, and guarded with strong shutters.

"We will have the door locked and bolted," said Mr. Glyn. "If the cracksmen can get in after that, he must be a wizard and not human at all. And if he should get in—"

"He will not get out again!" said Arthur Wodyer.

"He would not have got away at the school, gentlemen," said Inspector Skeat, "but he shot the light out, and that was a move we were not expecting. But in this case—"

"There are lights on in three different parts of the room," Ferrers Locke remarked. "It would require a volley."

"There is no telling what the rascal's dodge may be," said the millionaire. "I wish the captain were here!"

"I think there are enough of us, sir, to handle one man," said the inspector.

"He is not an ordinary man, Mr. Skeat."

Mr. Glyn called two powerfully built footmen into the library. He had already explained to them what was required. They brought in thick oaken cudgels with them, and sat down at the farther end of the room.

Mr. Glyn, Arthur Wodyer, and the inspector placed their chairs before the door of the safe and sat down.

Truly, the cracksmen had a difficult task before him to crack the safe.

Ferrers Locke watched all the arrangements made, and then put on his coat.

"You will be outside?" asked the inspector.

Ferrers Locke nodded.

"Blow your whistle if you require help, then."

"Oh, no!" said Ferrers Locke. "Police whistles can be counterfeited. On no account get out of this room."

"By George, sir, you're right! We won't stir!"

"Keep a strict watch, and rely upon me to be near at hand if the cracksmen appears," said Ferrers Locke. "You will lock the door after me, Mr. Glyn."

"Certainly."

Ferrers Locke passed out into the

hall. The millionaire watched him stride out of the house and disappear into the darkness of the grounds.

He shivered a little.

"Mr. Locke has an iron nerve," he said. "I should not care to be out there in the dark, knowing that the most desperate criminal of modern times had promised a visit."

"I agree with you," said Arthur Wodyer.

"Well, I will lock the door now."

"I—I suppose Miss Glyn is quite safe?" hesitated the young man.

"Quite!" said the millionaire. "There are two maids in Miss Glyn's room with her to-night, to say nothing of an electric burglar-alarm, and a dog outside on the landing. It is not Miss Glyn who is in danger—it is ourselves." The young man coloured, and Mr. Glyn laughed. "Never mind, Arthur; I don't blame you for thinking of it. But we've got to think of X now."

He turned the key in the lock, then he returned to his seat.

"It means a long wait," he remarked. "The cigar-box and the decanters are here, gentlemen."

But the watchers did not care for either. They were too excited and strained. Every sound of the wind outside made them start.

The hours struck from the clock on the mantelpiece.

"Ten o'clock! Another hour before our friend the enemy is due!" said the millionaire, with a yawn. "I hope he will not disappoint us."

"I think he will come," said Wodyer.

"I hope so," said the inspector, between his teeth.

"I wonder where Mr. Locke is?"

"Keeping watch, no doubt."

"It would be terrible if—if—"

Arthur Wodyer hesitated.

The millionaire shivered a little.

"Mr. Locke is not likely to be taken by surprise," he said, "and it was his own wish to be out of the house."

"True! I wish eleven o'clock would strike."

"Half-past!"

The time was getting close now, and the watchers felt their hearts beat fast, in spite of their efforts to remain calm.

A quarter to eleven!

Arthur Wodyer rose to his feet and leaned against the safe. Mr. Glyn and the inspector sat bolt upright, grim and unbending.

Chime!

"Eleven!" cried the millionaire.

The strokes chimed out softly from the silver-toned clock on the mantelpiece. It was eleven o'clock!

The men gazed at one another.

It was a thrilling moment. The hour at which the mysterious cracksmen had promised his visit!

They listened—the house was still. Only a faint rustle of the wind in the trees outside—nothing else in the stillness of the night.

A minute passed—another—and another.

Their eyes were fixed upon the door, as if they expected to see it fly open, in spite of lock and bolt.

But the door remained fast.

Their hearts beat in unison with the ticking of the clock.

Five minutes—ten minutes—a quarter!

"A quarter past eleven!" breathed the millionaire.

"He isn't coming!" said Wodyer.

The inspector shook his head.

"X has broken his word!" said Mr. Glyn. "Alas! His teeth are drawn, then!"

The minutes ticked away. Half-past eleven—twelve! Midnight sounded.

"X has failed!" said Mr. Glyn. "He has broken his word!"

"And the diamonds are safe!" said the inspector.

Mr. Glyn started.

Back into his mind came the vague suspicion Captain Mellish had entertained—that somehow the cunning cracksmen might get wind of the transfer of the diamonds to the Head's study at St. Jim's. It seemed impossible, but that would account for the cracksmen having failed to appear.

Mr. Glyn's face went white.

"I wonder if the diamonds are safe?" he said. "Where is Ferrers Locke?"

Why does he not return?

But Ferrers Locke did not return.

While they were keeping watch and ward over the empty safe, what might have happened at the school?

CHAPTER 14.

On the Watch!

TOM MERRY & CO. had gone to bed at the usual time.

Arthur Augustus, remembering the advice of Ferrers Locke, not only concealed his secret, but concealed the fact that he had one to conceal. Not one of his chums noticed anything unusual in his manner that evening, and not one of the Fourth guessed, for a moment, that he went to bed with the intention of getting up before rising-bell.

Arthur Augustus was lying very low.

There was the usual chatter in the Fourth Form dormitory in the School House, till one by one the juniors dropped off to sleep.

At length only one of them remained awake. It was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

The swell of St. Jim's propped himself upon his pillow, afraid to lay his head down lest he should slip into slumber.

Half-past ten sounded from the clock tower, then the three-quarter. Arthur Augustus stirred.

The dormitory was still and silent; all the fellows were fast asleep.

The swell of St. Jim's slipped quietly out of bed and dressed himself. As a rule, Arthur Augustus took a good deal of time to dress. But on this occasion he completed that operation in ten minutes.

He made hardly a sound as he dressed. Then he stole on tiptoe to the door of the dormitory, opened it and quitted the room. He drew the door softly behind him.

The passage was in darkness. Downstairs, a light was burning—some of the masters had not yet gone to bed. But the dormitory passages and the junior studies were in darkness, and D'Arcy had no fear of being seen.

He crept down the stairs to the Fourth Form passage. At the end of the passage was the deep shadowy recess which gave admittance to the punishment room. At the end of the recess was the heavy oaken door of the old room.

D'Arcy was in complete darkness now; but he knew the way well enough. It came eerily into his mind at that moment that that room was the haunted room of St. Jim's, and he shivered for a moment. But he did not hesitate. He opened the door and entered Nobody's Study.

There was the faintest glimmer of light from the single window. The room struck the junior with a chill; the walls and the floor were of solid blocks of stone—the massive stone that was used in the construction of the oldest part of St. Jim's.

D'Arcy closed the door behind him.

From the dark chimney he drew a coil of rope, which he had concealed there during the day. He uncoiled it, and stepped to the window. The window creaked as he pushed up the sash with a cautious hand.

The window opened upon an entry between two high buildings, into which little of the starlight penetrated. Below was a mass of darkness.

Eleven o'clock had chimed out from the tower.

Was Ferrers Locke there?

D'Arcy wondered.

Bernard Glyn had been home that day, and he had brought back to St. Jim's the story of the telegram from the cracksmen. All the fellows knew of the vigil that was being kept at Glyn House. It seemed to D'Arcy, as to the rest, that Ferrers Locke would certainly be watching with the rest. But the detective had bidden him keep the arrangement, whatever happened; and Arthur Augustus, whether he had abilities as a detective or not, was showing that at least he could obey orders.

He lowered the rope from the window. If the detective was there, he would hear the sound it made as it slithered down.

The rope reached the ground.

Arthur Augustus listened intently.

There was a slight pull on the rope.

The junior felt the pull, and he understood. Ferrers Locke was there. The watchers at Glyn House were watching without the detective.

There was no sound, no voice from below. There came another pull on the rope, to feel if it was secure. Arthur Augustus tied the end of it to the bar of the grate in the room. Then there came another pull, and the rope was taut.

"It's all right."

D'Arcy breathed into the darkness below the window.

There was no reply.

But he heard the faint sounds of a man climbing the rope.

The rope was knotted at intervals, and the climb was easy enough to an active man like Ferrers Locke.

The detective came up, hand over hand, and the dim form appeared in the gloom below the window.

"It's all clear, Mr. Locke!" whispered D'Arcy.

"Good!"

Ferrers Locke climbed in at the window.

He stood for a moment or two breathing deeply; then he closed the window.

Arthur Augustus waited.

The detective broke the silence. He spoke in so faint a whisper that the swell of St. Jim's had to strain his ears to listen.

"You did not wake anybody in leaving the dormitory, D'Arcy?"

"No, Mr. Locke."

