THE BLACK STAR

Andrew H. Walpole

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THE BLACK STAR

A SCHOOL STORY FOR BOYS

By ANDREW H. WALPOLE

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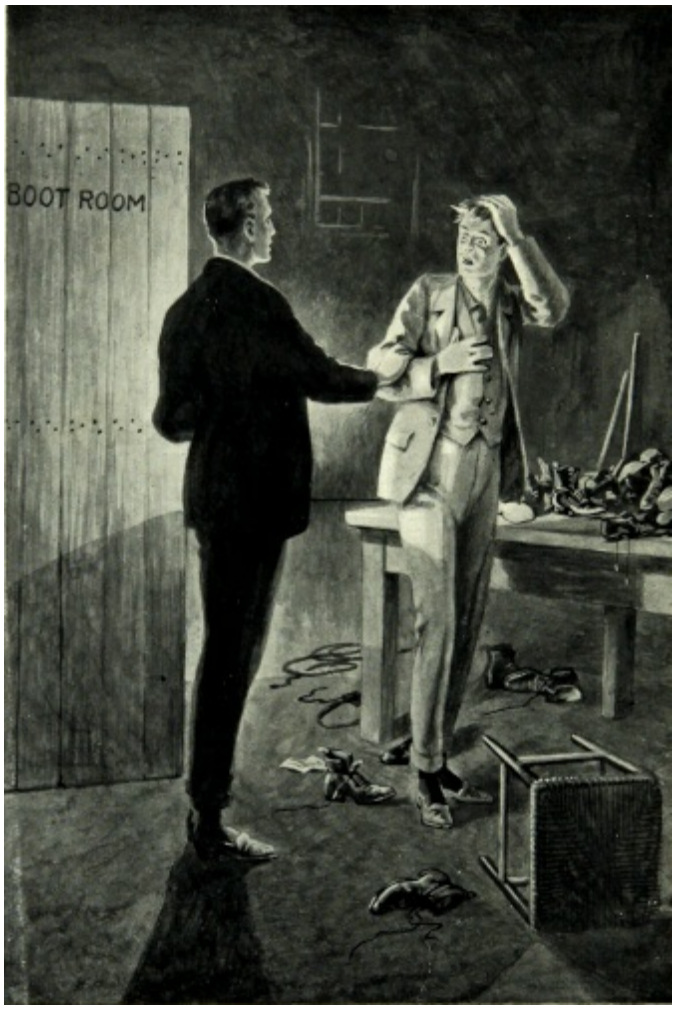

"I wasn't trying to get out!"

CHAPTER I

FARADAY'S BAG

Jack Symonds' regret at the holidays' ending had now definitely passed, and, strolling along the wide departure platform, he looked forward with considerable excitement to the reunion with his pals. The train was already crowded with his schoolfellows, who shouted at him many noisy greetings.

"Hullo, Jack!"

"Hullo, yourself! Where did you get that colour?"

"Surfing, old boy. Coming in here? No?"

"Waiting for Billy Faraday," said Jack, and continued his stroll. The Melbourne train had not yet arrived, and Billy consequently had not put in his appearance.

Jack Symonds stood with his back to one of the great station pillars, gazing upon the animated scene with interest. There were scores of the Deepwater College boys, in their blue-and-gold caps, drawn to the city from far and near, to catch the school train.

New juniors, unnaturally silent, were hustled into carriages under the care of Mr. Kemp, the mathematics master; old friends, all smiles and laughter, greeted one another boisterously. Porters bustled to and fro with immense stacks of luggage.

Jack's eye fell idly upon a tall, rather sinister-looking man standing with folded arms, pulling occasionally at a heavy cherrywood pipe. The man's eyes were very deep-set and dark; the mouth was thin-lipped. In all, hardly an attractive, although certainly a striking, personality.

As Jack's glance held the fellow casually for an instant, he was surprised to see him start and pale perceptibly.

"Funny," mused the boy, and turned his head to see what had

caused the change in the other's demeanour.

It was another man—and a man, in his own way, quite as remarkable as the first. He was short and very broad, with an immense neck; his nose was twisted permanently to the right, as if he had been struck at some time, a terrific blow in the face.

Jack smiled to himself. "Retired pug," he thought, noting that the man also carried a cauliflower ear—the left, and that his eyes were the narrow, quick eyes of the boxer.

"By Jove," exclaimed the tall man, as the two came together, with mutual expressions of surprise, "what brings you here, Tiger? Thought you were in America."

"Business," said the bent-nosed man, shortly. "Business, my dear old Doctor Daw—do they still call you that?"

"Hush," said the tall man, abruptly; "... that name...."

The rest was lost to Jack, for Doctor Daw spoke in a low whisper. The man he had called Tiger laughed in a short, sharp manner.

"Anyhow, whither away?" he asked.

"Deepwater—down the coast. You getting this train?"

The other nodded, and they both strolled in the direction of the smoking carriages. Jack gazed after them curiously. It was peculiar that the tall man should have said that he was going to Deepwater, for the only sign of civilization at Deepwater Bay was the College—and he could hardly be going there.

"Anyhow," said Jack out loud, "here's Billy, old Bill Faraday himself, and looking about as cheerful as an exhausted codfish."

He slapped the newcomer on the back; but Billy did not brighten appreciably. He was a tall, rather thin youth, with dark eyes and hair that emphasized the present pallor of his face.

"How are things, Jack?"

"Top-hole, old bean—but, I say, what's the matter?"

"Do I look bad? Fact is, old chap, I've been having a pretty rough

passage these hols. The pater died, and I'm feeling—"

"I say! I'm awfully sorry. That band on your arm—I didn't notice."

He gripped his pal's arm in silent sympathy. Billy understood. There were never many words between the two, but their understanding was perfect.

Billy's father had been an eminent naturalist. Beyond that, the boy knew very little of him. That he had made explorations into Central Australia, and had attained to considerable fame in scientific circles, Jack was also aware. Billy, however, was a quiet, reserved sort of chap, and no one ever found out much about him or his people. To most of the fellows at the school, indeed, he was a bit of a mystery.

"Don't let us get in with the crowd," said Billy, nodding to an uproariously-cheerful throng at the train windows. "Try this smoker."

Jack followed his chum into the smoking compartment, and they had barely stowed their bags in the rack when Symonds observed, that sitting opposite were the two men he knew as "Doctor Daw" and "Tiger."

There was nothing remarkable in that, but Jack noted with intense surprise that Tiger was staring at Billy with an air of recognition. Jack wondered. Did Billy, by any chance, happen to know him? It did not seem likely, and yet—

At that moment Billy turned from the rack and sat down beside his pal. Tiger instantly averted his gaze and looked out of the window. He did not look at Billy again, although Jack watched him closely; and, what was more surprising, he did not seem to know the tall man at his side—Doctor Daw, as he had called him. Jack was puzzled more and more by this singularity as the train left Sydney and passed down the coast, for it seemed as if the two men knew nothing whatever of each other, and were even deliberately ignoring each other. This, despite the fact that Jack had overheard their recognition on the station, and had seen

them enter the train in company.

Mystified as he was, the boy had for the present, other things to think of. Soon he was engrossed in conversation with Billy, and the train had halted at a little station some miles north of Deepwater, before anything occurred to disturb the even run of their journey.

The train had commenced to steam out of the station, when all at once the man Tiger, as if he had suddenly remembered something, leapt from his seat, grabbed a handbag from the rack, opened the door, and sprang out.

Jack, though taken aback by the suddenness of the move, was alert enough, mentally, to recall that the man had not had a bag at Sydney. The bag, therefore, was not his own; it was—

"Billy!" he yelled, "he's got your bag!"

Never was there a more magical transformation. Billy Faraday had been half dozing, moodily leaning back at the window, answering his chum mechanically. At Jack's words, he jumped as if a red-hot coal had been dropped down his collar, kicked open the door, and in a single bound gained the platform.

Jack was utterly amazed. Billy's action had been so quick, so marvellously prompt, that it had left him barely time to gasp. But then, Billy was always a fellow of impulse. Jack felt bound to follow his pal; Billy would be sure to get into some trouble or other.

And so Jack Symonds, prefect at Deepwater College, brilliant three-quarter and athlete, laughed his reckless laugh and followed suit.

He landed lightly, with perfect control of himself, despite the fact that the train had gathered speed, and was now moving quickly. He wheeled round, caught sight of the hurrying figure of Billy Faraday, and followed at a run.

The township into which Fate had thus strangely deposited the

chums was very much a one-horse affair, and a few scattered houses and rutted country roads represented the sketchiest outlines of civilization.

The little man had made a quick exit from the station, but obviously he had not counted on the rapid pursuit of Jack and Billy. His coup had been planned to allow the train to get well under way before the loss was discovered, and the chase began. He ran swiftly along the road, and for some minutes made very good going of it. But the bag was a heavy handicap. In pursuit were two lithe, springy youngsters, practised athletes and runners, and they were gaining upon him.

Just then Fate played another card. Around the corner came the sound of a car, and then the motor shot into view, with a professional-looking man, clad in white dust-coat, at the wheel. He was evidently the local doctor, but he was probably a most astonished man in the next few seconds.

For Tiger jumped upon the running-board and flung the handbag into the tonneau. At the same time he presented a wicked-looking little pistol at the doctor's head.

"Turn her," he commanded, peremptorily. "Quickly—or I'll fire."

The doctor was a sensible man, and the cold contact of the steel at his temple quenched any rash attempts at resistance that might have suggested themselves. Obediently he turned the car about.

"Full speed—hit her up," added the man on the running-board, curtly, and the doctor's unsteady hand reached for his levers.

Jack Symonds uttered a groan of despair and chagrin.

"Done us, Billy!" he panted, as the car, responsive to her driver, shot forward at increased speed. "It's no good—we're beaten."

And he slackened his run. But just when it seemed that the bag was finally lost, Billy Faraday sprang another surprise—a surprise even for Jack, who imagined he knew his chum so well.

It was the most amazing, most preposterous thing, and Jack was almost convinced that he was dreaming. Faraday plunged his hand into his hip-pocket, and produced an automatic revolver of the latest pattern!

Standing boldly in the middle of the road, he commenced firing at the doctor's back tyres. At the third shot there was an audible effect, and the car slowed up. Tiger turned about, furious and desperate, and for a moment Jack feared that the pistol would be directed upon them. But no; Tiger was not anxious to run the risk of murder, and seeing that there was no chance of his escaping with the handbag, there was nothing left now but to make good his own departure.

While the boys were yet some distance off, he leapt from the car and disappeared into the scrub at the roadside.

"Suffering cats!" exclaimed Jack, as he and Billy hurried up to the car. "Pinch me, someone—I'm dreaming. Or am I acting in a Wild West movie drama? Please tell me, Billy! And, dear old chap, what on earth are you doing with that gun?"

"Let you know afterwards," said Faraday coolly, replacing the amazing weapon in his hip-pocket.

CHAPTER II

DOCTOR DAW AGAIN

Unsatisfactory as was this postponement, Jack was destined to meet with a further disappointment. The doctor had been pacified and given an explanation of the affair, and Billy Faraday had declared that he did not want to be worried further with the man Tiger. He had recovered the bag, and he was willing to let the matter rest there. But when they got into a later train, Jack's curiosity prompted more questioning.

"By Jingo, Billy," he said, "that was a great sprint you made for the bag. Anyone would have thought you had a purse of sovereigns in it, or something."

Billy sniffed. "Well, perhaps hardly a purse of sovereigns, but something—"

"Well?" prompted Jack.

"I don't know whether I ought to tell you," said Billy, enigmatically. He ran his fingers through his thick, black hair, and stared out of the window.

"Hang it all," protested Jack, "you're starting this term in a jolly mysterious way! What's the giddy joke? What have you got up your sleeve—or in your bag?"

Billy shot a look of sharp inquiry at his friend.

"You're cute, Jack," was all he said. "You've dropped to it that there's something."

"Also that our friend Tiger is interested in your bag. Perhaps he knows what's in it."

"Knows—or guesses," said Billy, with a queer smile.

"But this is a bit too thick. And there's that revolver, too, just to make a real, nice, soupy mystery of it. I tell you, Billy, when you came out with the canister I—"

He opened his mouth, spread his hands, and indicated immense surprise.

"Perhaps I was a bit of a fool to bring it," Billy admitted. "But—it came in jolly handy!"

"Still, that doesn't account for it all. What is it, Billy? Can't you tell me?"

Billy shook his head slowly, uncertainly. "No, Jack—not yet. I promised I'd tell you, but—I won't. I don't want to alarm you without need, see? I may be wrong about this—all this business. The bag, the revolver, all our little adventure may be quite meaningless, and I don't want to be dragging you after any mares' nests—not yet awhile. But if anything happens—"

"Don't mind me," said Jack, weakly. "The Sphinx is a sort of uncle of mine. I'm good at riddles! No more explanations, Billy. I'm in a knot with them already. Don't overload my young mind any further." And he laughed, quite falling in with his pal's present reluctance to divulge, and dismissed the subject.

All the same, he realized that there was indeed something behind Billy's reticence. The two were good friends; anything in the ordinary way they shared as a matter of course. But this—this was something important, something serious. Strangely enough, he had an odd feeling that this term was going to be a remarkable one—and certainly it was opening well. Billy had hinted at further events. What was he to expect? Truly there might be adventures in the near future.

Or yet, on the other hand, perhaps the whole affair was nothing at all—a mere mare's nest, as Billy had said. Either way, there was nothing to be gained by thinking any more about it.

When, finally, they reached the College, there were lots of things to be done, and they spent the afternoon in the study that they shared with two other fellows. Last term the two study-mates had left the College, and consequently there would be two new boys this term.

"Nobody here," said Billy Faraday, opening the door and glancing round the room. "Place looks bare, doesn't it, with all their things gone?"

"Wonder who's going to step into their shoes?" queried Jack thoughtfully.

"No idea." Billy was absorbed in unlocking his cupboard, and Jack, glancing over his shoulder, saw the light fall on the blue barrel of that mysterious revolver.

"Leaving it there, Billy?"

Billy nodded. "For the present. I'm not one of those asses that'd go round swanking with a thing like this. Don't think I brought it for that, old chap."

"I don't, Billy!"

Billy looked at his friend, and seemed on the verge of giving away at last the real reason why he had brought the revolver. But at that moment there came a knock at the door, and Billy quickly thrust a small black cash-box into the far corner of the cupboard, and shut it hurriedly.

"Come in," said Jack, sitting on the table swinging his legs; and there promptly entered a most amazing apparition.

A tall, very thin youth, with horn-rimmed spectacles, stood at the door. He carried stacks of luggage, baskets, odd bundles in paper, a portmanteau or two, which, with an air of great relief, he proceeded to distribute impartially over the floor of the study.

"What—what—?" gasped Billy.

"Ah, comrade!" demanded the new arrival, "how are you?" He fingered a red tie of extraordinary brilliance of design. "I trust you have spent your holidays in quiet enjoyment, and have returned flowing over with vigour to—" At this stage a cushion struck him in the face, and he fell gracefully backwards over a suit-case.

He arose with the expression of a resigned martyr, and dusted

his trousers. "Comrades both," he declared, "that was unkind of you—really it was. However, perhaps I was unduly long in coming to the point. I should have announced," he beamed broadly, "that hence-forward I am to be your study-mate."

"Our what?" demanded Jack, incredulously.

"Why, your study-mate, comrade. Come, come, where are your tongues? What, no congratulations? Aren't you overjoyed to have me? Think how well we are sure to get on together—think of the evenings of happy and profitable study, self-help, also co-operation, everything pleasant—No, I implore you, no more cushions."