"No one knows you are here?"

"Nobody."

"No one suspects?"

"No one, sir."

"Very good! Now, how many people are still up—do you know?"

"I think the Head is still in his study, sir," said D'Arcy. "Pewwaps Mr. Wailton is up. But nearly everybody is in bed."

"And Captain Mellish?"

"Oh, he went to bed early. His ankle was hurtin' him," said Arthur Augustus. "Dr. Short came ovah fwom Wylcombe to see him, and he recommended Captain Mellish to west it."

"Then he is in bed?"

"Yaas, sir."

"Where is his room?"

"He has the woom next to Mr. Linton's—you have slept in it yourself when you were stayin' here, Mr. Locke."

"Yes, I remember the room. Thank you for what you have done, D'Arcy; I am very much obliged to you."

"Not at all, sir," said Arthur Augustus modestly. "Is there anythin' else I can do?"

"Nothing, thanks! You had better go back to bed now."

Arthur Augustus felt a very keen sense of disappointment. He knew, of course, that Ferrers Locke had not entered the School House in this mysterious way for nothing. The detective had some plan in his mind—some work to do. And Arthur Augustus had hoped to be able to help in it.

"Can't I help you, Mr. Locke?" he asked.

The detective shook his head.

"Not now, D'Arcy. You have helped me, you know. But if you like to (Continued on the next page.)"

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remain awake, I might call you presently—possibly. But I should advise you to go to sleep; if there is an alarm, you will wake soon enough."

D'Arcy breathed hard.

"I'm not likely to go to sleep atfah that, sir," he said. "But I'll go back to the dormitory if you wish."

"Do so. And thank you for what you have done. One word. Has the Head been in his study all the evening?"

"Yaas, sir; I believe he has not left it."

"Good!"

Arthur Augustus moved silently away. He left the detective in the punishment-room, and returned silently to the Fourth Form dormitory. But he did not go to bed. He lay down in his clothes, and drew a blanket over him, fully intending to stay awake. But the hour was late, and Arthur Augustus was sleepy. Ere long his eyes had closed, and he was slumbering as soundly as any fellow in the Fourth Form dormitory.

Ferrers Locke remained some minutes in Nobody's Study. He felt in his pocket, as if to make sure that a weapon was there. Then he drew on a pair of soft rubber shoes. Without a sound, he quitted the room, and moved along the passage to the stairs.

It was a quarter past eleven. Everyone in the School House of St. Jim's was in bed, with the exception of the Head.

Ferrers Locke, moving as silently as a ghost, came to the end of the passage where the Head's study was situated. A light was still burning there, and there was a light under the study door.

Ferrers Locke drew back, and disappeared into a deep, shadowy alcove at the end of the passage.

Half-past eleven struck from the clock tower.

Then there was a movement in the Head's study. A few minutes later the light was turned out, and the door opened. Dr. Holmes came out of his study, locked the door carefully on the outside, and put the key in his pocket. He switched off the electric light in the passage, and walked away towards the stairs. He passed the alcove where the detective stood in the darkness, without a suspicion. His footsteps died away in the distance.

The School House was plunged into deep silence.

Ferrers Locke waited.

CHAPTER 15.

Capturing the Cracksman!

FERRERS LOCKE stood silent, hardly breathing, in the deep, dark alcove.

For what was the detective waiting?

It would have been hard to tell. If Mr. Glyn, who was keeping watch and ward at Glyn House, had known that the detective was in the School House at St. Jim's, he would have been amazed.

The millionaire supposed Ferrers Locke to be keeping watch in the grounds of Glyn House. No one but Arthur Augustus knew where the detective was. Why was he there?

The threatened visit of the cracksman was to be paid to Glyn House—not to the school. Did the detective suspect that, perhaps, the cunning criminal had become aware of the transfer of the diamonds? Even so, why was he waiting alone—unknown to Mr. Glyn—unknown to Captain Mellish—unknown

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to Dr. Holmes—in the dark alcove near the Head's study?

It would have been difficult to explain. But it was certain that the famous detective was waiting for something—for some happening that he expected.

Midnight!

The last stroke of midnight died away, leaving, as it seemed, a deeper silence behind it. No sound in the House—nothing but the scuttling of a rat round the wainscot and the rustle of the trees in the quad.

Dead silence!

Half-past twelve! The detective had hardly stirred. His ears were strained to listen.

A slight sound in the silence!

Ferrers Locke's eyes gleamed, and he bent his head a little, his eyes fixed upon the black darkness of the passage before him.

A sound again—a scarcely audible sound of a cautious footstep! Had not the detective been on the alert for the faintest sound, it would have escaped his keen ears. A black shadow passed within a couple of yards of him. Whoever the unknown was, he was accustomed to moving about with caution, evidently.

The sound died away—and then Ferrers Locke moved silently to the opening of the alcove and looked along the passage.

The unknown individual who had passed him in the darkness had stopped outside the door of the Head's study.

That door was locked. Faintly through the darkness came a sound.

Click!

Ferrers Locke smiled grimly.

The lock of the study door had been picked. He saw the door yield to the unknown, and then he heard it close softly.

The mystery man was in the Head's study.

What was he doing there?

Ferrers Locke thought that he knew. He did not move from the alcove. Whatever the unknown was doing in the study, he was not to effect it uninterrupted by the detective.

Ferrers Locke waited.

In his mind's eye, it seemed to him that he could see the unknown—he could see him stop before the safe in the study—he could see him pause there and work silently—hard, grimly—till the safe yielded to him and the iron door swung open.

Yet the detective did not stir.

He knew that the Head's safe was being cracked—he knew that the packet he had brought over from Glyn House and placed in the safe was being taken—and he did not move.

He waited.

One!

The deep boom sounded through the still air of the night.

It was one o'clock.

St. Jim's was plunged into grave-like stillness. Ferrers Locke listened. There was a faint sound from the direction of the Head's study. The door was opened, and it had closed again.

Click!

It was locked. In the morning it would look as it had looked over-night. Only an expert eye would be able to detect the fact that the lock had been picked.

Ferrers Locke drew a deep breath.

He felt in his pocket again, as if to make sure that something was there—and stood ready, where the alcove opened into the passage.

The unknown was returning!

But this time he could not pass without coming into contact with the detective.

Closer—closer!

He was moving as silently as before. The detective rather felt than heard his approach.

Closer—till a black shadow came opposite the alcove where the detective was hiding. Then Ferrers Locke sprang like a tiger.

The unknown, taken utterly by surprise, went heavily to the floor, with the detective on top of him, holding him with an iron grip.

There was a cry from the man as he fell—a cry in which surprise and terror were mingled.

Then he began to struggle.

But it was too late—he had met his master. Ferrers Locke had won. There was a click in the darkness—click!

Then a savage oath.

For the unseen man, as he struggled, found that his wrists were locked together, and he could not get at his weapon, and he could not escape.

He lay panting under the detective.

Ferrers Locke, gasping for breath, rose to his feet.

He had succeeded. He had taken his enemy by surprise, and he had handcuffed him before he could reach a weapon—or there might have been grim murder done there in the darkness.

And now the detective broke silence at last.

"Caught!" he gasped.

There was a gasping breath from the man on the floor.

"My heaven!" he muttered. "Caught! Trapped!"

"Yes, trapped!" said Ferrers Locke. "Caught at last—X!"

"My heavens!"

Ferrers Locke felt in his pocket and took out a police-whistle.

He blew it sharply.

The sharp, sudden blast rang through the silent house. Twice again the detective blew, filling every recess of the old School House with echoes. There was a cry from the handcuffed man. He had staggered up.

"Ferrers Locke—it is you?"

"Yes."

"Half the diamonds if you let me go." "Not for all the diamonds in South Africa, my friend!"

"All of them—and the picture—and everything!"

"You are wasting your breath."

There were sounds in the House now—opening doors, calling voices. The shrill blasts of the whistle had awakened every sleeper. Lights flashed on the stairs.

Ferrers Locke replaced the whistle and stepped to the switch of the electric light in the passage. He pressed the switch, and the passage was flooded with light.

The handcuffed man reeled back. He leaned against the wall, panting. He was a tall, powerfully built man. His face could not be seen—there was a crepe mask over it, and only the chin and the eyes gleaming through the openings in the crepe could be seen. The mask had been pulled a little aside as he fell, but it still hid the face of the cracksman.

Footsteps and voices came down the stairs, along the passage. Kildare, half-dressed, with a poker in his hand, was the first to reach the spot. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was a good second, and he was dressed. A crowd of seniors and juniors came behind, wild with excitement.

Dr. Holmes and Mr. Railton hurried down together.

"What is it?" asked the Head.

"What—Mr. Locke?"

"You here?" said Mr. Railton.

Ferrers Locke nodded.
 "Yes; and I have been fortunate enough to capture the cracksmen."
 "The cracksmen!"