"Well, cut out the oratory," warned Jack, lowering the missile. "Do you think we are a bally political meeting? Aren't you Patch, though—weren't you in Cooper's House last term?"

"That is my poor name." The newcomer executed a profound bow. "Septimus Patch, socialist, inventor, friend of the downtrodden and oppressed—"

"Cheese it," said Billy. "Why on earth did they move you to this house?"

"Ah, why?" said Patch blandly, gazing at the ceiling.

"And why, on top of that, did they pick upon this study?"

"Who knows?" The inventor gazed dreamily out of the window. "Fate, perhaps."

"And, anyway," Symonds took up the tale, "what have you got in all these traps?"

"My chemicals—my models of invention—my books—my goods generally," said Septimus Patch gloomily.

Horror deepened upon the faces of the two chums.

"Do you mean to say—?" said Billy.

"—Rotten chemicals?" finished Jack.

"In this study?" Billy could scarcely believe it.

"Why not?" asked Patch, with his conciliatory smile, polishing his enormous spectacles. "Is it not comforting to be companioned by a man of science—I will not say genius? When time drags, you may find infinite enjoyment in mixing up things for me, and solace in wandering through the dark forest of science under my guidance."

"Oh, help!" moaned Jack.

"Moses!" gasped Billy.

"'Dark forest of science,'" quoted Jack, throwing himself weakly into Billy's easy chair. "This place is going to be a little paradise, isn't it just?"

"More like a ward in a lunatic asylum," corrected Billy with bitterness.

"You are unduly severe on yourselves," Patch assured them blandly. He was unpacking an enormous number of things, and distributing them pell-mell over the floor. Jack and Billy could only sit and stare, goggle-eyed, at the spreading disorder on their one and only carpet.

"Pictures, too, comrades," said Septimus enthusiastically, bringing to light a huge bundle of frames wrapped in brown paper. He exhibited the top one proudly.

"Good grief! What on earth's that?" demanded Jack in astonishment. "Side elevation of a poached egg, or—"

"That," said the owner, indignantly, dusting it with his handkerchief, "is a diagram of the anatomy of the common flea. Much magnified, of course. Rather good, don't you think? Where shall I put it?"

"In the fireplace," suggested Billy, cruelly. "Do you think we want to be gazing all day at that horror? And what's this?"

"Butterflies."

"Not so bad. Put them up there over that shelf."

Septimus hoisted the huge frame into place, and got down, beaming broadly.

"Comrade," he said, "we are getting on quite well. Only one or two more; here's a portrait of Sir Isaac Newton."

"It's a good frame," commented Jack. "I've a photo of Trumper that'd just fit in. I'll dig it out. Here, we'll put it up high for the present." So saying he balanced a big dictionary on a chair, and climbed up with Sir Isaac Newton in his hands.

"Hope I can reach," he said, while Septimus Patch and Billy Faraday watched him anxiously. It did not seem as if he could reach. He raised himself cautiously on tiptoe, but the frame was heavy and the risk great. The dictionary tottered.

"Look out, Jack—you'll be over," said Billy. "Whoa!" He made a frantic grab at his pal, but missed by about a foot.

Jack came down with a tremendous crash, scattering a pile of Patch's bottles right and left. There was a tinkle of broken glass and the sound of a mild explosion; through the ensuing cloud of smoke Septimus could be seen seated on the floor, vainly endeavouring to release his head from the photograph frame that Jack had let fall.

It was fortunate that Sir Isaac had had no glass in front of him, or the results might have been serious. As it was, he was hopelessly punctured now; the frame hung about Patch's neck like a grotesque collar.

"Ha, ha, ha!" The sight was so absurd that Billy could not check a laugh at the comicality of it all, but his laugh ended abruptly. At that moment the door opened, and a stern voice spoke.

"What is the meaning of this?"

Billy looked up in surprise. The voice was a strange one, but it carried a ring of authority.

"Just a slight accident, comrade," replied Patch. "We were hanging this picture, and regrettably it fell. Ah, off it comes at

last! But I am afraid Sir Isaac is disfigured," he added sadly. "Yes, he does look rather cut up."

"I am your new history master," said the other, interrupting him. His rasping voice made Jack swing round with a gasp of surprise. "Daw is my name."

"Doctor Daw!" murmured Jack. The words were literally jerked out of him by surprise. He regretted them instantly, but it was too late. The amazing fact was that the man now standing in the doorway was actually the man who had travelled with them in the train—the fellow who had been so familiar with the bag-snatching Tiger on the station, and who had completely ignored him afterwards. Jack recalled now that the man had said that he was going to Deepwater. It was a somewhat startling coincidence, and it was no wonder that he had been impelled to whisper the name that Tiger had given the new history master.

Slight as that whisper had been, it had not escaped the ears of Doctor Daw, who gave a violent start and took a step forward. His mouth opened, as if he were about to say something, but no words followed. His eyes met Jack's in a troubled, questioning stare. He seemed to say, "How much do you know? What have you got hold of?" And then, on the verge of an outburst, he recovered himself.

"I have a new study-mate for you," said he quietly, although his eyes still glittered angrily. "A new boy to the college, and from New Zealand, who will be in your form. Fane is his name—but no doubt he will introduce himself."

With that he ushered in the boy Fane, and let himself out. Only, before he closed the door, he eyed Jack narrowly—and his glance seemed to convey a threat, a warning. There was no mistaking the malignant nature of the look. Jack felt chilled, he knew not why. Then, the door closed, and Mr. Daw was gone.

"Cheerful-looking chap," commented Billy. "How are you, Fane?"

"Well, thanks," said Fane, who was a short and rather nervous-

looking boy. He came forward and shook hands all round. "Hope we get on well together."

"My sentiments exactly, comrade," said Septimus Patch. "I'm new myself, but I'll sort of father you. What are your interests? Know anything about Science? Or Socialism?"

Fane smiled nervously. "Neither, I'm afraid. Where can I put my things?"

"Here you are," said Billy. "What shall we call you?"

"My first name's Swinnerton," he admitted. "Silly name, of course —call me Swin, if you like."

And while Billy and Patch were attempting to make the newcomer feel at home, Jack was looking idly out of the window. He did not know the connection between Doctor Daw and Tiger, but he felt vaguely that he had made an enemy.

CHAPTER III

THE BULLY-KILLER

Salmon's House, to which division of Deepwater College Jack Symonds and his study-mates belonged, was famous for its exclusive set of youngsters—a band who had clubbed together for their own advancement, and the confusion of everybody else, and had named themselves the Crees. It amounted in the long run to a sort of secret society; it had its president, but no one outside its numbers knew who he was. It was never known for certain who the members were, either; and that gave a delightful uncertainty to everything connected with it.

It so happened that both Jack and his friend Billy Faraday were members. With the others, they were notified that on a certain afternoon a special meeting would be held. They knew well enough the object of the meeting. Dick Richard, the founder of the Crees, and the society's first president, had left at the end of the previous term, and there would be some hot contention for his position.

"Do you mean to go for the job, Jack?" asked Billy, as they strolled across the fields to the appointed spot—a secluded position in the rear of a waste of scrub-land.

"Why not? It'd give me a bit of a pull, and there's no end of fun to be got out of it," returned Jack, in his practical manner. "I don't see anyone to give me much of a run for it."

"Except Cummles."

"Except Cummy, of course. And he can't do anything but bluster and kick up a dickens of a row. What sort of a time would we have under him?"

"No sort of a time at all. The man's got no initiative."

"No—but any amount of push and brute strength!" Jack laughed.

When they arrived at Three Skull Hollow—an entirely fanciful name bestowed upon it by the Crees—they discovered that most of the Crees were already assembled, and the loud voice of Les Cummles was dominating the assembly.

"Of course," he was saying, "there's absolutely no question—I'm putting in for the job, and if anyone else thinks he'd like it, let him say so." He stared round with a somewhat truculent expression. "Here's Symonds and Faraday—they'll bear me out in this, I know."

It was a direct challenge.

"Bear you out in what?" asked Symonds quietly.

"Why, my filling Dick's place as president—you're agreeable, aren't you?"

"I don't know so much about that, I was thinking of taking it over myself."

"Hear, hear!" said an invisible Cree, behind Cummy's back. He wheeled round and frowned upon the party.

"Now, what are the laws of electing the president?" he asked.

"Nominations first, and then a show of hands—that's all we've got to do. It's quite simple." He took a seat and addressed the assembled Crees. "I'm in the chair—any nominations for Chief Cree?"

"I propose Les Cummles," said one of the bully's toadies, with clockwork readiness.

"Good—seconded? Thank you. Now, anybody else?"

He looked round fiercely, as if defying anybody else to speak. But, finally, it was shown that he could not carry off the bluff. Billy Faraday spoke in his quiet voice.

"Jack Symonds—my nomination," he said.

"I second that," another Cree spoke quickly, and there was a murmur of approval.

"Anybody else?" Cummles's tone was distinctly nasty by now, and he glared at Bill savagely. "No—well, we'll have a show of hands."

This time he frowned round on the Crees with real anger. He was not a bad general, and he thought that by this show of force he would intimidate any wavering members, and make them feel that it was perhaps better to vote for him and feel safe.

The upraised hands for Cummles were counted slowly; there were twenty-one. And then the Symonds vote was counted.

"Twenty-one also," said the Cree deputed to tell the votes.

"Dead heat!"

"Wait a moment," said Cummles. "As chairman, I have right to a casting vote, and I—"

"Rot—it's a swindle!"

"All right, Moore—I'll settle with you afterwards," said Cummles wickedly. "I've every right to settle—"

"You're a big bluff!"

Feeling was certainly running very high. Lots of the fellows who had timidly voted for Cummles now regretted their action. Moore was an excitable little fellow, and Cummles's threats had roused him to defiance.

"Enough said. I—"

"Yah! Who do we want?"

"Symonds!" There was no mistaking the volume of the shout.

"Casting vote—" roared Cummles.

"Bluffer! Another counting! Another counting!"

"—chairman's right—"

"It's a swindle!"

"—therefore declare that—"

"Symonds, Chief Cree!"

"—I am elected to the position—"

A tremendous hullaboloo arose from the Cree meeting, and about a dozen free fights between heated partisans were taking place. Upright on a raised spot Cummles was endeavouring to state that, giving his casting vote to himself, he was elected Chief Cree. Jack and Billy were more like amused spectators, than anything else. The furious Crees were not anxious to be ruled by the heavy hand of Cummles, but many sought favour in his eyes by endeavouring to quell the insurgents.

There is no saying what might not have followed, but for the fact that a strange diversion had been preparing itself, and now burst upon the meeting of the Crees with no sort of warning. There was not even any preliminary noise; but even if there had been, the uproar in the meeting would have sufficed to drown it. Something darkened the sky with startling abruptness; then, there was an immense crackling and crashing in the scrub near by.

"Look out—coming over!" yelled a voice.

Only one or two heard the cry; Cummles, who was raging like a bull, certainly did not. So that, when some weighty object smashed into his back and hurled him to the ground with violence, he was taken completely by surprise. He was precipitated into the waistcoats of a couple of fellow-Crees who were seated upon the ground.

"Here—help!" shouted the assaulted ones, taking his action for one of personal violence. "What have we—"

"Ouch!" bellowed Cummles, struggling in vain to free himself from the tangle of arms and legs into which he had been so rudely thrown.

"Ha, ha, ha!" When the amazed Crees had collected their wits sufficiently to be able to take in what was happening, the humour of the situation was apparent. The object that had

collided with Cummles tugged and clung on to a rope—and at the other end of the rope was an immense kite-like affair that flapped and ducked in the air twenty feet above them. The plight of the astounded Cummles and the dangling and racing legs was farcical in the extreme.

"Help!" came the cry of the aviator. "Grab the rope—she's getting away. Catch hold, quickly!"

Several of the Crees flung themselves on the rope, and, hauling manfully, brought the big kite to the ground. It was tugging with the strength of several bulls, and it required all their strength to bring it to earth. It was quite a big affair, of weird construction, something along the lines of a box-kite, and Septimus Patch himself was seated in a light saddle in the centre of it.

"Patch!" exclaimed Jack Symonds in astonishment.

"That same, comrade! I fear I startled you somewhat—eh? But the machine would not behave."

His assistant, the boy who had been swinging on the rope in an endeavour to hold the kite down was discovered to be Fane, the shy New Zealander. Evidently he and Patch had struck up a friendship.

"Yes," he said, mopping his forehead, "I had my work cut out to keep her down—I've been dragged over a mile and a half of scrub. The blessed thing rises quicker than the price of eggs. Old Septimus nearly had a wetting—didn't you, Patchie, old boy?"

"It looked like it for quite a while," admitted the inventor modestly. "I must allow that I'd forgotten to provide for coming down again, once I'd got up. In the future, I'll have to have about twenty juniors hanging on to the rope. Or I might remedy that before the next ascent."

The Crees had gathered around the big kite, examining it with evident curiosity.

"I say," said one of them, "she must be pretty strong to lift you up

like that."

"Well, she's not badly designed, comrade," said Patch, with lordly condescension. "This is Flying Fox III. Numbers I and II, I regret to state, would not fly. They absolutely refused. Why, I don't know. But they—"

He found himself gripped hard by the shoulder, and turned to front the crimson face of Cummles, who, angered as he had been by the opposition to his presidency, had been doubly enraged by his ignominious fall. His dignity had been injured, and as he had a certain prestige among his fellows, he wanted redress.

"Look here," he said, shaking Patch's shoulder till the inventor's horn-rimmed spectacles shivered on his nose. "Look here, what the dickens do you mean by it?"

"Mean by what?"

"Why, barging into my back like that, and sending me flying? It was your wretched kite thingummy, and like your cheek!"

"My dear fellow," said Patch.

"Dear fellow, nothing! It's an apology I want, you glass-eyed goat! Down on your knees, too, and repeat what I say."

"I'm sure it wouldn't be worth repeating," said Patch coldly. "Anyway, there was no need to flare up like that over a simple accident. Reflect, comrade, on the injustice you are doing to yourself, and—"

"If you don't apologize the way I say," said Cummles inflexibly, "then you're going to be put through it."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning you'll get bashed," said Cummles, who was obviously in a dangerous mood. His dignity had been injured, and he meant to show the Crees just how he could impose his will on others. It should make an impression, he thought. "If you think you can play your silly fool tricks on me, then you're making the mistake of your young life! See? Now, what about that apology?"

"No," murmured Patch, with a worried air. He had gone very white, for the idea of a physical encounter hardly appealed to him. "You mean you're going to fight me?"

"I don't fight fools like you," said Cummles trenchantly, still bent on showing the Crees what he was made of. "I don't fight them—I just whip them. Apologize?"

For answer, Patch gave one look round on the circle of still, watching faces, and then sighed. Then, with a deliberate movement, he began to take off his coat. A gasp went up, for Cummles was a big, bull-necked sort of fellow, and a regular terror in a fight. Poor Patch, it seemed, was in for a very torrid time; but the spectators were forced to admire his courage. What sort of a chance would he have, though, with a smashing hitter like Cummles?

It was quite unfair, and Jack Symonds for one was dead against it. Cummles would have to learn to control his temper; it was too bad that Patch should get whipped for a pure accident. Just as Jack was on the point of protesting—just as, indeed, he had stepped forward to check the fight preparations, a new voice cut in before he could utter a word.

"Wait a moment." It was Fane, the quiet New Zealander, and he looked shyer than ever as he introduced himself, blushing, into the circle.