"X!"
 "There he stands!"
 Every eye was bent upon the gasping man as he reeled against the wall of the passage. His wrists were dragging convulsively at the handcuffs, but the steel was too strong for him. His lips were set in a tight line, his eyes were burning.

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed the Head.
 "Is it really the cracksmen—X?"
 "Yes."

"Let us see his face!" exclaimed Mr. Railton. "This is a very remarkable thing, for Captain Mellish's impression of the cracksmen was that he was a short, thick-set man!"

Ferrers Locke laughed.
 "I have no doubt that Captain Mellish had his reasons for making that statement," he said.

"What! You do not imply—"
 "That the captain was not stating the facts, undoubtedly."

"Mr. Locke!"
 "You shall see the prisoner," said Mr. Locke. "I warn you to be prepared for a surprise."

The detective stretched out his hand and tore the mask from the handcuffed man.

The electric light shone upon the face that was revealed—a face white with shame and rage—a face that all knew well.

It was the face of Captain Mellish!

CHAPTER 16.

"X"!

"CAPTAIN MELLISH!"
 The name leaped to every lip.

"Captain Mellish!" said the Head dazedly. "Is this a—a joke? What does it mean, Ferrers Locke? What have you handcuffed Captain Mellish for?"

"Captain Mellish! Bai Jove!"
 "My hat!" gasped Tom Merry. "It

can't be! Captain Mellish—he can't—he can't be the cracksmen!"

Mellish of the Fourth was in the crowd. He turned a face stricken with terror and dismay upon the handcuffed man.

"Cecil!" he exclaimed. "Cecil, what does this mean?"

Captain Mellish gnawed his lip.

"Get me out of this, Mr. Locke," he said. "You have caught me—the game is up! Get me anywhere—out of this!"

Even the hard, unscrupulous heart of the cracksmen was moved by the horror and dismay in the faces round him. All these fellows had known him, admired him, liked him—he had been a hero in their eyes. And he was exposed before all of them as a common thief—as a guest who had robbed his host—as a traitor and robber. Even into the cracksmen's face there came a flush of shame.

He gave his cousin a haggard look.

"I'm sorry for you, Percy," he said. "But—but the fellows won't be hard on you for what I've done—it wasn't your fault!"

"Oh, good heavens!" groaned Mellish. "Then it's true!"

"Can't you see it is?"

"Bai Jove!"

"Take me away, Ferrers Locke!" said the cracksmen.

The detective nodded.

"Come!" he said.

"You may take the diamonds," said the captain bitterly. "The packet is in my breast-pocket."

The detective smiled slightly.

"You may keep that packet," he said.

"I did not trust seven thousand pounds' worth of diamonds to chance, Captain Mellish! The diamonds are in my own pocket—that is a dummy package!"

"What? Then you knew—"

"I knew!"

The captain bowed his head.

"Then I have been trapped?" he said.

"It was the only way."

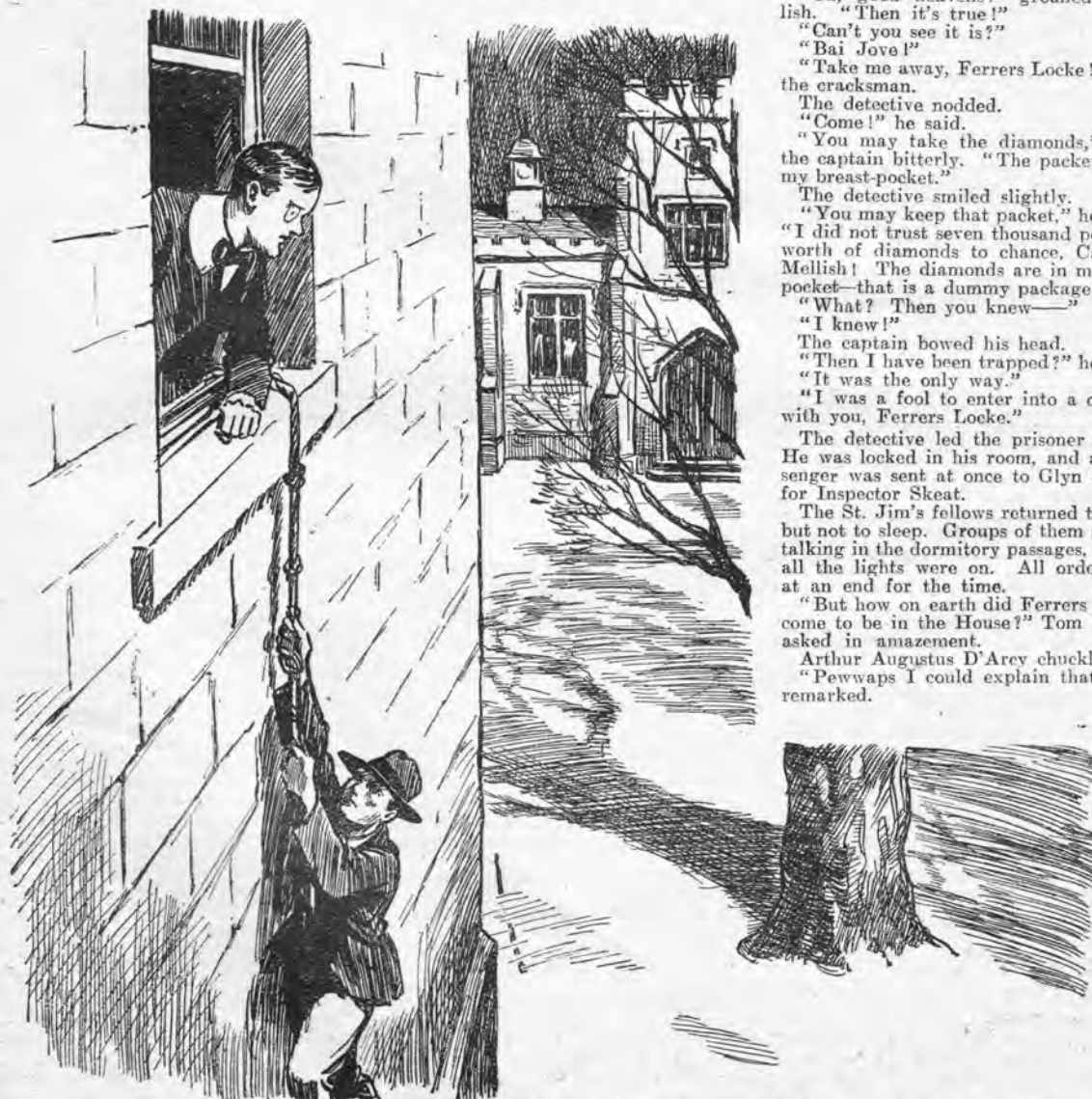
"I was a fool to enter into a contest with you, Ferrers Locke."

The detective led the prisoner away. He was locked in his room, and a messenger was sent at once to Glyn House for Inspector Skeat.

The St. Jim's fellows returned to bed, but not to sleep. Groups of them stayed, talking in the dormitory passages, where all the lights were on. All order was at an end for the time.

"But how on earth did Ferrers Locke come to be in the House?" Tom Merry asked in amazement.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy chuckled.
 "Pewwaps I could explain that!" he remarked.



The rope was knotted at intervals, and hand over hand Ferrers Locke climbed up it to the window of the punishment room. "It's all cleah, Mr. Locke!" whispered Arthur Augustus. "Good!" exclaimed the detective.

"You!" exclaimed Blake.
 "Yaas, wathah!"
 "What on earth do you know about it?" demanded Monty Lowther.
 "Ewewthim', deah boy!" replied the swell of St. Jim's serenely.
 "Then explain, you ass!" exclaimed Bernard Glyn. "Did you know Ferrers Locke was here?"
 "Yaas, wathah!"
 "How did you know?"
 "Because I let him into the House," said Arthur Augustus cheerfully.
 "There was a shout of astonishment.
 "You let him in?"
 "Rats!"

"If you say wats to me, deah boys, I shall wufuse to explain," said Arthur Augustus, with a great deal of dignity.
 "Then it's really true that you were helping Mr. Locke?" asked Tom Merry.
 "Yaas, wathah! It's not a secwet any longer, as the cracksmen is captured."
 "Why didn't you tell us?" demanded Blake indignantly.

Arthur Augustus shook his head.
 "An experienced detective knows how to keep a secwet," he said sagely.
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Weally, deah boys—"

Kildare came along the dormitory passage.

"Now then, you kids, back to bed," he said. "You can't stay up all night."
 And the juniors were herded off to their dormitories, to continue the excited discussion in bed.

Meanwhile, the Head and Mr. Railton had dressed and joined Ferrers Locke in the Head's study.

Ferrers Locke was waiting for the arrival of Inspector Skeat from Glyn House, to hand over the prisoner to him.