"Well?" Cummles demanded, with the truculence of a dog interrupted in worrying a bone.

"Patch mustn't fight—can't fight," said Fane, still in that uneasy, self-conscious manner. "You see—it wasn't his fault, really. I was the one that actually barged into you, and so—"

"Are you ready to take his place then?" demanded Cummles, with brutal directness.

"If necessary."

The Crees were even more disturbed at this, for if Patch was a

hopeless opponent for the bully, Fane was even more so. He was half a head shorter than the big fellow, and his appearance was altogether quiet and inoffensive. He removed his coat and, with the air of a veteran, rolled up his sleeves.

"I'll see if I can't justify my title of bully-killer," he said, without any appearance of boasting. "Will one of you give me a knee?"

"But look here—" said Jack.

"Where?"

"It's all absurd. You don't know what you're up against. Cummles here is a fighter—"

"You wouldn't have me back down, would you?"

"No; but—"

"The fight will go on," said Fane simply. "I know how to take care of myself. Cummles was anxious to pick a quarrel, and as Patch can't fight for sour apples—"

Patch was standing by, with a little criss-cross mark of puzzlement showing between his eyes.

"I ought really—" he began.

The sardonic voice of the bully interrupted him. "When you fellows have finished gassing to save time," he said, "I'll be ready to thrash you. Both, if you like—it doesn't matter to me a bit. One after the other—who's first? But hurry up."

He had not troubled to remove his coat, anticipating an easy time with Patch; but now he did so, and rolled up his sleeves, moved by something in the bearing of the quiet boy before him.

Without any further argument, without any courtesies of combat, he and Fane flew at each other, and there was the sound of a collision and heavy blows. For a moment the spectators looked on with dismay, fearing that Fane would pay dearly for his temerity and get hopelessly smashed about. But in a minute or two their apprehension changed to excitement, and they set

up a volley of cheering.

Fane was a dark horse—everybody recognized that at a glance. He quite obviously knew more than a little about boxing—and fighting, too. He had a good stance, and hit long and straight, and with both hands, like a professional.

Cummles was vastly shocked when, at the end of the first furious rush, he ran fairly upon a stiff left jab that split his lip instantly. Again and again he strove to get past that propped-out fist, but try as he would he could not get his head out of the way, and every time it was as if he had jammed his face against a beam of wood.

Then, too, Fane's right hand, with heavy body-swing behind it, followed up the left like a piston and thudded upon every portion of Cummles's anatomy in solid drives, until he began to feel acutely miserable, and, stung to desperation like a tormented bear, he commenced to hit with all his force, in wild swings that Fane dodged in good style. It was a magnificent exhibition of pluck and skill of the first water, opposed to brute force and doggedness. Fane seemed to be able to land hits at will. A trickle of blood from the bully's split lip coursed down that fellow's chin, and added nothing to his appearance.

"Go on, the bully-killer!"

The name had caught on, and the Crees yelled it in pure enjoyment, for they had all suffered more or less at Cummles's hands, and they appreciated to the full this repayment of his own medicine.

"Look at him—he's blowing like a grampus!"

Cummles was not in the best of training at this early stage of the term, and he was feeling the disadvantages of his condition. He was puffing badly and perspiring profusely. His movements slowed down and he seemed tired. Fane could not hit hard enough to knock the bigger boy over; but there was no doubt that he was cutting him about badly.

"Hand it out," yelled the bully's enemies, eager for the downfall of their tyrant. "You know, Fane!"

The Crees went simply wild with delight, for Cummles was getting the worst trouncing of his life. They cheered the New Zealander on with loud cries of encouragement, although it would have been impossible to have added to the sting and venom of his attack.

"Go on, Fane!"

"Give it to him—he's been looking for this for a long time!"

The bully-killer, as he had called himself, propped off another of Cummles's blind rushes, with stinging hits.

"Had enough?" he gasped, lowering his hands momentarily.

"No!" wheezed Cummles, lurching forward; and with a tremendous swing he clouted his opponent on the side of the head, sending him flying head over heels to the ground, where he lay outstretched.

CHAPTER IV

THE BROKEN BOOTLACE

Cummles stood back from his antagonist, a twisted grin of triumph on his face, and, in the tense silence that followed, the loud and fast sound of his breathing could be distinctly heard.

And then, all the horror of the Crees found voice, and they exclaimed together:

"Foul—it's a foul!"

"Scrag the dirty fouler!"

The ring pressed round about Cummles with angry cries, for the bully had offended all rules of fair play by his action in striking Fane when that youngster had lowered his hands. For a moment Cummles thought that he was to be mobbed, and he drew back on the defensive; then Fane slowly rose from the ground.

"Stand back," said Fane, "this is my job—let me finish it!"

With the words he again attacked the bully furiously. His blows were hard and fast, but he did not lose his head. Grimly Cummles strove to turn the tide, to repeat that one tremendous blow; but always Fane was just a little too quick for him.

Finally Cummles came to the end of his resources, and bitterly bitter though the admission was to him, he had to grant that he was beaten. Thoroughly exhausted, and much damaged by Fane's blows, he dropped his hands.

"Good enough," he mumbled through swollen lips. "I'm done—hold off."

Then for the first time Fane smiled; and like a cloak, his old nervous manner fell about him once more.

"You'll shake hands?" he asked. "Yes?"

Cummles shook the proffered hand grumpily, for he could not

easily forgive the fellow who had lowered his colours so decisively in the presence of his fellow-Crees. Then, pulling on his coat, he left the circle without another word, followed by two or three of his intimate cronies, who even now would not desert him.

"Well done, Fane," said Jack Symonds, patting the New Zealander on the shoulder. "That's just what Cummles has been looking for for months. Now, you fellows," he went on, turning to the Crees, who stood round murmuring congratulations, "I propose that Fane here and his friend Patch be made members of the society. For one thing, Fane is a jolly useful member, and—"

"Hear, hear!" they interrupted him.

"And what about Symonds for Chief Cree?" demanded another of them in a loud voice.

The reply was a burst of cheering, and Jack was duly elected. Amid much excitement, he was presented with the Eagle feather, the emblem of office that the founder of the Crees had left behind him when he had left Deepwater College. Jack put it in his pocket, and then turned to the business of getting the two new Crees elected to the band.

They were unanimously elected, and the four occupants of Study 9 that evening were fast friends. Even Patch was allowed to hang one or two more of his scientific diagrams on the walls, and to place his bottles and apparatus along the top of his cupboard.

In the middle of the night Fane awoke with a slight groan, and felt his face with tender touch. His right cheek-bone, where Cummles had landed a hit during their fight, was painful; the skin had been taken off, and now the wound was a hot, throbbing graze that worried him.

He turned over and over again, but found sleep impossible. The wound was worrying him too much.

"I've got some ointment," he murmured, "and that might cool it off a bit. But the stuff's down in the study, worse luck."

He bore the pain in silence for a few minutes longer, and then determined to go down to the study for the ointment. Silently he got out of bed, and left the sleeping dormitory behind him. The great corridors were cold and deserted, but, hurrying downstairs in his bare feet, he quickly arrived at Study 9. Then he threw open the door.

"Jiminy!" he gasped, involuntarily.

The study was in darkness but for a flood of light that streamed in a definite band from the end of what was evidently an electric torch. And the cupboards were open, and their contents partly emptied on the floor.

"What—who are you?" he demanded, as the glow of the torch fell upon a big figure in a pulled-down cap and a scarf that hid the lower part of the face. The bright eyes above the scarf challenged his, and for a moment they stood face to face, both held immovable in surprise. Fane realized at once that the man he had surprised was a burglar.

He flung himself without the slightest warning upon the intruder. No fellow at Deepwater College ever had more lion-like courage than Fane. The man bulked much bigger than himself, but the bully-killer sprang forward with all the vim of an attacking bulldog.

Swift and unexpected as was his move, the burglar was a fraction swifter. The torch went out silently, and it was as if a velvet curtain had fallen before Fane's eyes. The man must have twisted aside with lightning celerity, for Fane could not touch him. For a moment there was silence, each listening for the other. Then a large black shape blotted out the pale square of the window, and the boy realized that the burglar was escaping.

He ran forward, but fell over some invisible object on the floor. When he had picked himself up, he heard the thud of the intruder's feet alighting on the garden-beds outside, and the quick following sound of rapid footsteps. The man had got away!

Fane knew that pursuit was out of the question. He had no hope of following with success; and he wondered now whether the next step would be to inform the masters of what had occurred. On second thoughts he determined to consult with his pals, and returning to the dormitory he awoke Jack and Patch, and together they went to the bed where Billy Faraday lay asleep.

"Billy!" said Jack, shaking his chum by the shoulder.

"Look out—the Black Star!" said Billy. "The Black Star—take care of it!"

"What on earth?" said Jack. "The beggar's talking in his sleep. Black star? What does he mean?" He shook the sleeping Billy again. "Here, you old sleeping beauty, arise! Come up!"

"Hullo!" There was surprise and alarm in Billy's tone. "What—? Oh, I remember—I've been dreaming. I thought you were—"

He stopped and rubbed his eyes. "What's the matter, anyway?"

"Come out here, old chap."

When they got out in the corridor, Jack Symonds explained. "Fane here was going down for a rub of ointment for his eye, and when he got in the study there was a burglar. Here, where are you going?"

Billy Faraday did not answer. He had gasped with alarm at Jack's words, and set off at a rapid pace down the corridor. The others followed him at a run, and when they entered the study found him on his knees in front of his cupboard examining a small black cash-box, which he clicked open, peered inside, and then, with a sigh of relief, closed it again.

"Nothing gone?" demanded Jack. "Not even the Black Star?"

"Black star!" Billy whispered, looking at Jack as if he had seen a ghost. "What—what do you know about—"

"It's all right, Billy—only a joke of mine."

"But—a joke?"

"Yes. When we went to wake you up just now you were having a nightmare, or something, and you were jabbering about a black star. Something about taking care of it."

Billy was silent. Then he turned to his study-mates earnestly. "See here, you fellows," he said quietly, "we're all pals now, and I think we can keep a secret together. You heard me talking in my sleep about the Black Star, and perhaps you thought that it was only a nightmare, or something I'd read in a book. It isn't. It's something real—there *is* a Black Star, and here it is."

He opened the cash-box, and held out a small bundle wrapped in tissue-paper. Jack removed the wrappings, and held the object so revealed in the palm of his hand. There were exclamations of surprise from all three.

"By Jove!" said Patch in admiration.

In Jack's hand lay a black stone as big as the top of a tea-cup. It was beautifully smooth, polished to the last degree, and had a sort of opalescent fire that made it wonderfully beautiful in the lamp-light. It was shaped as a six-cornered star, and as the light played on it it seemed veritably alive, almost appearing to wriggle in Jack's palm.

"That's the Black Star," said Billy Faraday.

"And that," said Septimus Patch thoughtfully, "is, I suppose, what the burglar was after. Am I right?"

"Perfectly right. Only that Fane here arrived in time to interrupt his search, the fellow must have collared the Black Star."

"But the Black Star—what is it?" asked Fane. "Something very valuable? Why should the fellow be so anxious to get it?"

"And that's another thing," put in Jack Symonds excitedly. "When that man on the train tried to collar your bag, was he after the Black Star?"

Billy frowned thoughtfully. "I don't know that," he replied. "Perhaps he knew what was in my bag—or perhaps he was just a

casual thief. Anyway, I made sure of getting the thing back, didn't I?"

"You did! You couldn't have run faster from a man-eating lion. Still, old chap, what is the giddy mystery about this Black Star? There's more in it than meets the eye."

"I was just coming to that. It's rather a long story, but I'll cut it as short as I can. You know, my father, who just died, was a great naturalist, and he was deeply interested in Central Australia. He had made a special study of the natural history of those parts, and was considered the expert on all matters belonging to them.

"On one of his trips into the interior he discovered a little-known tribe of blacks. It seems that these niggers were of quite a superior brand, and they had a sort of civilization of their own, quite different from the low-down natives that travellers run across. They keep much to themselves, and it was only by the purest accident that the pater ran into them.

"He stayed with them for a long time. There were plenty of things to be inquired into, and with their assistance he added to his scientific knowledge. For their part, they got to like him very much; in fact, they wanted him to stay with them and be their chief. They even went so far as giving him the sacred emblem of the tribe, which is, of course, this Black Star. The possessor of this Star is all-powerful among the natives of the Boonadilla tribe. He can have his slightest wishes obeyed, and they handed my father a very great compliment when they gave him this. Of course, he accepted it, and brought it back to Melbourne with him, but he had no intention of going back and lording it over the tribe. All that he intended doing was to show it round among his scientific friends, partly as proof that the Boonadilla tribe existed. That was all that was in his head at the time; and he meant to send it back, or take it back himself on his next trip into the interior.

"But, as you know, there was to be no 'next trip.' The pater died, but before he went he told me certain things about the Black Star. It seems that one of his men on the trip got to know about it, and,

being a cunning sort of fellow, got the idea of taking the Star and getting back to the Boonadilla people with it. The reason was, of course, that he was going to get something out of it; and my pater told me that the tribe had lots of alluvial gold that they'd collected around the spot where they lived. They'd no idea of the value of the gold, and a clever man would be able to influence them with the Black Star, so that it would not be difficult to get away with the metal.

"This man Lazare—some sort of a foreigner, I believe—had been at the pater for a loan of the Black Star; but the pater knew too much of him for that. He knew that if he lent it to Lazare, the probability was that he would not see the thing again. So he refused. He told me that I was to be careful not to let Lazare get hold of it, for he handed it over to my keeping just before he—died. His instructions were that I should take it to his old friend Mason, the geologist, who lives in Sydney.

"Before I left Melbourne to come back to school I wrote to Mason, but I got an answer back to say that he was away on a trip, and would not be back for four or five months. What was I to do? The only thing was to take it back to school with me. This I decided to do; and I also brought back a revolver of the pater's, which came in very handy, as Jack can tell you. You don't want to let a word of this out, for there'd be no end of a row if I was found out. Before I left, Lazare himself came to see me, and asked me directly for the Black Star. He said that there had been an understanding between the pater and himself that he should take it back to the tribe. He was plausible, too, I can tell you. Only that I'd been warned against the fellow, I'd have fallen for his game like a shot. As it was, he didn't get it, and I believe that he's been watching me like a cat watching a mouse ever since I refused. Mind, he didn't threaten anything—he's too clever for that. He was very polite, and said that it was a pity that I was so obstinate, and that he would not worry any more about it. He remarked that he had been merely carrying out the pater's orders, and that, since I opposed him, he considered himself free

of any obligation. He said good-bye, and went away—implying that I was a silly young fool, of course. Now, I'm pretty certain that this was Lazare here this evening. He must have watched me closely, and possibly that was one of his men who snatched my bag on the train."

"By Jingo!" said Jack Symonds, "but we're going to have a lively term this time or I'm a Dutchman! What?"

"Comrade," said Patch, in his grand manner, extending his hand, "I appreciate your confidence in me—believe me, I shall do all that I can to help. You have heard, no doubt, that I am by way of being an amateur detective? No? You surprise me. I want everything left here just as it is. I may be able to find out something of the identity of the burglar. This is no joke. Wait until the morning and then I'll get to work."

"Well," said Fane practically, "we can't do anything by waiting here—besides, there's a chance that we'll be caught out of our dormy. Are you going to report the affair to the Head?"

"I think not. I don't want to have to explain everything, and, besides, no harm's been done. I'll take the Star up with me—I'll put it under my pillow for to-night. I had no idea that the attempt would be made so soon—else I wouldn't have left it in the cupboard. You never know your luck."

As they went back to the dormitory Fane and Septimus Patch could be heard planning to get down to the study early in the morning—before call-bell—and to make an investigation. Jack smiled, for he thought that the amateur detective was a bit of a joke.

"It's a biscuit to a fiver that you'll both be fast asleep when call-bell goes," he observed, with a yawn. "I'm feeling that way myself."

However, when morning came and Jack Symonds and Billy Faraday awoke, they found that the two beds occupied by Fane and Patch were empty.

"Here, Billy," said Jack, "we've time to run down before call-over and see what that beggar Patch's found out."

"Right!" The two of them hurried downstairs, and discovered Patch and Fane busily examining the turf outside the window of Study 9. Patch, with excited eyes, was pointing out various things on the ground; as the two pals came along he glanced smilingly up.

"Hullo!" said Billy. "Looking for the early worm?"

"Found it," said Patch confidently.

"What do you mean?"

"I've found that the burglar is really somebody belonging to the school!"

"Get out! How do you know that?"

"Deduction," said Patch. "The clue of the broken bootlace."

"Broken bootlace," repeated Billy Faraday in bewilderment. "What on earth do you mean by that?"

"I refer to a clue, comrade—and a valuable one at that. It means just this. You see these two footprints here, just where the burglar landed out of the window? And those further along, which are also his, for a certainty?"

"Yes—go on."

"Well, I—hang it, there goes the second bell, and we'll have to scoot. I'll explain it all after morning-school."

And with that promise the mystified pals had to be content. Had Patch actually found out something worth while, or was the whole thing merely a false alarm?

CHAPTER V

UNRAVELLING A CLUE

Mr. Salmon, who was the house-master over that section of Deepwater College in which the chums led a more or less care-free existence, was the best of good sorts, but hopeless as a disciplinarian. To begin with, he was partly deaf, and disrespectful juniors took advantage of the weakness in season and out of season. His own form, the sixth, to which all four of the Study 9 boys belonged, also contrived to have an easy time of it while he was in charge. So that if he observed a certain uneasiness on the part of the sharers of the Black Star secret, he might have ascribed it to post-holiday skittishness—at any rate, he said nothing about it, and the four of them hastened into conference immediately studies were over, and lent ear to the wise sayings of the eccentric genius, Septimus Patch.

"To begin with," said Patch, in his best Dear-Watson manner, "there's precious little beyond these footprints, in the shape of clues, but to a trained eye like mine those slight, almost meaningless marks have a story to tell. They are to me as an open book, and—"

"Cut out the cackle," said Jack Symonds brusquely, "and return to the washing. Get on with it."

"Examine this footprint closely," invited Patch, "and tell me what you see."

"A footprint, of course," said Jack. "In other words, a depression in the earth, caused by the yielding of the soil under a boot, which causes it to assume the shape—"

"Ass!" said Septimus cuttingly. "I mean, do you observe anything peculiar about it?"

"No. Why?"

"You see that snake-like mark across the place where the sole has

rested?"

"We're not blind, professor. What of it?"

"Well, that's where the bootlace was stamped into the earth under the foot. You see that! Now, that means that the fellow had his boot unlaced."

"Marvellous!" exclaimed Jack. "How do you do it?" he added, peering anxiously at Patch. "Are you quite sure that you have come to no harm? The severe mental effort—"

"Cut the joking a moment. The man's boots were unlaced. What was the reason for that? Is it likely that a man who was planning a burglary would come in with unlaced boots? The thing is absurd. There are no houses within miles of this place, and if the fellow had been hiding in the bush, he would scarcely have had his boots unlaced. No; the deduction from that lace is that the chap belonged to the school."

"Yes, that sounds pretty right. You mean, he put on his boots to give the impression that he'd come from outside, but as he'd just slipped them on, he didn't lace them up, meaning to take them off again shortly afterwards."

"That's just it, comrade. Also, he was probably carrying them in his hand and getting around the corridors in stockinged feet. I think we've just about narrowed the search down to the school."

"Yes;" broke in Billy Faraday, who had been listening to the discussion with deep interest, "that's all right, but it's absurd to imagine that anyone from the Coll. had a hand in this affair. Fane says that the chap was a big fellow—"

"There wasn't much light," said Fane, "and I didn't see him for more than half a minute. All the same, he looked big. There was a scarf over the bottom of his face, of course, so I couldn't tell him that way."

"We've got no chance of finding out who he is, then," said Billy. "Even if it was one of the chaps, which is hard to believe. I had an

idea that it was the bag-snatcher in the train, but he was quite short."

"Wait just a minute," interrupted Patch. "You want to hear all the detective's got to say, and then you can back-chat each other all day if you want to. I say we can find out who that chap was, and merely by this footprint again."

"Spit it out," invited Jack.

"Well, you can see the mark of the metal tag of that lace, can't you? And you will observe that it's broken in half. The jagged edge has left an unmistakable impression—see it? Just a minute."

He bent down, took a knife from his pocket, and detached a tiny square of the mud with the impression of the broken tag in it. This he held in the palm of his hand, and continued. "All we've got to do now is to find who owns the pair of boots that'd make an impression like this. There can't be any mistake, and it shouldn't take us long to run through all the boots in the school."

"When?"

"To-night, when they're downstairs for cleaning. They are brought back by the boy about half-past five—if we get down to-night we'd be able to examine them safely."

"Good on you," said Jack, slapping Septimus on the back with heartiness. "I didn't think you could do it, but it's a good notion all the same. By George, we ought to be able to find out who it is!"

"But—who could it be?" asked Billy, a furrow of puzzlement showing itself on his forehead. "That's what gets me! I can't imagine—"

"The bootlace will show—don't worry," said Septimus. "We can't do anything until we find that."

The four of them were wondering, as they sat in class that afternoon, who the intruder could be, and they looked at their class-mates with suspicious eyes. Big Martin, on account of his size, came in for furtive glances, but it was manifestly absurd

that he could have been the culprit.

At this early stage of the term, nobody felt much like work, particularly Septimus Patch, who always contrived to be doing as much of his own private business as possible, and never paid much attention to the lesson in hand. Just at this moment he had arranged a big barrier of books all along the front of his desk, and, concealed behind the screen, he was tinkering with a weir-looking model of many springs, screws, and cogwheels.

Consequently he did not notice that the boy in front of him had been surreptitiously unlacing his boots. His first intimation that something was amiss was when he felt a sharp tug at his feet, and both his boots came off. He gasped with horror, and, peering over his barricade, observed that his two boots were travelling the round of the class, in different directions. His loud socks, of purplish and yellow colour-scheme, brought a snigger from the class. He wriggled, protesting.

"Patch!" It was the voice of Mr. Salmon, who was all unconscious of the diversion, but who saw Patch's movement. "Are you paying attention?"

"Yes, sir," mumbled Patch, reddening, and glaring, through his great horn-rimmed glasses, at his companions. "Back here with the giddy old boots, you asses!" he whispered, in a furious aside.

"Well, then," said Mr. Salmon, arranging his spectacles so that he could get a good view of the boy, "we were talking about Charles XII. Patch, tell me why he was unsuccessful against Peter in this campaign."

"You said, sir?" replied Patch.

"Why was he unsuccessful?"

"Ah, why?" said Patch, innocently.

"I don't believe you've been paying any attention whatever." The master ran round the class with a rapid cross-fire of questions, but the answers were unsatisfactory. He frowned, and coughed.

"Here, Patch, you come out and read the account aloud," he commanded.

"Here, back with those boots," said Patch, frantically. But the boots had arrived at the other end of the room, and seemed likely to remain there.

"Do you hear me, boy?" demanded Mr. Salmon. "Come out at once. I never saw such indolence!"

With a groan Patch got up, and, amid the chuckles of the class, stepped forward to the dais where Mr. Salmon stood. But he had barely set foot on the stage, when he began a series of extraordinary antics.

"Ouch!" he howled, leaping four feet in the air, and bouncing with a thud. He danced about the dais on one foot, upsetting globes and maps, and tipping over one of the front desks upon its unfortunate occupant. "Take it out—take it out!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the class, both at the wild leaps of Patch and the astounded horror of Mr. Salmon.

"Boy, boy!" cried the latter, "have you gone mad? Stop this at once —stop it, I say! Really I—!"

"Yow! It's sticking into me—quick! My foot—it's sharp!"

"His foot's sharp?" queried Mr. Salmon. "Patch—calm yourself, my poor fellow," he went on, imagining that, if Patch had really gone off his head, it would be safer to keep him calm.

"You are quite all right—you really are. Just keep calm, and the effects will—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" The class was convulsed, and rocked with merriment as Septimus Patch was seen to sit down on the floor and painfully extract a drawing-tack from his stockinged foot. The tack had been lying harmlessly on the dais, and Patch had planted his foot fairly upon it. Mr. Salmon adjusted his spectacles, and took in the amazing sight. The vivid colours of Patch's hose met his eye, and he gasped.

"Boy! What do you mean by this? Where are your boots?"

"Ah, where?" said Patch dreamily.

Mr. Salmon coloured deeply. "You are insolent—you will be punished," he affirmed. "Explain at once. Where have you put your boots?"

Squinting over the tops of his goggles, Patch descried his boots in place underneath his desk, standing demurely side by side as if nothing had ever been amiss with them.

"You will forgive me, comrade," he said, in his most buttery tones, "but I had to take them off. My feet got very hot."

"Your feet got hot?"

"Yes—just a physical weakness of mine. Whenever it occurs I simply have to take my boots off. I can't bear them."

"So you are hot-footed as well as hot-headed!" said Mr. Salmon.

The class simply roared. They kicked their feet, and rattled rulers on the desk. They always made a stupendous row whenever Mr. Salmon cracked one of his very mild jokes, and the genial house-master was so very deaf that the din came to his ears in the form of a loud titter, which had always pleased him greatly. The noise they made now could be heard a couple of corridors away, but Mr. Salmon nodded and smiled, satisfied with the reception of his sally.

"Go back to your seat, boy," he said, restored to good humour once more. "If your feet feel warm, it is doubtless because you wear such very hot socks."

At this remark there was a repetition of the hideous row; and Patch strolled back to his seat and his model-making without the slightest concern.

After "lights-out" that night the four pals got out of their dormitory, and in slippers made their way down to the boot-room, where they tumbled around among boots and blacking and brushes, before Patch applied a light to a fragment of candle

that shed a flickering illumination over the rows of neatly cleaned boots.

"Now for it," said Billy Faraday, and without any more ado they set to work to examine the great stack of boots. It was fully half an hour before they had run through the pile, and then they had drawn a blank.

"It's no go," said Jack Symonds. "How now, professor?"

"The other House," said Patch calmly.

"What—Cooper's?"

"Of course," said Septimus. "Forward, comrades all!"

They crossed the quadrangle and the playing-fields to the other house of Deepwater College—Cooper's House.

"You were here last term, of course," said Jack Symonds to Patch. "You know your way about?"

"Rather, comrade; like the palm of my hand. Give us a leg up through this window."

Jack obliged him with a shove that nearly sent the investigator on to his head in the passageway beyond. In a little while the four had gained the boot-room, and there a much more cautious examination took place—more cautious because, if Cooper's masters or boys discovered them by any chance, then things would go hard with the intruders.

Inside of an hour the detectives had satisfied themselves that the boots had not been worn by any of the boys of Deepwater College.

"You've drawn another blank, Patchy," said Billy Faraday. "How do you account for this?"

"Account for it?" asked Patch, in wonderment. "What do you mean? This only brings us closer to our solution, as the great Holmes said—"

"Which Holmes? Oliver Wendell?" inquired Jack, with an air of

acute interest.

"Sherlock Holmes, of course," returned Patch, with scorn. "I forgot that you are unfamiliar with the classics. Well, he laid it down as an axiom, once, that when you have disproved all but one of a number of solutions, that solution must be the correct one, no matter how absurd it seems."

"I get you. But how does it apply?"

"Why, if it wasn't one of the boys here, it must have been one of the masters that made the footprint."

"But what master would come at that game?" asked Billy incredulously. "Think it was old Salmon?"

"By the Great Moa!" exclaimed Jack in a loud tone, which called rebukes from his companions.

"Cut the shindy," advised Patch tersely, "or you'll have the whole House down on us. What's stung you?"

"Doctor Daw!" whispered Jack. "What about him?"

"Is he in his right mind?" asked Patch anxiously. "And who may Doctor Daw be? I've heard of his daughter, Marjory, but that was in my nursery-rhyme days. Expound."

In low tones, and as briefly as possible, Jack explained the strange connection which he suspected between Doctor Daw, the new master, and Tiger, the man who had run off with Billy's bag.

"What could be more likely," he said, "but that the two are in league with one another, and associates of old Lazare what's-his-name? Why didn't I think of it before?"

"This is important," said Patch, seriously. "Daw is a big man, and it might well have been him. Now, the only thing to do is to compare his bootlaces with that impression we've got. And how are we to do that?"

"Sneak up into his room and take a look at them," said Jack.

"Who's going, though? Four of us can't do it."

"Draw lots, then. Here, wait a minute till I collect some pieces of grass."

Outside, in the shadow of the school buildings, they drew for the honour of investigating the room of Mr. Daw, and the shortest straw fell to the lot of Jack.

"You can go up now," said Fane, suddenly. "I remember that Daw went out this evening, and he hasn't come back yet, for he'd have to pass the boot-room to do so. If you're slippy you can get up there, examine the boots and get away again in about a minute."

"I'll do it," said Jack, as they came through once more to the corridors of Salmon's House. He rubbed his chin with his forefinger. "Let me see," he asked, "isn't there an electric torch of yours in the study?"

"Of mine?" said Billy doubtfully. "We'll see." They proceeded to the study, and there Billy unearthed an old, but still serviceable, torch. Armed with this, Jack went upstairs to the upper floor, where the masters' rooms were.

"Tit for tat," he murmured, turning the handle of Daw's door and opening it quietly. He let himself inside, and closed the door noiselessly. For half a minute he stood still, to assure himself that Doctor Daw had not returned, and then, flashing his torch, made a hurried search for the master's boots. He found a few pairs, all showing signs of recent use, but none with the distinctive tag.

"Ten to one he's wearing them," murmured Jack. At that moment his heart beat furiously. Steps were coming along the corridor, and they stopped outside the door. For a second he was paralysed; then he acted swiftly. He had barely time to roll under the bed before Doctor Daw himself entered the room—and with him his strange friend Tiger!

CHAPTER VI

JACK IS ENLIGHTENED

Jack Symonds had barely time to make certain that his hurried dive under the bed had not been observed, when Doctor Daw and Tiger were well within the room.

"A bit late for a call," said Daw grimly, "but there's no one to notice, luckily. Different last night, though."

"How so?" said Tiger. There came the sound of a match being struck, and Jack could presently smell the distinctive odour of tobacco. "How do you make that out?"

"Why, I had a cut for the Star," said Daw quickly. "And do you know what happened? I'd searched through about half the cupboards down there in the study where he's pretty sure to have it thus early. All at once, the door opened, and in walks one of the kids—"

"Not young Faraday?"

"No; a new chap from New Zealand; and instead of being scared, he jumped at me like a terrier on a rat. I got away, but only just. I tell you, Tiger, I—"

"See here," interrupted the other, "don't call me that name. It—well, you never know who might hear it, and—anyway, my name's Humbolt. Well, how did you get on with this kid? Scared you some, I'll bet!"