Dr. Holmes was looking very pale and troubled. The discovery of the rascality of Captain Mellish was a very great shock to him. And even now he did not understand. The captain had been caught in the very act, with the stolen packet in his breast, and the mask on his face. He had confessed his guilt, since it was useless to deny it, but how Ferrers Locke had discovered it was a mystery. Certainly no one else had had the slightest suspicion.

"Have you any objection to explaining how you brought this all about, Mr. Locke?" asked Mr. Railton.

"None at all, sir."

"We are all in a state of utter amazement. The man's guilt is clear; but how, in the name of all that is wonderful, did you discover it?"

"I am utterly amazed," said the Head.

"I knew it would be a great surprise to you," said Ferrers Locke. "It is not such a surprise to me. The police have long since guessed that X, when he was discovered, would turn out to be a man moving in a decent station of society. His knowledge of the places he robbed, his inside information concerning valuables, all pointed to that. The police knew it, and I knew it, and I should have expected the thief to turn out to be some man like the captain. Certainly, however, there was nothing in his ways or his manner to suggest a man living a double life."

"Nothing, certainly," said the Head. "He made the most agreeable impression upon us. He was very popular here."

Ferrers Locke nodded.

"It was his object to make himself so," he said. "The fact that he had a relation here gave him a footing in the school, but he could not have carried out his objects without making himself popular. Otherwise, you would not have asked him to remain on the watch

with you last Saturday night, and Kildare would not have asked him to play football. Undoubtedly there is an agreeable side to the captain's character. He is one of the most unscrupulous rascals I have ever encountered, but he is a very pleasant fellow in a social way. Criminals are not infrequently so, and I have not the slightest doubt that he enjoyed popularity and liked to be liked by people he met."

"But how—"
 "It was not an easy case," said Ferrers Locke. "But I had a clue from the start—a clue which had escaped the police."

"And that clue?"
 "The telephone message you received before the robbery."

The Head started.
 "But in what did the clue consist, Mr. Locke?"

"In this. The conclusion was that the cracksmen was a man with iron nerve and unlimited impudence, that it amused him to display his power by warning his victim before he robbed him in order to make a sensation by committing the robbery, in spite of the watch that was kept."

"Yes. Was that not the case?"
 Ferrers Locke smiled.

"There are criminals like that," he said. "Criminals suffer from 'swank,' like any other class of men. But X, I think, was a little too hard-headed for such boasting. Now, I did not believe that the telegrams and telephone messages were merely criminal swank. I believe they had an object."

"And that object?"
 "To cause a watch to be set over the article he wished to steal."

The Head started.
 "But surely that would make the robbery more difficult and dangerous?" he exclaimed.

"It would make it easier, because Captain Mellish, in each instance, contrived to be one of the watchers."

"Oh!" exclaimed the Head, with a deep breath. "I see it now!"

"I had thought over the matter a great deal," said Ferrers Locke. "I had formed that theory, even before I took up the case, that the insolent messages were sent because the keeping watch gave the cracksmen an opportunity to be on the spot unsuspected."

I came down here with Captain Mellish's name in my mind. Captain Mellish had been present at Lord Westwood's house when a watch was being kept, after an insolent telegram had been received from the cracksmen."

Captain Mellish was a guest in Mr. Glyn's house when the golden statuette was taken. Captain Mellish was one of the party that watched here. Now, if my theory was correct, it was evident that Captain Mellish must be the man, because the other members of the watching party here were above suspicion—yourself, Mr. Railton, Kildare, and Inspector Skeat. I do not mean to say that any person is above suspicion to a detective, but I mean that any member of the party, with the exception of Cecil Mellish, could not possibly have been the cracksmen."

"True!"

"At Glyn House to-day a telegram was received from X, threatening the robbery of Miss Glyn's diamond necklace to-night at eleven. Captain Mellish was to be one of the party staying up to watch—same old game. I suggested transferring the diamonds to your safe, here, Dr. Holmes, in order that they might not run risks. Captain Mellish and Mr. Glyn knew of the transfer. Captain Mellish expressed a fear that X, with his usual cunning,

might get wind of it. That was a feeler, to prepare our minds for the discovery we were to make on the morrow. Now, I knew that if my theory was correct Captain Mellish must devise some excuse for not keeping watch with us at Glyn House this night, as, obviously, he could not watch there and crack the safe at the same time."

"And he—"
 "He managed to get himself crocked in football practice here," said the detective with a smile.

"Ah, we never dreamed—" said Mr. Railton.

"That is why I borrowed your study this afternoon, sir," said Ferrers Locke with a smile. "I knew pretty accurately that Captain Mellish's ankle was as sound as ever, and I thought he might venture upon cracking the safe while the school was busy at lessons. The afternoon would have been almost as safe as the night. I remained in here all the time you were in the Sixth Form Room for that reason."

"Ah, I never guessed—"

"I should have done my work badly if you had guessed, sir."

"I suppose so," said the Head.

"But he made no attempt—"

"He probably knew that I was here. Having left it, he left it till the night, when he expected me to be keeping watch at Glyn House with Mr. Glyn and the rest, and so he had not the slightest doubt that I was safely out of the way."

"And you—"

"I introduced myself secretly into the House to watch. I had to allow him to go ahead with his work to obtain proof against him. There was no way of capturing him but by a trap. And so I trapped him. And I took him by surprise when he came out of your study, otherwise I might not be alive now to tell you what happened."

The Head shuddered.

"Yet—I do not see it all," he said.

"The other night, when we were watching here, who was it, then, that came and took the picture?"

Ferrers Locke laughed.

"No one came," he said.

"No one!" exclaimed Dr. Holmes.

"No one," said Ferrers Locke.

"From the precautions that were taken, sir, it was practically impossible for anyone to enter the House. You will remember that it was Captain Mellish who gave the alarm. Captain Mellish was the only one who saw the intruder; Captain Mellish did all the shooting. As a matter of fact, he had sent you the telephone message, with the intention of being one of the watching party here, otherwise he could not have been in the House at all, and would have had no opportunity of committing the robbery. He did not hear a noise in the passage—you remember no one else heard it."

"I remember."

"He affected to hear it, and when he went into the passage, he himself fired at the light and extinguished it. He smashed through the window with a chair, but no one leaped out. He shot the lamp out in this study, and he, in the darkness, whipped out a knife and cut the picture from the frame."

"And afterwards, when you were searching for the picture and the cracksmen, that picture was folded up, or rolled up and hidden on the person of the cracksmen, under your eyes—Captain Mellish himself!"

Dr. Holmes gasped.

"I understand now," he said. "And

(Continued on page 23.)

The BLACK HAND at St. Frank's!



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS.

The Unseen Watcher!

BARELY does it become known that an unknown Italian airman has been shot by a black man than the murderer himself is found murdered, with his left hand cut off. For the present the police are baffled, but eight boys of St. Frank's know more about the mystery. They were the first to discover the airman, who, with his dying breath, begged them to take a sealed package to "No. 1," at Gallows Mere. The juniors—Nipper & Co.—readily agreed, and solemnly promised not to say a word of their mission.

Learning that Gallows Mere, a sinister-looking old house, is the residence of Dr. Zangari, an astronomer, the juniors go there after dark to deliver the package. For safety's sake, Nipper enters the house by himself. Dr. Zangari appears to be a charming person, but Nipper senses an underlying menace in the man, and it is obvious that he is nervous of the junior knowing too much.

Nipper is returning to his chums, who are waiting outside the house, when a black man suddenly butts him into a mere. He is nearly drowned, for he finds that he is paralysed. His chums rescue him in the nick of time, however. Dr. Zangari comes on the scene and apologises profusely, making the excuse that it was his goat who butted Nipper. But the latter, who quickly recovers the use of his limbs again, knows differently. The juniors return to St. Frank's, realising that they are up against a dangerous man.

Meanwhile, Nelson Lee, the school-master-detective of St. Frank's, is returning by car from the scene of the second murder when a black figure suddenly launches itself down upon him from a tree overhanging the road!

Nelson Lee was not taken completely unawares by the mysterious black figure which dropped upon him from the overhanging trees as he drove underneath. He caught a fleeting glimpse of something in his rear mirror, something

dropping. In the next split second he pressed both feet on clutch and brake pedals.

Crash! The figure landed on Lee's head and shoulders with such force that the detective was crushed against the steering-wheel; yet he had had a fleeting instant of time to prepare himself for the shock, and his muscles were braced and he was lightning-like in his next movement.

He slewed sideways, ignoring the pain in his chest, and he was in time to see a hand, with a dagger clutched in the black fingers, descending towards his spine. Lee might not have had time to avoid the murderous blow, but, before he could attempt to dodge, the car, still moving, ran off the road into a ditch. It was enough to upset the assassin's aim and his weapon cleaved the air harmlessly.