"I won't say he didn't," confessed Daw. "The lucky thing was, I had a scarf over my face, and he can't say who did it. Probably thinks it was some outsider. But the Star won't be in that study now, you can gamble on that. I've one of the kids a bit under my thumb, through knowing him down in Victoria, and he's keeping a fairly close watch on what this Faraday does, and where he goes, and all that sort of thing."

Jack, beneath the bed, opened his eyes wide at this piece of news, and wondered who the boy could be. Nobody, he decided, in his immediate circle; but the fact that the youngster came from Victoria was a clue that would perhaps come in handy.

"I'll put Patch on to that," he thought, and gave himself over to listening to what the two plotters were saying.

"Ah, well," Humbolt was heard to murmur, with a sigh of relief, "I'm real glad you didn't give away the box of tricks last night. We'd have been pretty well diddled if they suspected that you—you know."

"That's safe enough," said Doctor Daw confidently; and Jack felt like chuckling at the thought that Daw was quite mistaken.

"You didn't reckon on Patch being a 'tec," he murmured, smiling to himself.

"I guess it's lucky that I met you," said Daw suddenly. "Do you know, I never liked playing a lone hand, and with you close by I feel a lot safer. And Lazare's the man to pay well, believe me, if only we can collar that Star. Hang me, it ought to be simple enough! Don't forget those instructions for Friday night, will you?"

"Trust me, Doc. And now, what about those goods—and the money?"

"They're in my leather handbag, somewhere." Doctor Daw stifled an immense yawn. "I'm feeling like sleep—you wouldn't credit how it knocks you up trying to teach these blockheads here."

"Of course, you always were a good teacher," sneered Humbolt.

"I used to be, once," returned Doctor Daw.

"Until you carelessly stole that money and left clues that a blind man could follow, and, of course, got what you were looking for. Twelve months, wasn't it—or was it two years? I've forgotten."

"You'd better forget the whole lot," answered Daw, with a threatening note in his voice. "You leave my past history alone,

and I won't rake up yours. That stands, doesn't it? After this business I'm going straight."

"Straight?" Humbolt laughed. "Never in your life, Doctor. You got in here on forged references, and do you mean to say—"

"That I'm going to stay here? Certainly. Supposing we get the Star—no suspicion attaches to me. I'll just stay on; there'll be no question as to my honesty."

"Oh, won't there?" thought Jack. "Just you wait and see, that's all. There'll be quite a lot of question, if I know anything!"

"Well, don't let me keep you up any longer," said Humbolt in his usual cynical tone. "Where's this handbag?"

"Somewhere about. Have a look, will you? Probably under the bed, or somewhere. Never can remember where I put my things!"

Jack felt his blood run cold at the words. Under the bed! He glanced about him, and saw that the handbag was certainly not there. All the same, if they were to look, the fat would be in the fire with a vengeance! What the two would do to one who had obviously overheard their very compromising conversation, Jack did not dare to imagine. He wriggled back against the wall, praying that he would not be seen; but he realized that the chances of escaping notice were very slender indeed. For what seemed an age he heard the two of them walking about, and heard the noise of furniture moved; and still they did not come near the bed.

What if they knew, and were merely making a mockery of his suspense and dread? The thought was a disconcerting one. Jack felt like scrambling from under the bed, and facing them, consequences or no consequences. He felt certain that they had seen him, had heard him—knew in some way, and were just tormenting him. Just at the moment when the strain seemed too great to be borne, a leg appeared at the side of the bed, and the counterpane was lifted. In another second the person would stoop and peer under the bed. With bulging eyes, Jack Symonds

awaited his exposure.

"It's all right—I've got it." It was Doctor Daw's voice, from across the room, and Humbolt let fall the counterpane once more. Jack almost fainted with relief.

Shortly afterwards, to his joy, both left the room, Daw intimating that he would see his companion safely off the premises; and Jack crawled out of his hiding-place, feeling stiff and cramped, but glad indeed that he had been permitted to take a glance at the plot that was preparing itself against his chum.

He hurried through the dark corridors, and slipped into the dormitory without being noticed by the monitor in charge. His pals were all eagerness to be told what had happened to him; but he was in no mood for explanations.

"I'll tell you in the morning," he said. "I'm jolly sleepy."

And that was all that they could get out of him. The next morning, however, he had a lot to say, and especially to Billy Faraday.

"Look here, Billy," he said, "you really must take care of that Star, because Lazare and these others have some scheme going for Friday night. What it was, or what was proposed, I've got no idea; but Daw told the other chap to be ready, or words to that effect. Can't we hide the thing somewhere?"

"Yes, but where?"

"And there's another thing, too. Daw mentioned a kid—one of the fellows here—that's under his thumb, and who's going to keep an eye on what we do."

"Jingo!" said Billy. "The dickens he is! Wonder who it is?"

"Here's Patch, and perhaps he can find out for us. How are you, my giddy old sleuth-hound? I may as well tell you that you scored a bull with that bootlace clue."

"Comrades, I'm delighted. You compared the laces?"

"No. You see, Daw had the boots on. But I heard all about it, and I don't doubt that your clue would have worked out to the last bend in the tag on the lace. There's something else, though—" And Jack told him the strange conversation that he had overheard, particularly with reference to the spy that Daw controlled among the ranks of the college boys.

"Interesting, comrade, deeply interesting," said the schoolboy detective, rubbing his chin in the approved Sherlock Holmes manner. "It seems to me that the field is not too large, either. I mean, the boy must be in this house to keep any sort of watch over Faraday here, and as he comes from Victoria, that narrows the field still further. You twig? There are only a limited number of chaps in Salmon's House hailing from Victoria. And we can whittle them down one by one. I'll get a list of them, and we'll eliminate those above suspicion. That will leave under a dozen, I should say, to be watched."

"Patch, you old genius!" Jack Symonds smote him heartily between the shoulders, and the old genius was projected into the fireplace, whence he recovered himself with injured dignity.

"It's only attention to detail, that's all," murmured Septimus deprecatingly. "I picked that up from Dupin—"

"From whom?" demanded Jack.

"Dupin—that's Edgar Allan Poe's detective, and a real snorting detective at that. Ever read any of it?"

"Dunno. Didn't old Edgar write somethin' about the Bells—Bells—Bells, yells, shells, or some rot like that? My giddy sister recites some yards of rubbish to that effect."

"That's the fellow. Any rate, he wrote 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue.'"

"Gur-r-r!" said Jack, frowning heavily. "Sort of sequel to 'The Bloodstained Putty-knife, or the Bricklayer's Revenge.'"

Septimus smiled as one who indulges the caprices of a child.

"Comrade, you will never make a detective," he said. "I've got the book here, with the yarns in it, if you'd care to read them. Meanwhile—"

"Look here," interrupted Billy Faraday, a shade impatiently. "There's not much time before morning-school, and I'd like to hide the Star before we go any further. Of course, I might stick it in the pouch of my belt and carry it about with me, but don't you think that's just the scheme that'd strike Lazare and his crowd as being most natural. I might be knocked down and searched; anything might happen."

"One of the boards in this floor is loose," said Jack thoughtfully. "How would it be to prise it up and drop the Star down there? We could replace the carpet, and nobody would be any the wiser."

But Septimus Patch had what he considered a better idea. "We were just now talking," he observed, "of Dupin, the first scientific detective in fiction. There is a story about him, called 'The Purloined Letter.' The strength of it is that a fellow is known to have a letter which he has stolen, but it baffles the detectives to find it. They go all over his room, rip up the boards, sound the cabinets for secret drawers, take accurate measurements of the tables, probe everything, but the merry old letter is still missing, although they know for a fact that it's somewhere about the fellow's house. They call old Dupin in, and he finds it right away."

"How?"

"By using his brains, comrade; by simple reasoning. Here, hand me that book of Poe's, and I'll read some of his reasoning."

A day or two before, Jack and Billy would have laughed at Patch's request, and refused his help; but they had to admit that he had used his brains in regard to the footprint clue, and they were willing to give him a chance to safeguard the Black Star on the strength of that first triumph.

"Here you are," said Billy a little sceptically, throwing over the desired volume. "Show us what you can do."

Patch whipped over the pages with accustomed fingers, and began to read. "Says Dupin, 'There is a game of puzzles which is played upon a map. One party playing requires another to find a given word—the name of a town, river, State, or empire—any word, in short, upon the motley and perplexed surface of the chart. A novice in the game generally seeks to embarrass his opponents by giving them the most minutely lettered names; but the adept selects such words as stretch, in large characters, from one end of the chart to the other. These escape observation by dint of being excessively obvious."

"That's all right," agreed Jack. "I've noticed that myself. But what happened?"

"That's the whole point of the yarn," returned Patch. "Dupin came to the conclusion that the thief had not concealed the letter at all. He pratted along to the chap's house, and saw that he had several cards in a letter-rack, and a solitary letter. The appearance of the letter was quite different to the missing one. But Dupin says, 'In scrutinizing the edges of the paper I observed them to be more chafed than necessary. They presented the broken appearance which is manifested when a stiff paper, having been folded and pressed with a folder, is refolded in a reversed direction, in the same creases or edges which had formed the original fold. This discovery was sufficient. It was clear to me that the letter had been turned, as a glove, inside out, re-directed and re-sealed.' Well, after that," pursued Patch, shutting the book, "he came next day with another letter done up in the same way. He got a fellow to fire off a pistol and raise a shindy in the street below, and while the thief was looking to see what was up he got the stolen letter and put his own in its place. In the letter he'd put a stinging quotation to the effect that there was no copyright on that particular trick."

"I'll bet the thief got a surprise when he came to open it up," chuckled Jack, who had been following the story with interest. "But I see what you are driving at—you don't want to conceal the

Star at all?"

"Not as open as all that," said Patch. "But let us get hold of some place that's so obvious that nobody would ever dream of looking there."

"Billy can wear it as a tie-pin," suggested Jack, with a laugh. "Or we could put it up over the mantelpiece."

"No, comrade; a little subtlety is necessary. What about that old jacket of yours, Billy? That one hanging up in the corner? We could sew the Star up in the lining, and leave the jacket there. We'd notice in a moment if the jacket were gone. But nobody would think of that as a hiding-place, and that's why it is the safest place in the world. Savvy?"

"Sure thing. Do you think it's the best place?"

"Of course I do, comrade. Now, I've got a needle and cotton somewhere, I think, and if you like I'll do the job now."

Somewhat reluctantly Billy passed over the Black Star, and with deft hands Patch ripped up the lining under the shoulder-padding of the coat. Then, while Jack looked to see that they were not overheard at the door, and while Billy kept watch at the window, Septimus embedded the Star in the padding, and closed the seam again as neatly as a tailor.

"There," he commented, hanging the coat up again in its accustomed position. "The fellow who finds that we've left the Star in such an easy position will be cuter than most people. Now we'll have to cut—it's nearly form-time."

And with their preparation in the most hazy and uncertain state, the three occupants of Study No. 9 hurried down to class. That afternoon the Star was still in place, and Billy breathed freely. "I suppose it's as safe there as anywhere," he thought. "I say, Jack, what's that hideous din?"

CHAPTER VII

THE CALAMITOUS CRIPPLES

Jack looked out of the window. Then he gurgled.

"By the Brass-eyed bull!" he exclaimed. "Look here, just cast your optic in this direction, old fellow. That's all, old man—just a look!"

From the quadrangle below them came the blare of bugles, and the gaps were filled up by a miscellaneous din emanating from tins, whistles, combs and paper. Billy hurried over, and the two chums leaned from their window in astonishment.

"A giddy procession," murmured Billy.

It was; but a procession of the kind rarely seen outside of a circus. There were about forty boys in the show; and every one of them was attired as a cripple of the most dilapidated kind. They all looked as if they had been rolled upon by a steam-roller, and then passed through a chaff-cutter. Bandages enwrapped their heads, and their arms and legs appeared to be broken in numerous places. Many carried crutches, and an odd effect was given by one humorist who elected to appear on stilts, which were liberally bandaged. Two buglers headed the procession; and most of the others had instruments of some sort or other. At arranged intervals they gave vent to sepulchral groans. In the van was a tattered banner, bearing the words, "The Calamitous Cripples. Break your leg and join."

"What is it?" asked the mystified Jack. "What's the giddy wheeze?"

Billy Faraday was far too absorbed in watching the amazing spectacle to answer him, and Jack's question lapsed. The procession drew nearer and nearer, and the noise was ear-splitting. The Cripples drew themselves up before the window of Study 9, and Jack was moved to call out, "Lovely! Is it the

National Anthem or Alexander's Ragtime Band? I never could tell the difference."

His shaft of wit, however, went almost unnoticed in the general uproar, and Billy Faraday grasped a more cutting form of witticism; he got a handful of pennies and half-pennies, and threw them one at a time to the serenading party below.

Cummles, hammering at a tin drum with zest, received one of the coins full on the bridge of the nose, and it broke short his performance. He held up his hand, and with a final crash of sound the Cripples completed their selection.

"Know," roared Cummles at the top of his voice, "that a new Society has been formed, called the Calamitous Cripples! We let everybody join—the more the merrier! And our object is—" He turned to his supporters for the rest.

"—death to the Crees!" roared the crowd, in disconcerting chorus.

So this was the strength of the new society—it was a rival show to the Crees! Jack realized that Cummles was getting his own back for his rejection and disgrace at the last Cree meeting, and he whistled softly. But Cummles was speaking again.

"We therefore begin on the Chief Cree!" he yelled, and as at a given signal all the Cripples raised their hands, and sent a volley of hard, tightly-rolled paper balls at Jack and Billy as they stood open-mouthed at the window.

The fusillade took the two Crees by surprise, and Jack for the moment did not know what to do; but he soon settled that question, and with Billy jumped out of the window, and rushed the banner of the Calamitous Cripples. It was flagrantly against rules to jump out of the window at all, and soon a free fight was taking place around the banner of the Cripples.

"To it, Crees!" yelled Jack, wrestling furiously with one of the banner supporters. Someone had grasped his leg, and he could not keep upright much longer; sooner or later he would have to go down.

"Ouch!" Down he went, and down went half a dozen others in a panting, scrambling, tossing mass.

There was wild disorder for lively minutes, but force of numbers gave victory to the Cripples, who rescued their tattered banner and scampered away with it. Jack stood looking after them with fire in his eye.

"Jingo," he observed to Billy Faraday, "but I can see some immense japes this term, with the Crees and the Cripples. What do you think?"

"We've got to score on them," said Billy emphatically, "and score right away. Watch us notch ahead."

Jack nodded meaningly; then, as someone touched him on the arm, he wheeled round. It was Septimus Patch, and the schoolboy detective's eyes were shining. He was plainly full of some scheme or other.

"Comrades!" he said. "Don't waste your time here—I've got the best idea out for the discovery of the fellow that's giving Daw a hand."

"What are you going to do—advertise?"

Patch smiled tolerantly. "Daw—Doctor Daw, as you call him—said that this chap, whoever he is, is keeping an eye on Billy here?"

"That's so."

"Well, why shouldn't we—" he looked around to make certain that they were not overheard, "—why shouldn't we lead the fellow out on a false scent?"

"Meaning?"

"Sort of red herring business, you know. The three of us could sneak out before call-over and make it appear as if we were going to hide the Star somewhere out in the bush. If there is anyone on the watch, it's the Commonwealth Bank to a peanut that he'll slink out after us."

"Good word—slink," said Jack approvingly. "Yes, Patchie, the idea's not so dusty. We've got time. We could lie in ambush for the beggar and catch him red-handed."

"Better leave him alone—just make certain who he is," warned Septimus, polishing his great horn-rimmed glasses. "You see, if we just lie low and say nuffin, like Brer Rabbit, the spy won't know that we're fly to his little game."

"Good for you, Picklock Holmes," said Jack. "You mean, he'll think that he's working quite safely, unknown to anyone, and all the time we know, and are pulling his leg so much that he'll need a boat-hook to take his boots off."

"Prezactly, comrade," returned Septimus, chaffingly. "Your brain is bucking up lately, isn't it? We never know what we can do till we try, do we? However, to the bright, brisk business! You"—turning to Billy Faraday—"you slip up into the study and pretend to bring something out with you—we'll watch here."

"We're the giddy conspirators, old boy," said Jack. "Get a move on—we haven't any too much time."

In a few minutes the three boys had set out from the school, striking into the thick belt of scrub-lands that lay towards the north. They pressed forward for a good ten minutes, and at the end of that time Billy strode on alone, making as much noise as he could, while Jack and the amateur detective crouched behind the undergrowth, to watch closely for any follower.

Billy's footsteps died away, and there came only the faint sound of his passage through the scrub; then that in turn faded till it was almost inaudible.

"'Fraid we've drawn blank, old boy," said Jack in a low whisper. "Can't hear anything, can you?"

"Wait," was all that Patch had for answer; he had his head cocked to one side in a listening attitude, and all at once he raised a finger for silence.

During a tense ten seconds he listened, Jack scarcely taking breath, and then the detective nodded as one who had satisfied himself.

"Get down," he whispered; "somebody coming."

Sure enough, almost at once came the sound of footsteps; and Jack, peering through the interstices of a wall of greenery, could barely restrain a gasp as he saw a tall, pasty-faced, weedy youth strolling negligently along the faint path that Billy Faraday had followed, and, although he wore the college cap of blue and gold, he was smoking an expensive brand of cigarette.

In dead silence the two watched him pass their field of vision, and then he, too, was swallowed up in the bush.

Jack turned to Patch with a criss-cross mark of puzzlement creasing his eyebrows. "Now, what do you make of that?" he asked softly. "That's Redisham, and the dirty slacker's smoking at that. But is he following Billy or not?"

"Or is it only coincidence that he comes from Victoria?" asked Septimus in the same discreet voice. "Very funny, isn't it?"

"Now, you know what sort of a fellow Redisham is," went on Jack. "He's just the sort that'd have gambling debts, and all that, although his father's got piles of cash, they say. Question is, is he clever enough to be used as a tool?"

"Comrade, I don't know," admitted Septimus, slowly shaking his head. "It's often these foolish-looking fellows that turn out pretty cunning in the long run. All the same, Redisham—the man's an ass, a weak-minded ass with an eye for 'loud' dress, and—"

"—and no eye for catching a cricket ball, or any sort of sport, except betting—if you can call that sport," Jack snorted. "Little Montague Redisham isn't the sneak in this case, I fancy."

"Well, then, what's he doing?" countered the amateur detective, with index finger marking his point. "It looks jolly fishy, doesn't it?"

"Might have come out to smoke that rotten cigarette of his."

"I thought of that, but the coincidence of the time, and the direction of his outing, is hard to get over. Anyhow, we'll find out, we'll find out—don't worry."

They got out of their cramping positions behind the undergrowth and stepped out into the little glade. Barely had they done so when there came a loud cry from some distance ahead—and Jack knew the voice as well as his own.

It was Billy's voice.

"Help—help!"

Jack jumped about a foot in the air, and shot a sharp glance at Septimus Patch. "Jiminy!" he said, quickly, "that's old Billy—wonder what's up? Here—after him."

Symonds and Patch put their heads down and ran. Heedless of the undergrowth that set traps for their feet and that tore at them in the shape of thorn-bushes, they charged madly forward, and all at once Jack stopped and picked something up from the ground.

"Here—look at this!" It was Billy's cap, with the Deepwater College badge in the front of it; and Patch pulled up and glanced keenly at the ground with sharp eyes.

"A struggle—see?" he panted, pointing to the way the bracken had been tossed about and the turf trampled by heavy heels. "A struggle, and then—then—what happened?"

"Don't say he's been knocked on the head and dragged off," groaned Jack, looking about him helplessly. "Here, Patchie, have a look at these marks—what are they?"

"Good—good," observed Patch, scanning them closely. "See, Billy got away and ran for it—the other chap after him. See how the big, heavy print is stamped over that other? They were running, the both of them—and—"

"Come on," said Jack curtly; and the two of them tore off once

more, stopping to pick up the trail every now and then until they were startled by a loud, frenzied crashing through the brushes.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Patch, stopping; and into their arms, almost, Billy Faraday staggered, hatless and dishevelled. He was panting heavily, and seemed almost done; a sharp twig had scratched his cheek badly, for it was bleeding.

"Billy—you're all right?" demanded his chum, seizing him by the arm.

Before Billy could pant out an answer, another fellow came up at a run, and halted, half-hidden in the scrub, at the sight of the two who now reinforced the fugitive. His cap, pulled down over his eyes, hid his face pretty well; but Jack knew at once that it was Tiger Humbolt who stood staring at them.

It was Septimus Patch who decided the next move.

"After him—I've got a gun!" he yelled at the top of his voice; and Humbolt started and then, wheeling about, vanished into the thick bush at a run. He knew that Billy had fired a revolver at him during his attempted escape with the handbag, and he was disposed to take Patch's cry at its face value. As Patch had intended, of course; for he did not attempt to give chase. Instead, he glanced at his watch.

"Ten minutes to call-over," he said; "we'd better get back."

On the way back to the college Billy explained that he had been standing in a thicket when Humbolt had jumped on him from behind and carried him to the ground. After a struggle he had broken free and run for his life.

"I doubled on my tracks," he concluded, "and came back again, when I ran into you. That's all—lucky it wasn't worse."

"And did you see Monty Redisham?" asked Patch.

"Redisham—that rich blighter in the Sixth? The prefect?"

"The slacker," said Jack trenchantly. He went on to explain how Redisham had come into the mystery, and Billy said that the plot

was now thicker than ever.

"I can't make it out," he said, thoughtfully, dabbing his scratched cheek with his handkerchief. "No, I didn't see the brute at all. He was following me, you say?"

"Looked like it, comrade," said Patch, "but then we can't say for certain. I'll have to give the matter some thought," he went on, with a resumption of his light-hearted manner.

"Another thing requiring some thought," put in Jack, "is, how are we going to score off those Cripple lunatics? We want to shake them up pretty suddenly, you know. I think we'll call a special meeting of the Crees in our study to-night, and we'll think up something really smart."

When the Crees had assembled, managing in some inexplicable manner to cram themselves into Study 9, Jack was delighted to learn that one of the fellows was ready with a plan.

"Chief Black Feather," he said, in the approved style of address, "may I suggest a scheme for the downfall of those scoundrel palefaces—I mean Cripples?"

"Of course," said Jack at once. "In fact, I was going to ask you fellows to come to light with some such idea. Spring the giddy wheeze, mon brave French," he explained grandly, "very hard."

"Well," said the Cree, "the bright idea is this. I happen to have heard that the Cripples are holding a meeting to-morrow afternoon—they've got one of the classrooms on the north wing for the purpose. Now, I happen to know that up in the ceiling over that wing there are several bags of sawdust—been stored there for ages, and I think the Head's forgotten all about them. Now, it's a shame to waste them, and there's a nice big man-hole in the classroom, and—"

"I think we see the rest!" said Jack with a laugh. "Which classroom are they in?"

"The end one—the drawing-room, next to the extra French set."

"Good—nominations for four fellows to carry out the scheme? I'll make one myself."

Three others were accordingly chosen to deluge the Cripples' meeting with sawdust, and on the following afternoon the conspirators gained access to the space between the ceiling and roof. A busy meeting of the Cripples, with closed doors and windows, was in progress; and there was going to be no mistake whatever about the disorder and surprise that would follow the avalanche of sawdust.

"The jape of the century!" averred Jack Symonds in a low whisper. "What about the cover for the man-hole? Have you got it?"

"Yes, she lifts pretty easily, but I won't pull her right out, or they'll be ready for us. Now, how are we going to open fire?"

"Wait a second." Jack took a swift look round at his assistants, flashing the electric torch that he had brought with him. "I've got it. We'll each take a bag, and as soon as Martin whips the cover off the trap, I'll let fly—then you, and you next, and Martin last. See? That'll give him time to grab his bag after taking the cover off. All ready?"

"Let her go, Gallagher," murmured the Crees, lifting the big, open-mouthed bags; and at a word from Jack, Big Martin whisked the cover off the man-hole. A square of light opened in the dark floor beneath them, and there came the murmur of voices from the aperture.

That was all that the Crees had time to take in, for the next moment Jack had tipped the great bag forward, and the sawdust gushed out in a stream. The two other bags followed, and Martin finished the good work with his contribution, to the dismay obtaining in the room below.

Jack leaned forward, convulsed with laughter, and cast a glance down into the room; then his face lost its smile, and his jaw dropped.

"Hokey!" he said. "Now we've done it!"

"Why? What?" asked the others, pressing forward.

"We lifted the wrong trap," murmured Jack in a voice of horror. "That's Monsieur Anastasie and the extra French set!"

CHAPTER VIII

FANE'S FATAL MISTAKE

Strange as it may seem, the coolest person who looked on the appalling scene in the classroom presided over by the French master was Jack Symonds himself. Recovering from his surprise, he could gaze down and enjoy the havoc even as he knew that, unless something intervened to save them, he and his companions were booked for a severe spasm of trouble—and trouble of the direst order.

But the classroom scene was irresistibly funny—too funny for words. Monsieur Anastasie stood like a sawdust statue, his comical moustache powdered with sawdust, too amazed, too dumbfounded, to utter a word of protest or surprise. Before him the sawdust was spread in an irregular layer, almost knee-deep, and it was piled on tables and chairs, and the boys of the extra French set in generous fashion.

All at once, the French master found his voice—with a vengeance. "What is ze meaning of zis?" he cried, dusting at his coat, and sending the sawdust flying in clouds. "Pah! I am smother—I am choke! Abominable!"

He raved and danced on the platform, scooping the sawdust in handfuls from his person, and then shaking indignant fists at the open man-hole.

"Peste! I will not have ze tomfool antic! Ah, but you shall answer for him before quickly," he choked. "Sacrebleu! It is an outrage—it is vat you call indignation! Ze ear of ze headmaster shall be apprised of zis!"

The extra French set, half-guessing what had happened, commenced to roar with laughter at those who had received the contents of the bags upon their heads, and the furious Anastasie became more wild and incoherent than ever.

"Ah, you laugh?" he cried. "You identify me comical? But you shall not entertain ze ribald laughter for longer! Remember ze proverb—he laughs loudest who gathers no moss!"

There was a perfect yell at this brilliant effort on the part of Monsieur Anastasie, who was always tangling his proverbs in the most ludicrous manner.

But the laughter was cut short when Jack Symonds began to appear in instalments through the open man-hole. His feet showed first; then his legs dangled; in a moment he was hanging by his hands. Then, he let go, and came to the floor as lightly as a feather.

"I must explain—" he commenced.

But Monsieur Anastasie literally overwhelmed him with a torrent of French and English phrases, and he could not get a word in on any account.

"Ah, you are ze misdemeanour!" said the excitable Frenchman bitingly. "You play at Père Santa Claus, hein? Explain yourself without ze hesitate! You shall disport yourself before ze headmaster, quoi!"

"I'm really sorry for what's happened," said Jack, seeking to cool the master's wrath by appearing calm himself. "It was all an accident—"

"Ah, an accident!"

"Yes, that's so—"

"Ze sawdust has tipped himself over?"

"I don't mean that. You see, sir, we were going to play a joke on those cads—I mean those fellows next door. We did not mean to harm you in any way. Only thing was, though, we mistook the giddy—that is, the man-hole up there. The two of them are close together, and in the dark we opened the wrong one."

He stood awaiting the verdict of Monsieur Anastasie, who took the frank confession in silence. Then he dusted a little sawdust

off his sleeve.

"I rejoice myself you have owned up, Symonds. Ze business was very foolish, and you are too big to intermeddle yourself with ze foolish tricks of little boys. I was going to inform ze headmaster of your prank, entendez-vous? But no—you are not a bad boy. You must disperse ze sawdust."

And the hot-tempered little French master actually smiled. It was his way. He flew into a furious rage in a second or two; but it never lasted long. And in this case Jack's open confession had somehow subtly pleased him. He turned to his class.

"It is wise, is it not," he observed, "to be certain always? Think what our friend would have saved had he ze forethought to look into ze room. Remember ze proverb: a look before you leap saves nine!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" The class chuckled its appreciation of this portmanteaued proverb, while Jack and others of the Crees who had nothing to do, hastily collected the sawdust and shamefacedly put it into the sacks that they had emptied with such gusto. Monsieur Anastasie, deep in the mysteries of French grammar, permitted himself an occasional broad smile, quite restored to his native good-humour.

Just as Jack was about to leave the room, however, the French master walked over to him and spoke quietly.

"Two hundred lines," he said, "will repair ze mistake. From Corneille—Le Cid. And put in all ze accents."

He smiled and nodded as if he had just handed Jack a five-pound note, and Jack got out into the corridor, feeling that he had made a fool of himself.

"Jingo, though!" he exclaimed, "I was jolly lucky not to be carpeted before the Head. What a dickens of a mess I would have landed myself into! Hullo, Patchie!"

"How fares it, comrade?" asked Patch, in his usual grand manner,

saluting Jack with an elaborate salaam. "What is this rumour that comes to my ears that you have met with a set-back in the course of that jape intended for the Cripples? Untrue, of course?"

"No such luck. We made an awful bloomer, and we'll have it in for those Cripple blighters worse than ever now. Instead of letting the Cripples have the sawdust, we made a slight miscalculation, and tipped it all over old 'Annie' and his class."

"'Annie,' I take it, is Monsieur Anastasie? I suppose he was sore?"

"Oh, he cut up a bit at first, but he soon cooled down. In fact, he was rather decent about it. Handed me two hundred lines, that's all."

"Bad luck, comrade. But it might have been worse, mightn't it?"

"Oh, easily! I might have dropped on Annie's head, and killed him, or perhaps the sawdust might have choked one of those grinning beggars in the extra French set. Or there might have been a tribe of death-adders hidden in the sawdust. Oh, yes; I came off pretty well considering." He laughed his usual happy, careless laugh. "Why, I've gone and forgotten that trial swim for this afternoon—down at the baths. Coming along?"

"Er—no thanks. In fact, comrade, I may confide that I—well, I can't swim."

"Oh, get out—you must. On a hot afternoon like this, too. Come along, I'll give you a few pointers about the game. What on earth would you do if you were left on a sinking ship with no lifebelts and unable to swim?"

Patch seemed to ponder the situation. "I expect I should sink," he announced brightly.

"Come, I'll tell you what I'll do," said Jack. "I'll defy an indignant world, and teach you the noble art of supporting yourself in the aqueous elephant—I mean element. That is, after the trial swim."

"What is this trial swim, comrade? For that matter, any sort of a swim would be a trial—for me."

"Joke?" asked Jack, carelessly. "Fact is, old fellow, this is a preliminary canter, so to speak, for a hundred-yards championship of the Coll. Friend Billy is in for the event and he's a hot favourite too. You'll see. It's a pound to a peanut that the Cup goes to Salmon's House this year. I'm just going to give Billy a bit of a sprint over the length."