An animal-like snarl of disappointment escaped the unknown's lips; his opportunity had gone, and in a moment he was struggling with his would-be victim.

Nelson Lee, as cool as ice, found himself grappling with a species of human eel. By the reflected light from the headlamps, Lee could see that his antagonist was a black man, naked except for a black cloth round his middle, and his body and limbs were smeared with grease. The detective found it impossible to obtain a hold, but with one sweeping drive he nearly broke the fellow's dagger arm, and the weapon went flying out of the black fingers.

"Now we're more even," said Lee coolly.

The attacker, deprived of his weapon, had had enough. With a wriggling twist he slithered out of Lee's grip, leaped from the car, and in one amazing bound was over the hedge. He was more like an animal than a human being. Lee's hand went swiftly to his gun as he quickly followed. He charged through the hedge, but only ran a few paces. For a fleeting second he caught

a glimpse of the black figure fleeing in the gloom, then it was swallowed up. The detective shrugged. The black man was as fleet as a hare, and in the darkness a chase would be hopeless.

"So these interesting people are after my blood now," mused Nelson Lee, as he replaced his gun and returned to the car. "Very intriguing!"

It startled him to realise that the black attacker had been waiting in ambush for him. How could the man have known that Nelson Lee would drive, alone, along this road? There could be only one explanation. The man, as invisible as the night itself, must have been lurking near the scene of the murder and had overheard Lee talking to Inspector Lennard. Then, running swiftly, and knowing the route the detective would take, he had gone in advance and had climbed into the trees so that he would be ready to make his murderous leap.

Lee guessed, however, that the black man was only an agent—a small cog in the machinery of a big organisation. And the people at the head of that organisation were getting nervous. They were afraid of an investigation. At the outset, then, they had attempted to eliminate Nelson Lee.

The attack convinced the school-master-detective that the centre of this extraordinary criminal activity was not many miles from St. Frank's, and in such a quiet countryside it should be easy to identify. Lee, as he set about the task of getting his car out of the ditch, was from that moment a hunter.

By putting the gears in reverse and racing the engine, he managed to extricate the car from the ditch. He had no fear of another attack during the remainder of the drive, but he remained very alert, nevertheless. He was resolved to return to that spot by daylight—to search for the dagger. It had flown in amongst a clump of dense brambles, and in the darkness he might have spent hours in futile search.

When he drove into the garage at St. THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,439.

Frank's he saw lights and the figures of several boys. A small car and a motorcycle had just come in; the boys were revealed clearly in the light of Lee's headlamps. His eyes became rather grim. At the first glance he saw that Nipper and Watson and Handforth were in a bedraggled condition and had evidently suffered a recent ducking.

"Oh, hallo, guv'nor!" said Nipper carelessly. "Didn't think you'd be back so soon. We're just going in. Come on, you chaps!"

"Rather!" said the others hurriedly. Nelson Lee jumped out of his car.

"Just a minute, boys," he said quietly. "Where have you been all this time? Why did you leave the scene of the murder so suddenly?"

"We—we thought you wouldn't need us any longer," said Nipper. "By the way, how's that gamekeeper chap? He was half-dead with fright—"

"Never mind the gamekeeper—and don't try to evade my questions, Nipper," interrupted Nelson Lee. "I can see you have only just got back, and you left me a good deal more than an hour ago. What have you been doing? How did three of you get so wet?"

"Oh, it was nothing, sir," said Nipper. "I happened to fall into some water, and Handy and Tommy pulled me out. That's all. Nothing to worry about. As soon as we've changed into dry dogs we'll be all right."

Lee regarded them gravely.

"You are concealing something from me—and that's very foolish of you," he said. "It's not a habit of yours, Nipper, to 'fall' into deep water, so that your chums must pull you out. I seem to remember, too, that you are a powerful swimmer. Where did this incident happen? And why did it happen?"

"Well, you see, sir—"

"It's like this, sir—"

"Absolutely, sir!"

"Begad! Just an accident, sir!"

Several of them had started speaking at once, and they all paused.

"Well?" asked Lee, in the silence which followed.

None of them saw a figure, black and mysterious, which lurked round the angle of the garage wall. But that figure was watching from the shadows—and listening.

"If it's all the same to you, guv'nor, we'd rather not say anything," explained Nipper frankly. "Honestly, we've been doing nothing wrong. Ordinarily, I'd tell you like a shot, but— Well, there's a reason."

"Is it necessary for me to remind you that there are some very dangerous people loose in the countryside?" asked Nelson Lee. "Two appalling murders have been committed since last night—and they are not ordinary murders. There are features in this case, indeed, which stamp it as a case of unique and terrible character."

"But we're not mixed up in it, guv'nor," protested Nipper.

"No? Do you expect me to believe that?" retorted Lee. "It is a significant fact that you are the boys who discovered the first murder. Extraordinarily enough, you were the first on the scene, with the exception of the young gamekeeper, of the second murder. Since then you have been doing something which you prefer to keep to yourselves. I am warning you to tell me everything you know."

They were all silent.

"We've done nothing we're ashamed of," said Nipper, at length. "We've done nothing against school rules—"

"I'm not talking about school rules,"

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interrupted Lee impatiently. "I have every reason to believe that your lives are in danger. Good heavens, Nipper, do you know that an attempt was made to murder me as I drove home? For a moment it was touch and go; and unfortunately I failed to capture my antagonist. I believe you boys know more of this mystery than I do myself—and it stands to reason, then, that you are in greater danger. Unless you tell me all you know, so that I may judge if you are in danger or not, I may find it necessary to advise your Housemaster to confine you to gates indefinitely."

"Oh, I say, sir!"

"By George, that's a bit thick, sir!"

"Ods injustice and tyranny!"

"You wouldn't do that, sir!"

They were all dismayed. The prospect of being "gated" for an indefinite period appalled them. Handforth, in particular, was bubbling with indignation. He had made up his mind to do a lot of private investigating, and how could he do that if he was forbidden to leave the school premises? But Nelson Lee was adamant. Within the precincts of St. Frank's, he knew, the boys would be out of danger.

He was puzzled by their obstinate silence. There was something behind it which disturbed him greatly. Before he answered their protests, however, he saw something which increased his curiosity. Nipper and his companions had instinctively shifted out of the light, but Nelson Lee countered this by switching on his powerful torch. The beam, as it happened, fell full upon Church; and there were some smears on Church's jacket which attracted Lee's attention on the instant.

They were greenish smears—of a peculiarly distinctive green!

"Come here, Church!" said Lee sharply.

"Eh?" ejaculated Church, jumping.

"Me, sir?"

"Yes. Stand forward."

Church, thinking he was going to be cross-examined, cast an appealing glance at Nipper, and the latter, with compressed lips, gave him a hard look. But Nelson Lee's questioning took a turn which Church was unprepared for. The detective was concentrating his torchlight on a section of the junior's jacket.

"These paint smears, Church," said Lee—"where did you get them?"

"Pup-paint smears, sir?" stammered Church. "Why, I didn't even know they were there."

At close quarters, under the strong light, Lee could see that the green paint was identical with that on the dead fingers of the murdered Ethiopian. Such a thing could not be mere coincidence.

"Where did this paint come from, Church?"

"I—I don't know, sir."

"Be careful what you say—"

"But I'm not telling lies, sir," protested Church. "I don't know."

"But you know, at least, if you have recently climbed a fence or a gate?" said the detective. "You don't climb dozens of fences and gates in the course of an evening, Church. Therefore, you must have an idea as to how this paint came to be on your jacket."

Church closed his mouth tightly. It was true he had had no knowledge of the paint smears; but he remembered scrambling through the hedge which divided the garden of Gallows Mere from the road. On the inner side of the hedge, almost concealed, a roughly constructed fence had hindered his movements.

"Well?" asked Lee grimly.

"I can't tell you, sir," said Church, with dogged obstinacy.

"What is the meaning of this obstinate disinclination to tell me the facts?" demanded the detective, looking from one to the other with growing exasperation. "I've warned you, Nipper, of the danger—and you have wits of your own to convince you that there is danger. There's been enough of this nonsense. Do you imagine I did not see your warning glance to Church a moment ago? Tell me where Church has been to get this paint on his clothing, and tell me how three of you got wet through."

Nipper looked straight into the detective's eyes, and his gaze was steady and resolute.

"I'm sorry, guv'nor," he said, "but we can't answer."

He turned without another word and walked away. The rest, glad enough to escape, followed. They expected Nelson Lee to call them back, but the detective did not do so. He stood silent and thoughtful.

"I don't like the look of it," he told himself. "Those boys know a great deal more than they will say, and they have either pledged themselves to silence, or have given their pledge to another. Probably the latter. And that's awkward."