"I'm sure it will be most exciting, comrade. I never did like baths, though. The sight of all that water—ugh! Tell you what, I've just remembered that I'd made an appointment. Beastly forgetful of me, but—"

"No, you don't," laughed Jack, grabbing the Socialist's arm and dragging him towards the entrance to the baths. "You must learn swimming some time—why not now. Hop into a costume—wait till my swim's over."

In a few minutes Patch stood shivering upon the edge in a costume several sizes too large for him, while Jack took a ten seconds' start on Billy in a hundred-yards sprint. Septimus looked on with an eye of cold disfavour as the two chums swept the length of the baths in a cloud of foam and bubbles. Billy had perfected a very neat trudgeon-crawl, and he beat Jack, who was no mean hand at the game, by a matter of three seconds, despite the start that the latter had had.

Later on when Billy ran off to change, Jack caught sight of the miserable Septimus Patch and recalled his intention of giving the inventor a few lessons.

"Here," said Jack, "come along to the shallow end—look slippy."

Septimus paced gingerly after him along the wet boards, and all at once he executed a most astounding manœuvre. His feet went from under him, and he landed head-first in the water.

"Good gracious. What's the beggar up to?" asked Jack, who had imagined that Patch had dived into the deeper part of the bath. "I say," he went on, as Patch's head appeared, "you can swim—after all?"

"Swim—glug!" said Patch, as a wavelet curved into his conveniently-opened mouth. "No—help! I'm drowning—glug!"

He paddled his way frantically to a ladder near by, and hauled himself out.

"You asked me to look slippy, and I slipped!" he said. "Believe me, it's no joke. How far did the water fall when I swallowed that little lot—ugh! I had a young Niagara trickling down my throat! Comrade, does it all taste like that?"

Jack choked with laughter. "Mind your step," he warned. "Here, this is the shallow end. Hop in—it's only up to your waist."

He prepared to demonstrate the art of kicking while holding to a step on the level of the water, and Septimus appeared to manage that part of the business well enough. Jack then showed his study-mate a few simple arm movements, and invited Septimus to try while being supported in the water by his middle.

After a few minutes of this sport, Patch wriggled out of his mentor's grasp and spluttered indignantly.

"Do you want to drown me?" he asked. "I'll buy a gun and let you shoot me—it'd be quicker."

"Why, what's up?"

"Up, do you say? Down more fits it—at least that's where my head was, under water, while you were watching my feet! I don't want to die a lingering death, thanks. I've had enough for the first lesson—and I'd like to take the others by post."

As he clambered out of the bath, his loose costume hanging about him in ridiculous folds, a roar of laughter went up from the fellows bathing there.

When they got back to the study they met Billy Faraday. He was grinning broadly. "I hear you've been teaching the inventor how to swim!" he laughed. "I believe he found the water quite wet?"

"Yes, comrade," answered Patch genially, "and so would you if only you were more familiar with that unknown quantity."

"Well, you ought—" began Billy; but he broke off with a sharp, "I say!"

"What's the matter?"

"The coat—it's gone! And the Star's in it, too!"

Jack and Septimus looked up in surprise, and were startled to observe that it was even as Billy had said—the coat was gone. They jumped up and made a hurried search.

"Jingo, this is serious!" murmured Jack. "It's gone, right enough. Wonder whether that beast Redisham—?"

"It's got misplaced, perhaps," said Patch, who had put down his book and joined in the hunt. "Mislaid somewhere or other—"

"But I never wear it!" said Billy. "How could it?"

"Fane—Fane's the solution, I think," jerked out the amateur detective, rubbing his chin hard. "We didn't tell him, I remember, that we'd hidden the Star, and perhaps he's—but here he is."

"Yes, here I am," said Fane, closing the door. "You fellows look excited—what's up?"

"Look here—did you move a coat of Billy's? It was hanging up in this corner."

"Billy's coat!" exclaimed Fane, turning a trifle pale. "What's the matter with Billy's coat?"

"Matter enough, comrade," said Patch grimly. "We didn't tell you—we forgot, as a matter of fact—we didn't tell you that we'd sewn the Black Star up in one of the seams of that coat, to hide it. And now the coat's gone."

"My only aunt!" gasped Fane, falling into a chair. "Is that right? Was the Star in that coat?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Why?" echoed Fane. "I sold that coat for five bob to an Indian hawker yesterday afternoon! And I expect he's miles off by this time!"

CHAPTER IX

ALIAS BILLY FARADAY

For almost a minute the three chums stared in hypnotized fashion at the bent head of Fane, as the bully-killer sat dispiritedly in his chair.

"You mean you—" gurgled Billy at length.

"I'm awfully sorry, old pal, but there it is," said Fane, with the stolid calmness of despair. "I'd give anything to be able to say I'm mistaken, but it's no go. I see my mistake now. The coat's just the dead ringer of one I've got myself, and like an ass, I mistook them. Only just now, when you mentioned Billy's coat being missing, I remembered that my own coat hasn't been unpacked."

The four boys were silent for several seconds. The sharp, sudden blow, the renewed assurance from Fane that the coat had actually gone, left the three pals dumbfounded.

"Well," said Jack gloomily, "it's gone, right enough. We've lost it."

"Billy, Billy!" cried Fane, "it was my fault absolutely. I don't know what made me so terribly careless. I'm no end cut up about it—isn't there anything I can do?"

"Nothing suggests itself at the moment," said Patch, with a recovery of his calm manner. "The thing would be, of course, to get hold of the hawker and buy the coat back. But—" He shook his head, with pursed lips. Then, all at once, he smacked Jack heavily upon the back—so heavily that Jack indignantly jumped a foot in the air.

"Great Caesar!" he gasped, "What did you do that for, you giddy lunatic? You've dislocated my neck!"

"Bother your neck!" cried Septimus. "I've got the plan to get back the spiffing old Star—we're in luck! It's brother Egbert!"

"Brother Egbert?" echoed Jack, staring at the inventor open-

mouthed. "Has he gone off his rocker?" he inquired anxiously of the other two. "Poor fellow—brains all addled. Or perhaps poached. I knew he would do it. My advice is, Patchie, wear an ice-pack on your fevered brow."

"It's all right, comrade," Septimus assured him. "Here's another occasion to thank your uncle Patch! Brother Egbert, I may explain, is my brother, and he'll be down here to-night. He's making a trip down the coast on his motor-bike, and he intended to call in at the school on the 14th, which is to-day."

"Well, what about it?"

"My good baboon," said Patch pityingly, "don't you see? Egbert will be only too pleased to take Billy, or myself, in pursuit of the jacket and—the Black Star. I think I should go, because it was really my fault that the coat went. Edgar A. Poe didn't mention anything about stray accidents that might happen in any good, well-regulated family, or their bearing on his no-concealment wheeze. I confess I begin to lose my respect for Edgar. The next hiding-place for the Star will be a most abstruse one, when we get the thing back—"

"If we do," supplemented Billy. "Look here, Patch, that was a very defective plan of yours, I agree, but I think I'll make the trip with brother Egbert, all the same."

There came a rapping at the door, and Jack invited the rapper to come in. A singular-looking young man entered, took a comprehensive glance over its occupants, and then spoke in a drawling, bored voice.

"Permit me to introduce myself," he said. "I am Egbert, fifth Baron Patch. Sounds good, doesn't it, that phrase, 'barren patch'? Rumour hath it that one Septimus, a juvenile relative of mine, is to be found in the precincts of this study. Ah, I see I am right—how are you, brother?"

"Bursting with robust health and goodwill," declared Septimus modestly. "See here, though, you've just arrived at the right

moment. A rather interesting business has been going on here, and—can I tell him everything, Billy?"

Billy Faraday nodded, and Septimus explained the whole matter of the Star and its disappearance to his attentive brother, who resembled a collection of walking-sticks as he half-lay, half-sat in one of the chairs, his big head resting in his open palm.

"Quite a decent little mystery," he commented, when his brother's account had finished. "I twig what you want me to do—give chase, and all that sort of rot, what? Well, if any of you would care for a rough, bumpy, perilous journey on the back of a big 7-9, then I shall be happy to oblige. As I said to the Duke last week, when he asked me for a fiver, 'Dee-lighted, old bean!'"

"That's that, then," said Septimus. "The only question is, who's going? Billy wants to go, and I'm not anxious to stand in his way, see? But though we can arrange that Billy shall not be missed to-night, it might prove dashed awkward to-morrow, when he does not show up in class."

"Who's taking us in the morning?" thoughtfully asked Billy. "Old Salmon, isn't it? How on earth—"

"Don't worry, comrade!" interrupted Patch suddenly. "I've got the most ripping suggestion, and you'd better be off right now. Your absence will never be noticed—I'll fix that much for you. But try and be back by to-morrow night—I'll not guarantee to have the beaks hoodwinked much after that time. Now, Fane said that the hawker was going south—"

"That's right," said Fane eagerly, anxious to be of assistance to redeem something of his error. "He was just outside the gate, and lots of the fellows gave him old clothes, and I heard Big Martin ask him where he was bound for—he said Moruya. He only had a covered cart and a scraggy-looking old mare, and you ought to be able to catch up—"

"Just what the Marquis said, when I lost my hat out of his car, and ran back for it." It was Egbert Patch who had spoken. "We've got a

lot to do, and I think we'll vamoose. Good-bye for the present, and sweet dreams!"

With these words, the eccentric-looking young fellow, suddenly animated, jumped to his feet and, grabbing Faraday by the arm, left the room. Inside a few minutes the chattering roar of his motor-bike was heard, and he had left the College, racing southward with Billy Faraday clinging perilously behind him.

"Doesn't believe in losing time," murmured Jack. "But, I say, aren't we going to have a bit of trouble in accounting for Billy's being away, to-morrow?"

"My dear old Angora," returned Patch, "aren't you aware that Salmon is as near blind and deaf as makes no difference? What's to prevent us from making a dummy of Billy, and putting him in Billy's seat? You know he sits right at the back of the class."

"Good grief!" said Jack. "Is that the bright and brainy idea? Patchie, old boy, the sooner you go to sea the better for you—and all of us. Who ever heard of a dummy—and in school at that? Why, Salmon's sure to smell a rat, and once he asks Billy a question, the game's bust."

"Not so, comrade! Among my other accomplishments, I am no mean hand at ventriloquism, and—"

"Well, you've got a pretty tall nerve, Patchie! I'll confess that I'd never have thought of such a dodge."

"Its boldness," averred Septimus, "is its strength. To-morrow I shall prove that. Meanwhile, there is a most irritating chunk of Sallust to be prepared for the morn. Leave me to it."

And, opening his books, the extraordinary fellow calmly set to work. After a moment or two of silence, Jack picked up the volume from which Patch had been taking swimming instruction, and began to turn its leaves idly....

On the following morning, Mr. Salmon entered the classroom with his usual salutation, and the whole form eyed him

apprehensively. Would he surprise them in their deception? Was an awful row impending?

For, in the back row of the class, reclining gracefully on Billy Faraday's seat, was a dummy figure. Attired in an old suit of Billy's, it looked very lifelike, its arms supporting a book on the desk before it, and its head apparently none the less attentive for being stuffed with straw.

As the lesson proceeded, and as the master still failed to smell a rat, the class's fears subsided, and they began to enjoy the joke. Subdued chuckles sounded at intervals, the presence of the dummy schoolboy striking his companions as distinctly grotesque; but, as Patch had said, Mr. Salmon was almost deaf and very dim of sight, and unless anything out of the ordinary occurred, Billy's absence would pass unnoticed.

"Bathgate," said Mr. Salmon suddenly, "commence the translation. Line 25."

Bathgate, a big, sleepy youth at the back corner of the class, awoke suddenly from his dreams of better things, and began translating the Latin in a loud, clear, albeit, a trifle hesitant, voice.

"Speak up," commanded Mr. Salmon.

"Ought to yell in your ear," observed Bathgate, with a humorous glance at his mates.

"What did you say?" asked the master.

"I—thought—you—could—hear," said the shameless Bathgate. "Shall I proceed?"

"Proceed—yes! No, one moment. You've done pretty well. Go on, next boy."

There was a dead, stunned silence. The next boy was no boy at all, but the effigy of Bill Faraday, and the effigy simply sat still and stared at the master with the most guileless stare in the world.

"Faraday—you heard me?"

"Yes—sir," squeaked Patch, diving down under his desk, and attempting to throw his voice in the direction of the quiescent Billy. But the attempt met with poor success. The squeak did not come to the ears of the master at all, and he repeated his reminder, with a trace of irritation at the delay.

"Faraday—I believe you've gone to sleep."

The ingenious Patch was now brought up against a poser, but his resourcefulness met the obstacle. He got down on the floor and attempted to cross over to a position behind Billy's seat, which would enable him to deputize for the thick-headed effigy.

Unfortunately he was observed, and Mr. Salmon demanded at once to know what he was doing.

"Dropped my pen, sir," he explained loudly, and then frantically whispered to Jack, "Get behind Bill's chair and speak up."

To cover Jack's move across the aisle between the desks, Patch stood up, and showed his pen to Mr. Salmon, as ocular evidence of the truth of his explanation.

"I've got it now, sir," he observed brightly. "It had rolled right under my seat."

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Salmon testily. "Sit down."

But Septimus was sparring for time until Jack was ready to take up Billy's translation. So he added, in his most foolish manner, "It's curious, sir, where these things get to, isn't it! Once I lost a pencil, and found it in the bottom of my trousers. Philosophers call it—"

"Sit down, sir!"

"—call it the perversity of inanimate—"

"Will you sit down?"

"—objects, like a collar-stud, or—"

"Patch!"

"Very well, sir," said Patch, sitting down with the aggrieved air of one who has been casting his pearls before swine. He glanced sharply towards Billy's chair, and sighed with relief.

"Perhaps we can get on with our work now," said Mr. Salmon sarcastically. "Faraday, are you properly awake?"

"Yes, sir!" yelled the supposed Faraday in such a loud voice that it came to Mr. Salmon's ears in the form of a smart answer. The master nodded. "Go on, then," he said.

Jack went on as fast as he was able, and for five minutes the class held its breath. At the end of that time the possibility that Billy's deception would be discovered seemed to have passed. The master went on through the class, and the boys were presently deep in their work; so deep, in fact, that Bathgate felt impelled to relieve the tedium by a little horse-play.

Propping his book up before him, he proceeded to annoy his neighbour in front, one MacAlister, in sundry well-thought-out ways that ended in Mac's turning round and firing a book at Bathgate's head.

Bathgate, who had, of course, been expecting retaliation, ducked smartly, and the book hit the wall with a bang. Mr. Salmon looked up, for the book happened to have been a dictionary, and the sound of its arrival rather loud.

"Bathgate," said the master, "don't tap."

The class chuckled afresh, and Bathgate inserted a pin in the toe of his boot, winking across at Jack Symonds in unmistakable "you-watch-me" manner. Then, sitting back innocently, he let the pin sink into MacAlister's calf.

"Ow!" gasped MacAlister, jumping up in a rage and aiming another book at his tormentor's grinning face. "Take that!"

Bathgate, however, had no intention of taking it, and he slid sidewise on his chair to avoid the missile. His move was too sudden for his equilibrium. The chair went over, and he went

over with it, pitching head-first into the stomach of the bogus Billy Faraday. The effigy did not protest, but slid gracefully to the floor, where it lay in the attitude of a gentleman looking under the sofa for his collar-stud.

"Jimjams!" gasped Septimus Patch, "That's done it!"

Done it, it had. Mr. Salmon demanded to know why Bathgate and Faraday were crawling around on the floor, and Bathgate, looking sheepish, said something about falling off his chair.