Troubled, he put his car away and went indoors. And the shadowy figure behind the garage wall slipped like a ghost into the playing fields and went loping across country into the darkness with uncanny speed.

He kept mainly to the meadows and along the edges of fields. When, presently, he reached Gallows Mere, he made sure that the road was completely empty before venturing to cross it. He went to a small side door, admitted himself, and silently went along a stone-flagged passage. He tapped on a door. "Entrate," came the purring voice of Dr. Zangari.

The black figure entered, as invited. The room was comfortably furnished as a study, and there were soft, artistic lights. Dr. Zangari sat at a desk, and his eyes glowed as he nodded towards the door.

"Chrudere la porta, Luigi," he said. "Che cosa volete?"

"Aw, chief, cut out the Eye-talian!" said the visitor, closing the door as requested. "I'm as good an Eye-talian as you are, I guess, but I was born in Chicago, and my folks kinder neglected to teach me my own language. We'd get on better in English."

While speaking he removed his tightly fitting black headgear, revealing a sharp-featured, rat-like face, wet with perspiration. His body, legs and arms were enclosed in tight-fitting black, even to the hands.

"Molto bene, Luigi; we use the English," said Dr. Zangari. "It is because you understand the English that you are here. Well? You followed the wretched boys to their school?"

"I took to the fields—and I got there a minute after they made it," replied Luigi. "I was lucky, too. That Lee guy came along while I was noseying around, and I got an earful."

Dr. Zangari shrugged impatiently.

"You talk the English, and yet I do not understand," he said. "This earful—what is it?"

"Sorry, chief. I mean, I heard something that would interest you."

He approached the desk with a lithe, animal-like motion. Not for nothing had this man been known throughout the State of Illinois as "Lightning Luigi," on account of his amazing fleetness of foot. He was one of the most dangerous gunmen—one of the most

ruthless killers—the Chicago police had ever failed to capture. His "speciality" had been the robbing of banks after dark, and, unlike most gunmen, he had never used an automobile. He had always relied upon his fleetness of foot to carry him out of the danger zone. Not many years earlier, before taking to his career of crime, he had earned fame as one of America's greatest sprint racers.

He was an Italian, and his complete knowledge of the English language made him useful to Dr. Zangari.

He repeated all he had overheard, and Dr. Zangari listened attentively.

"As far as I can see, chief, you don't need to worry," concluded Luigi. "The kids are O.K. When that Lee guy questioned them, why, they just closed up like clams. What the kid told you was right; they gave their word they'd keep the secret, and they're doing it."

"Pah! They promise they would deliver the letter, and say nothing," said Dr. Zangari harshly. "So, they deliver the letter, yes. But for how long will they be silent. All this trouble because of the treachery of Ibb! Not a soul would have known; but now we are in the hands of these inquisitive, prying schoolboys! There is nobody more dangerous than an inquisitive boy, Luigi."

He rose to his feet and then brought a clenched fist down on the desk.

"Yes, they know too much," he added tensely. "They know of this house—and all must be silenced. There is too much at stake for us to take any chances."

He unlocked a drawer of the desk and removed from it a small parcel wrapped in newspaper. Unfolding it, he revealed the missing hand of the murdered Ethiopian.

"Risky to keep that around the house, chief," said Luigi, eyeing the grisly object with alarm.

"But for the knowledge of the schoolboys, there would be no danger," replied Dr. Zangari. "But, yes, we must be careful, mio amico."

He donned gloves, re-wrapped the dead hand, added an outer covering from a page of the local "Bannington Gazette," and tied it with string.

"You will get ready, Luigi," he said suddenly. "You will go to London and drop this package in the General Post Office."

"What about addressing it, chief?" asked Luigi. "These English police are mighty slick—"

"We address it—so!" interrupted Dr. Zangari, making two circles on the newspaper wrapping with a blue pencil. "The English police shall have no clue."

He had selected the column of the "Bannington Gazette" which dealt with the mysterious affair of the crashed aeroplane; and the words he had encircled with blue pencilling were "Police Station" and "Bannington."

"Geel! That's what I call smart, chief!" said Lightning Luigi, with admiration.

"So!" agreed Dr. Zangari, his eyes burning with a dangerous fire. "The black hand will cause a new sensation in Bannington to-morrow; the newspapers will make much of the incident. But only those who understand will read the warning."

Handforth & Co. Investigate!

ARNOLD MCCLURE of the St. Frank's Remove did not quite know why he opened his eyes as the school clock was solemnly chiming midnight; sleep had not come



As Handforth pushed some creepers aside, there was a sharp metallic sound. In the same instant the harmless looking creepers gripped Handforth and he was whisked off his feet and swept into the air!

to him as easily as usual, and, in fact, he had only dozed. But it was not the striking of the clock which had jerked him into full wakefulness; it was another sound. The creaking of a floor-board!

He opened his eyes, raised his head, and stared into the gloom of the little dormitory. The sound of steady breathing came from one of the other beds, but, for once, Handforth was not snoring. McClure's heart gave a jump. Something black and shadowy had passed between his bed and the window! Mac was of Scottish blood, and hard-headed; but after the mysterious events of the evening he was not quite his normal self, and he could not check the gasping intake of his breath.

He saw the shadowy figure turn, approach his bed, and bend over. He opened his mouth to yell, but before he could utter a sound, the bedclothes were pressed hard over his mouth.

"Fathead!" hissed a warning voice. "It's only me!"

McClure gulped, gurgled, sat up, and

dragged the bedclothes away from his mouth.

"Handy!" he breathed. "I—I thought—"

He paused.

"Thought I was some prowling nigger about to murder you in your bed, eh?" said Handforth, with a sniff. "That's the worst of you imaginative chaps. Who the dickens told you to wake up, anyhow? I thought I was going to slip out without disturbing either of you."

Only two of Handforth's words had any effect.

"Slip out?" repeated Mac, in sudden alarm.

"Don't shout, you lunatic!" growled Handforth. "You'll have Churchy awake in a minute—"

"I'm awake already," came Church's voice, from the adjoining bed. "What's going on?" he added sleepily. "Why can't you chaps let a fellow sleep?"

"Get up, Churchy—quick!" hissed McClure. "It's Handy! Grab him! He says he's going to slip out!"

Church had a little electric torch, and

he switched it on. The light revealed the fully clothed figure of Handforth.

"My only sainted aunt!" groaned Edward Oswald. "Any other night you fellows sleep like logs! But to-night, just because I want to get away on the quiet, you both wake up!"

McClure glanced at Church, gave a rapid nod towards Church's clothing, and commenced dressing. Church took the hint and did the same. They knew Handforth too well to hope that they could persuade him to go back to bed—and there was only one alternative.

"Do you mean to say you were thinking of sneaking off to Gallows Mere—alone?" asked Mac.

"Gallows Mere? Who said I was going there?" said Handforth, with an innocent tone, much too exaggerated.

"I—I was just going for a stroll."

"A stroll at midnight? How were you going to get out?"

"Well, I've got a rope at the window; I smuggled it up just before bedtime," replied Handforth. "Look here, you needn't think you can stop me!" he added fiercely. "I've made up my mind! This is about the only chance I shall have to do any investigating, and I'm not going to be dished out of it!"

"But it's dangerous, Handy," urged Church. "You heard what Mr. Lee said. It's sheer idiocy to go to Gallows Mere at this time of night—and alone. Supposing something happened to you?"

"Rats! I can look after myself!" replied Handforth. "When I do a spot of detective work, I do it thoroughly."

"Oh, rather!" said McClure, humouring him. "When you're on the track things begin to hum, eh? At the same time, what's the hurry? Why not leave it until daylight? We can all go over to-morrow—"

"To-morrow will be too late," interrupted Handforth dramatically.

"Too late! You think the birds will be flown by then?"

"No, I jolly well don't—but we shall be gated!" replied Handforth with conviction. "Don't you remember what Mr. Lee said? Unless we were perfectly frank with him he would gate the lot of us. Well, he's bound to question us again in the morning—and because of the oath we took, we shan't be able to tell him anything. So he'll gate us. That's why I've got to go over to Gallows Mere to-night. It's my only chance."

There was a certain amount of common sense in this argument; so, for once, Handforth's chums were unable to pick holes in it. They were fully expecting that Nelson Lee would confine them to gates on the morrow.

"Well, anyway, let's tell the others," said Church. "Let's have Nipper and Browne and the rest with us."

"Not likely! I'm going on this investigation alone," said Handforth, noticing that his two chums were now practically dressed. "You can jolly well get back into bed. No sense in a crowd of us going; we should only attract attention. It's a one-man job."

Without another word he ran to the window, which was already open, heaved himself over the sill, and slid down the rope which he had fixed into position before McClure had awakened. The action was so unexpected that Church and Mac were taken by surprise. It had been their intention to delay Handforth, so that one of them would have time to arouse Nipper and the others. They could, of course, have yelled, and this would have done the trick; but the rest of the Remove would

have been awakened, too, to say nothing of prefects and masters. And for Handforth to be found fully dressed at midnight would have been disastrous—resulting, possibly, in expulsion.

"Come on! He's dished us!" said Mac. "We can't awaken the others now. We've got to go after him."

"You bet!" panted Church.

Fortunately, they were both dressed, and, one after the other, they slithered down the rope and landed in West Square. Handforth was just disappearing. They overtook him after he had scrambled over the wall which divided the school premises from the playing fields.

"Go back!" commanded Handforth. "I told you not to come!"

"Never mind that—we're coming with you!" said Church firmly. "Dash it, the best detectives take assistants with them on their investigations!"

"H'm! That's true," admitted Handforth. "But, remember, you'll have to obey orders. I won't stand any nonsense, my sons! You'll agree to do exactly as I say, or I'll call the whole thing off!"

"Good egg!" said Church. "We refuse to take orders."

"Eh?"

"You can go and eat coke!"

"Look here—"

"So you'd better call the whole thing off," said Church. "Might as well, anyhow. Ugh! The wind blows cold, and it feels like rain. Let's get back to bed."

"So that's the game, is it?" asked Handforth grimly. "Well, I'm not going to call the whole thing off. And if you won't obey orders I'll punch your heads!"

He strode off resolutely; and his chums, giving it up as a bad job, followed.

Even across the fields it was a walk of at least four miles before they reached the neighbourhood of Gallows Mere. And the walk, by now, had warmed them all, and Church and McClure had lost the sleepy heaviness which had troubled them earlier on. Being healthy and adventurous youngsters, they caught some of Handforth's enthusiasm. They began to regard the scheme as a sound one. This was partly because Handforth had revealed a surprising amount of common sense during the walk.

"You needn't be afraid that I'm going to do anything rash," was his first astonishing statement. "Not me! All I'm planning to do to-night is to have a look at the back of Gallows Mere. It's a thing we can't do by daylight, and it's important that we should know the exact lie of the land."

"But why look at the back?" asked Church. "Think it'll be any different from the front?"

"My poor fathead, try to picture the front of the house!" replied Handforth. "There's the drive and the mere, and the house in the background. On either side of the house dense plantations. Not a gap anywhere. In other words, from the road you can't see anything that lies at the back of the house. You haven't forgotten what that postman said, have you?"

"Something about some outbuildings, wasn't it?"

"I can remember his exact words nearly," said Handforth. "You can't see anything from here, but they tell me he's built some rare queer outhouses at the back. What we're going to do, my sons, is to have a look at those queer outhouses."

"But there's nothing in that," protested McClure. "Everybody knows

that Dr. Zangari is an astronomer. I'll bet the postman was talking about Dr. Zangari's observatory."

"Observatory be blowed!" said Handforth. "That's just a blind. Dash it, we know that Zangari is a crook! I'm not swallowing that observatory bunkum!"

"By Jove! Mac, he's right!" said Church breathlessly. "But we shall have to be jolly careful!"

"Don't worry; we'll be careful," promised Handforth. "We won't try to break in, or anything silly like that. We'll just have a look."

He was so earnest that his chums realised they had misjudged him. For once, Handforth was not bent on a fool-hardy enterprise. And so they were soon as eager as he was. They no longer attempted to dissuade him from his purpose; rather, they entered into the spirit of the adventure with enthusiasm.

When they approached the mysterious house of Dr. Zangari they kept well away from the front. It was an easy matter to get through a gap in the hedge, some half-mile from Gallows Mere, and cautiously make their way across two or three fields and meadows. In this way they came nearer and nearer to the rear of the premises. A dense hedge barred their progress; they skirted along it for some distance, but discovered no gap. It was not long, however, before they knew the reason for this. At one time there had been many gaps in the bottom of the dense hedge; but every one of them had been blocked up with masses of dead brambles, securely staked and wired.

"Looks fishy—eh?" breathed Handforth, as he and his chums, on hands and knees, examined one of these spots. "No need for us to go all the way round. Ten to one every gap is blocked up in the same way. Zangari has made sure of keeping trespassers out. Why should a harmless astronomer be so jolly particular about gaps in his giddy hedge? I tell you, my sons, there's something going on behind these barriers which Zangari is anxious to keep under his hat."

"It looks rummy," agreed Mac. "At the same time, Handy, we're dished. We can't possibly get through this hedge—at least, not without making a lot of noise."

"Can't we?" replied Handforth aggressively. "Watch me!"

He went about it in a businesslike way. On hands and knees he burrowed the loose earth away at the bottom of the hedge at a spot where there was no blocked-up gap. He was, in fact, making a fresh gap. Having loosened the earth sufficiently, he pulled out his big Scout's knife, and it did not take him long to cut through a number of the tough bush "trunks" of which the hedge was composed. Forcing these aside, he made a respectable gap. But even then it was not possible to squirm through, for he discovered some tightly stretched barbed wire. That Scout's knife of his was a useful implement, and it carried a wire-cutter. Two or three minutes later the barbed wire was severed, and Handforth, with a whispered warning to his chums, inserted his head and shoulders and wriggled through. Church and McClure waited breathlessly.

"All serene!" came Handforth's voice at length. "There's a ditch on the other side, here, but it's as dry as a bone. Go easy after you've got through the gap."

They followed his advice. The ditch was full of dead nettles and weeds, but there were no other obstacles. When

at length they climbed out of the ditch and stood upright, they found themselves in a big enclosure, where there were numbers of untidy trees. Evidently the orchard of the old house. In the gloom of the night they could see the roof and chimneys of Gallows Mere in the distance. There were no lights showing in the windows; everything was dark and silent—except for the stiff breeze which whistled through the trees.

"Look!" whispered Handforth, pointing.

Between them and the house rose a strange-looking outbuilding. The lower part of it was squat and had a flat roof; but from this roof arose a quaint-looking tower, with a rounded dome at the top. Handforth felt rather disappointed. Obviously this was a small observatory. No fake about it; it was the real thing. But he refused to be discouraged.

"Come on!" he whispered. "We'll have a closer look. There are some rummaging sheds over in that direction, too. Go easy—don't talk, and mind how you tread."

He led the way under a tree which was festooned with dead creepers, and he pushed some of the creepers aside in order to have free passage.

Twang! It was a sharp, metallic sound, like the sudden releasing of a taut wire; in the same instant the harmless-looking creepers gripped Handforth in a vice-like clutch, and he was whisked off his feet and swept skywards.

In the Hands of the Enemy!

THE incident was so unexpected that Handforth had no idea what had happened. Church and McClure, just at his rear, saw their chum go hurtling upwards. He was carried fifteen feet into the air, and there he hung suspended, the strange creepers holding him relentlessly.

"What's happened?" gasped Handforth. "Oh, my goodness! Help, you chaps!"

"It's a trap," said McClure, with a sudden feeling of panic. "These horrible things are not creepers at all—but cunningly camouflaged steel cables. When you touched one of them, Handy, you released a spring, and—"

"We might be able to help him," interrupted Church. "If we shin up this tree we can reach him from that overhanging branch—the one he's suspended from."

They both swarmed up the big tree, and even as they did so they were half-ready for some other mysterious happening. McClure was first, but nothing hindered him. He made his way along the overhanging bough, and he found that he could just reach his suspended chum. He could see that Handforth was gripped by two things which looked like fragments of dead tree branches—but which were actually steel talons. By exerting all his strength, Mac managed to force the jaws of one of the grips open, and Handforth fell away. There was a rending tear, and he dropped with a thud to the ground. The second grip had not secured a full hold, and the sudden jerk had released him.

"Down you go, Churchy!" muttered McClure, his voice unsteady. "The sooner we're out of this place the better!"

They dropped to the ground, and as they landed each was seized and held. It was a tremendous shock, for until that second they had had no idea that the enemy had been disturbed.

They saw Handforth struggling in the

grip of a black shape. It was difficult to look upon his antagonist as a human being, for no face was visible—no hands were visible. Just blackness. When Church managed to squirm round and take a look at his own captor, he gulped with shock. For he, too, was held by a black shape.

"Sorry, you chaps!" gasped Handforth. "They've got us. All my fault. Shouldn't have come!"

"Venire!" said one of the black figures briefly. "Come!"

Handforth and his chums ceased to struggle, for struggling, they found, was dangerous. Their captors did not use gentle methods. Handforth knew that if he had not desisted his arm would have been broken.

No other word was spoken. The schoolboys thought they would be marched to the house, to be brought face to face with Dr. Zangari. But this was not the case. They were taken in the opposite direction—away from the house, away from the observatory. Under the trees of the neglected orchard they went, forced along by their captors. From the orchard they passed through a gateway to a paddock, on the farther side of which stood an old, thatched building, which looked like a deserted barn. There were no windows, and the plaster walls, once tarred, were flaking away in untidy patches, revealing, here and there, the inner laths.

Handforth's thoughts were bitter. Now that it was too late, he knew he had been foolhardy in coming here by night. He might have known there would be all sorts of traps and pitfalls for possible intruders. It was more than likely, he realised, that an alarm had been given in the house when he had tampered with the barbed wire in

the hedge. Otherwise, how could the enemy have arrived in the orchard so soon? Worst of all, he had dragged Church and McClure into the same misfortune. They were to be locked in this old barn for the night, perhaps, and then—

Handforth experienced a fresh shock; one which seemed to turn his blood cold. Nelson Lee had warned them in very plain language. The people of this murderous organisation were not ordinary crooks. They dealt drastically with people who interfered. Only that very evening an attempt had been made to murder Nipper! Handforth and his chums had left St. Frank's without telling a soul. Perhaps there had been a spy at St. Frank's—perhaps they had been watched all the time! In that case, the enemy knew that these three were the only ones on the job. If they were murdered, and thus silenced, how could the crime be brought home to Dr. Zangari or to anybody connected with Gallows Mere?

Handforth realised that he and his faithful chums were face to face with death. But he was not allowed to continue this alarming train of thought, for he had just been forced through a small door at the end of the barn, and what he saw in front of him surprised him so much that he forgot all else. Church and McClure were just at his rear.

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Handforth, his eyes opening very wide.

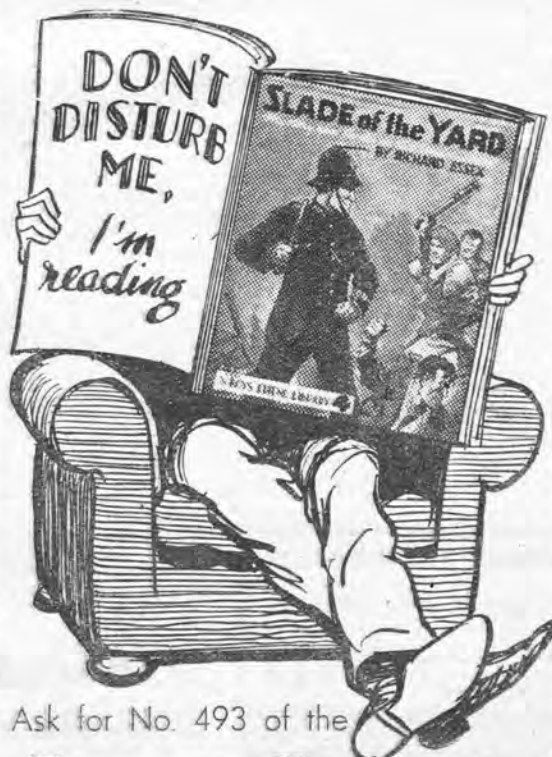
The door had closed, and at the same moment electric lights gleamed overhead. The air was stifling hot, and was filled with a pungent chemical odour. On the far side of the building a silent-running engine was in operation. A great flat leather belt went upwards to a wheel in the rafters, and all along

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the roof there was other machinery—wheels and belts—which could be driven by the same engine. There were benches and strange-looking machines.

On one side of that interior stood a furnace, and it was giving out a great heat. Over the furnace was a thing which looked like a crucible, filled almost to the brim with a bubbling reddish liquid which, extraordinarily enough, sent forth vapour of a greenish hue. Near by were great ladles. Something—and evidently something unlawful—was being manufactured here. An innocent-looking ramshackle old barn outside—an ultra modern workshop within!

The boys at last turned their eyes on their captors, and the black "shapes" were explained. For their captors were clothed from head to foot in tight-fitting black costumes, even to their heads, feet, and hands. There were no eyeholes, no mouth slits. The boys wondered how the men could see and breathe. But the explanation was simple enough—the eyeholes and mouth slits were there, but they were covered with black gauze, and thus rendered almost invisible. Only at very close quarters could they be seen.

The mystery men wasted no time. They took rope and tied it round the wrists of their captives. With their hands behind their backs, Handforth, Church, and McClure were thus made secure. Their ankles were bound in the same way. Then they were half-

dragged, half-carried, until they stood in a group almost in the centre of the place, their backs to a bench, with a whirring leather belt driving some machinery near at hand.

The three black figures retired to some distance, and spoke together in low voices. One of them then took his departure, and as he walked towards the little door to open it all the lights in the place went out, although no switch had been pressed. And as the door closed so the lights automatically came on again. Thus, no gleam had been allowed to pass out into the night.

"Well, they believe in taking precautions," said Handforth, trying to speak cheerfully. "We were right from the first, you chaps—there's something pretty rummy going on here! By George! I'll bet they're a gang of coiners!"

"Whatever they are, it doesn't make much difference to us," said McClure steadily. "We're finished!"

"No need to be so pessimistic—" "Do you think they would have brought us into this place if they ever meant to let us go again?" said Mac. "The very fact that they've allowed us to see so much proves that they mean to kill us out of hand."

"They wouldn't dare!" said Handforth, between his teeth. "It's—it's unthinkable—"

"We're their enemies, Handy," interrupted Church. "Mac's right—we've

made ourselves enemies. It's a pretty awful thought, but it looks to me as if we're done for!"

Handforth tried to speak, but he nearly choked. A sudden idea had come to him. As he had leaned back to ease his position he had accidentally touched the moving leather belt which took the driving power from the engine at the end of the barn to a big flywheel farther down. For some reason the machinery had not been stopped and the belt was revolving.

And in this desperate situation a plan had entered Handforth's head. One of the men had gone to the house—evidently to fetch Dr. Zangari. There were some minutes then of respite. The other two blackly clothed men were standing motionless some distance away, keeping their eyes on the boys.

But they could not see what Handforth was doing at this moment, for Handforth's tethered hands were behind his back. And, moving imperceptibly away from his chums, he was pressing his bound wrists against the edge of the revolving leather belt. He took no notice of the pain caused by the grazing of his skin, for he knew that the friction was tearing the strands of rope, and soon his hands would be free!

(If Handforth does get free, can he and his chums escape? See next week's GEM for further thrills in this great serial.)

MR. "X" UNMASKED!

(Continued from page 22.)

that was why he discovered the ivy loosened—he loosened it himself to give the impression that someone had escaped into the road."

"Exactly." "But I am still amazed!" said the Head. "What of the telephone message to-day when Captain Mellish was himself in this study?"

"Ah, that was a masterstroke!" said Ferrers Locke. "But the explanation was quite simple—the captain had a confederate, as many details in his robberies amply prove, and it was this confederate who rang you up while the captain was here to-day. You remember that the voice did not sound quite the same?"

"Yes, I remember now. I suppose the telephone call was really on your account. He knew that you were here, and instructed his confederate."

"Precisely." "There was the sound of a car in the quadrangle."

"Inspector Skeat!" said Ferrers Locke.

The inspector arrived in a state of almost dazed amazement. He could scarcely believe the message he had received, and he could scarcely believe his eyes when he gazed at Captain Mellish, alias X, with the handcuffs upon his wrists. His look of almost idiotic amazement brought a grim smile to the face of the cracksmen himself.

"Well, you've got me," said Captain Mellish. "Dr. Holmes, before I go, allow me to express my regret. I have treated you very badly, and I have no excuse to offer. I came home from India with expensive tastes and little to gratify them with; I had peculiar talents, and I made use of them—that is my history. But you shall have your picture back. It has not been disposed of, and it is uninjured. Forgive me if you can."

"I forgive you," said the Head sadly. "I am only sorry that such a man should have come to this. It is never too late to repent, Captain Mellish."

It was a nine days wonder at St. Jim's.

No one would ever have dreamed of

suspecting Captain Mellish, but now that the truth was known, Tom Merry & Co. remembered some little circumstances that had not engaged their attention before. They understood the meeting in the old barn on that rainy afternoon. It had probably been the plunder of a robbery that the captain was handing to Nat Perkins on that occasion; and doubtless, after the man had left the barn, Captain Mellish had met him again, unseen by the juniors, and given him the instructions for that surprising telephone call to St. Jim's.

Dr. Holmes recovered his picture, and Captain Mellish went to his proper punishment. And disgrace, too, fell upon one who had not earned it—Mellish of the Fourth.

But Mellish, somewhat to his surprise, found that Tom Merry & Co. stood by him, and their countenancing him enabled him to hold up his head.

Mellish hoped eagerly that the matter would be forgotten. But it was likely to be a long time before the St. Jim's fellows left off discussing, over and over again, the mystery of X.

(Next Wednesday: "WASHED OUT!" A sensational long yarn telling of the fun and excitement at St. Jim's when the school is flooded!)



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