"My chair overbalanced, sir," he said. "I knocked Faraday over."

The class was on tenterhooks. Would Mr. Salmon come up and investigate for himself? Faraday, at any rate, lay there absolutely still.

"Faraday," said the master, grimly, "evidently desires to emulate Doré, the artist, who drew his pictures while lying down on his stomach. Or is he just asleep?"

"I think he's hurt," said the indomitable Patch, getting up again. He meant to pull the fat out of the fire if it were humanly possible. He grabbed the effigy and savagely hauled it into place, keeping between it and the master all the time. He got back to his seat, but barely had he reached it when the dummy boy doubled up at the waist like a jack-knife, and banged its head on the floor. To Patch's horror, the head, which was loosely attached, came off and rolled a full yard down the passage.

Jumping up once more, Patch grabbed the head, and, amid the laughter of his companions, restored it to its position. The effigy of Faraday grinned impudently at the master, its head on one side, as Patch got back to his seat.

"There is too much disorder," said Mr. Salmon petulantly. "Far too much of it. Patch, and you too, Faraday, and Bathgate, take one hundred lines."

Just at that moment came the bell announcing the end of the period, and Mr. Salmon, gathering his gown about him, stalked

out indignantly.

"Phew!" breathed Patch. "I don't want to have a strain like that again for a few years. Talk about nerves! You'd want nerves of phosphor-bronze, or something, with an obstreperous dummy like this on your hands."

He landed a kick into the effigy's waistcoat, and it fell on to the floor. The class simply roared.

"Anyhow," went on Patch, "you've got to do a hundred lines, you grinning idiot. Thank goodness I haven't got to look after you this afternoon."

CHAPTER X

THE CHASE FOR THE STAR

Meanwhile, how had it been faring with Billy Faraday and Egbert Patch. It will be remembered that they left by bike on the afternoon following the departure of the hawker, so that that person had a twenty-four hours' start on them. Not that that mattered very much. The big machine could cut down that discrepancy with ease. The only problem left unsettled was the question of whether or not they would be able to find the purchaser of the precious coat.

Through the night they sped for two or three hours, and at length came storming into Rimvale, a small town of some importance in the coastal district.

Here they put up for the night; and, early next morning searched for news of the hawker. Fortunately, they had not far to seek. An old man, who had purchased some articles from the itinerant vendor, informed them that the person they sought had left the town on the previous night.

"This is alarmingly easy!" grinned Patch, leaping into the saddle as the big machine moved off. Billy followed suit, landing on the carrier; and they were off once more.

Through the long, dusty miles Egbert set his machine positively roaring, and the distances were eaten up in fine style. To such good effect did they travel that inside three hours they came up with the hawker's covered cart, and asked him to pull up.

"What the matter?" he asked, leaning down on them from his perch like a strange bird.

"You must excuse us, Mucilage," said Egbert Patch. "That is your name, isn't it? But the fact is, old coffee-bean, you bought a coat back at Deepwater College in error, and we want it back."

"What do you mean? I paid for it."

"Quite so, my dear Tupentine; quite so. You see, a chap sold you a coat belonging to this fellow here, in mistake for one of his own, and we want to buy it back. See!" And as a token of good faith, he showed a hand filled with silver.

The Indian wrinkled up his brows in a puzzled fashion, and then began to rummage in his goods without another word. At length he turned to the expectant pair and eyed them keenly.

"You mean a brown jacket?" he asked.

"Yes, yes," said Billy, impatiently. "You've got it there, have you? Bring it out, and I'll give you ten bob for it."

The Indian shook his head gravely, and calmly repacked his bundles.

"I can't do anything, sir," he said at length. "The coat is sold."

"Sold!"

The other nodded, and went on to explain in his slow, but intelligible English. It appeared that a man had bought the coat in Rimvale for six shillings. The Indian made a small song about the fact that he had been unable to get six-and-six for it. At all events, he did not know who the man was. That he was young, and that he was evidently a native of Rimvale, he was able to state. Beyond that, he knew nothing.

"Thanks," said Billy in a low voice, turning away. It seemed that he was pursued by the worst of bad luck. How on earth were they to discover the owner of the coat, now? It might be that the Indian was not telling the truth. Billy was ready to imagine that he had observed a gleam of avarice in the fellow's eye. Of course he had not been deceived; he knew that there must be something unusual about the coat. And perhaps he had lied....

Billy groaned. "Rimvale's the only place," he said, and, mounting behind Egbert Patch, he sped off back along the path to the little fishing town.

Arrived there, they stowed their machine in the local garage, and

set out on a feverish errand of investigation. But they knew that it was pretty hopeless.

"How on earth can we be successful?" Billy repeated to himself again and again, and as the morning wore away his hopes sank lower and lower.

All at once he gave a great cry, caught Patch by the arm, and pointed.

"Look there!" he said hoarsely. "That fellow's wearing the jacket!"

"The Dickens he is!" replied Patch, staring at a tall, rather bullying youngster who looked as if he might be a butcher's boy. In another moment the inventor's brother had started forward and called out to the wearer of the missing coat.

"Wait a moment! Hi!" he said.

The red-faced youngster turned and eyed them with obvious disfavour. "What do you want?" he demanded. "Who are you?"

"I'm the man who put the salt in the sea," said Patch gravely, "and my friend here's the man who's going to take it out. Twig? Look here, old man, that's a nice coat you're wearing."

"Oh, go and play!" grunted the other, turning away sullenly. "What's the game, anyhow?"

"I've taken a fancy to that coat, that's all. It used to belong to my mate here, the man who rode the bull through Wagga. But another chappie mistook it for one of his, and sold it to a nigger named Mucilage, who in turn sold it to you—for six bob."

"I see—and you want it back, hey? Well, it happens I've got to like this coat, and I don't want to part with it, see?"

Billy not only did see this particular point, but saw also that he was up against a pretty shrewd bargainer, who was ready to turn their own eagerness for the jacket into ready cash. He was too anxious, however, to bluff.

"Look here," he broke in, "I'll give you ten bob for the coat, and fix

everything up. No fuss—give me the coat, and this half-note will be yours."

The red-faced boy's little eyes gleamed. "Ten bob—ten bob for a coat I've taken a fancy to," he murmured. "Look here, mate, I can't part with the coat—not under a quid. It's a good coat."

"It's certainly a good coat, but—" Patch was dubious.

"Well, then," said Billy desperately, "I'll make it a quid, just to please you. There you are—a pound note—and now, the coat."

"Hold hard, hold hard." The country boy's interest had been roused by this reckless bidding for the old jacket, which was scarcely worth a third of the money Billy Faraday now flashed before his eyes. What was wrong with the coat, he asked himself; or, rather, what was right with it? "No, I don't think I'll sell," went on the yokel shrewdly, "until I've had a good look over it."

"Until you've what?" asked the horrified Billy.

The other noted his emotion and slowly winked one eye. "Until I've looked over it," he repeated cunningly. "You never know. What if there's a five-pound note sewn up in the lining?"

"A five-pound note?" gasped Billy weakly.

"I'm going to have a look," said the rustic, taking off the jacket and fumbling it between his fingers. "Why," he yelled, suddenly, "what's this here?"

Billy's heart sank into his boots as the red-faced country youth, with a grin of the most horrible triumph, rubbed between his fingers the slight lump under the coat-cloth that indicated where the Black Star had been so carefully hidden.

"There's something here, right enough," he said, cheerfully, "and we'll have it out in a jiffey. When I've seen what it is, then you can buy the coat—perhaps."

And he began to open a very efficient-looking clasp-knife. But at that, all Billy had gone through to recover the coat came up in his mind, and a wave of fury swept over him that he should be thus

baulked at the last moment.

Uttering an inarticulate cry, he dashed forward, snatched the jacket out of the other's hands, and took to his heels, with Egbert merely a pace or two in his rear. The yokel stood dumbfounded for an instant, and then roared out at the top pitch of his voice, "Stop thief! Stop thief!"

The quiet, respectable little town of Rimvale witnessed the most astounding of chases along its sleepy main street. First came Billy and Patch, running their hardest for the garage and the big cycle, and after them tore the outraged country lad, yelling in a voice that would have roused the envy of any Indian chief of the prairies.

The country boy continued to yell, "Thi—eeves!" lustily as he rushed after the two boys.

The solitary policeman that the town boasted, aroused by the uproar, left the veranda of the country hotel, and stepped into the glare of the noonday sun.

"Hey! What's the trouble?" he asked, in the voice of one bent on smoothing troubled waters.

"Sto-oo-op thi-eef!" came the stentorian shout of that amazing vocalist, the robbed boy. "Stop them two thieves!"

Billy Faraday took a swift survey of the situation. It would not do, he decided, to run into the arms of the policeman, who did not look formidable, but who might cause a deal of bother.

"This way!" he yelled, breaking off at right angles, and darting down a narrow laneway, between two paling fences. But Billy had made, for once, an error of judgment. The fences abutted on a brick wall of some height, and the lane was, consequently, a blind alley.

"We're diddled—dished," gasped Egbert Patch.

"Not a bit," said Billy, pausing for six precious seconds, while, with his knife, he ripped the Star from its place of concealment,

and slipped it into the pocket of his waistcoat. "Not a bit," he repeated, throwing the coat towards the pursuers, who were already at the mouth of the alley. "Come on!"

With an agile spring he vaulted over the paling fence and landed in the garden beyond. Patch followed, and the cries of the pursuers changed abruptly from triumph to chagrin. Billy found himself confronting an enormous man in a blue shirt, who seemed annoyed that the boy had landed full in the centre of a bed of prize cauliflowers.

"'Ere!" this worthy bellowed. "Oo are you?"

"The King of Sweden!" answered Patch grandly. "My card!" He made a move as if to hand the astonished fellow something, and before that person could realize what was happening, he had received a hard dig in what boxers call the "mark." He gasped, and sat down with the giant collapse of a pricked balloon.

Laughing, the two fugitives fled on, for the red-faced youth was leading the pursuit over the fence, and it was risky to linger. Over two more fences they hurried, and then found themselves confronted with an impasse.

This was a stone wall over which it was impossible to scramble. They therefore cut away towards the right again, making back towards the street. They were in the yard of a baker, as it happened, and they went full speed for the street that meant liberty. Rounding the corner, with pursuit perilously close, Patch had a sudden inspiration. He pulled open a wide door, had a swift glimpse of a bakery and a couple of white-clad forms, and then slammed it as hard as he could.

He and Billy remained outside, of course, and ducked into the friendly shelter of a pile of timber, just as the robbed boy, doubly red-faced now with his exertions, and the policeman, and a couple of others dashed up with the impetus of a fleet of fire-engines.

"In here—heard them slam the door!" gasped the rustic

triumphantly.

"We've got 'em," said the constable, breathing hard. He flung open the door, and an angry white figure darted out fairly into his arms. It was the baker himself, who had been hurrying to catch the "impudent rascal" who had slammed the door; and, as it happened, his exit had coincided with the constable's entrance.

For a moment they struggled blindly, the baker dabbling his floury hands over the other's tunic with a fine eye for effect.

"Leggo!" panted the angry constable. "No use strug—whup!"

"Scoundrel!" roared the baker, who was enormously fat and red, and who was no mean hand at wrestling. "Whaddeyer mean by this—ur."

They fell over on the ground, rolling, gasping, and wheezing, like two great porpoises entangled with seaweed. Billy and Patch were helpless with suppressed laughter, as the two big men ramped and roared on the ground ludicrously. But in time their excitement cooled sufficiently to permit of recognition, and they fell back, seated on the ground, staring at one another amazedly.

"Why, it's old Jim!" said the baker.

"Course it is, you fathead! What the dickens do you mean?"

"Mean?" repeated the baker. "I like that! It's you that ought to say what you mean! Are you drunk?"

"Drunk? Me? Why?"

"Why, coming and playing fool tricks on my door—"

"Who's doing that? All I was after was two fellows funning—no, two fellows rulling!" The constable's tongue had become a trifle twisted, and he sought to make amends by shouting at the top of his voice.

"I mean," he roared, "you've got two hokes bliding—no, no!—they cinched a poat, I mean! Dash it, they dot in this gore—!"

"You are drunk," said the baker, judicially. "Very drunk," he

added, as an afterthought.

"Never dinn before drinker—I mean, dink before drinner—no!" yelled the constable at the loudest tone he could raise, becoming more and more excited and inarticulate as he went on. "No, I don't mean that! What I mean is, two geeves thot away—they—hurry up!—colted with a boat!"

"A boat?" the baker asked. "Are you mad, Jim, or only—"

"Quick!" yelled the constable, threshing the air with his arms, and dancing first on one foot and then on the other. "Two fung yellows—!" This was as far as he could get, and he remained speechless, his eyes protruding from his head, his tongue tied in a furious knot.

"Oh, my only grandfather!" murmured Billy weakly, almost helpless from his restrained laughter.

There is no saying what might not have happened but for the intervention of the red-faced boy, who blurted out his story, and demanded the opening of the door.

"Oh!" said the baker, comprehension dawning on him at last. "But they didn't come in here, mate—they just slammed the door, and then bolted. That's why I thought it was Bill, here, playing jokes on me, and—"

But the red-faced youngster had turned and gazed about him, and the concealment afforded by the wood-pile proved inadequate, for he uttered a yell and his sharp little eyes gleamed. "Here!" he roared. "I see 'em. Come on!"

Billy and Patch had profited by their rest, and were away with the speed of the wind. The others gave instant chase, even the baker joining in. The fugitives realized that it would be a bad move to rush out into the open street, and they doubled on their tracks again, and darted into a grocery store, where they were met at the door by the grocer, in grimy white apron, who had not been favourably impressed by the manner of their entry.

"Ha!" he said. "What do you want?"

"A pound of hoo-jah!" said Patch promptly.

"What?" demanded the grocer in astonishment.

"Some gubbins," added Patch.

"Some—some—"

"Don't you sell it? A pound of doo-hickey."

"Here—" began the grocer.

"What I really want," said Patch calmly, "is an egg. Have you one? I'd like one called Percival, please, about fourteen hands high, and not too frisky. Ah, the very thing!"

He selected a couple of eggs from an open box on the counter, while the grocer looked on open-mouthed. He was quite convinced that he was being visited by a couple of lunatics, and he was doubly sure when he saw Patch turn to the doorway and let the red-faced youth have an egg fairly in the eye.

The pursuit had been somewhat tardy in discovering where the escapees had gone, and it was now arrested by the bombardment that Patch opened with the eggs. The baker, panting with open mouth, received a missile directly upon the teeth. The egg burst, and he found himself swallowing a mass of yolk and shattered shell. The constable had to wipe away a sticky mess before he could see; and the red-faced boy, blinded by the first egg, had collided with a pile of jam-tins, which descended joyfully upon his head as he lay sprawling.

"Thanks for the eggs," murmured Patch, pressing two florins into the grocer's palm. "Is there a back exit? Lead on, Macduffer."

And he bolted for the rear of the shop, closely followed by Billy. They had been working their way towards the garage, and it was only a stone's throw to the bicycle.

Hastily throwing his levers into position, Patch trundled the big Indian a few yards; and, as the engine began to fire, leapt on

board, followed in a moment by the ever-ready Billy. They stormed out of the little village of Rimvale, leaving a trail of blue exhaust-smoke and more than one angry person.

"Quick work, quick work!" said Patch. "That's the life, isn't it? As I said, when I gave up the job of carrying the red flag in front of a steam roller, 'The excitement's killing me.' But we got the merry old Star, and that's the main thing!"

"Jingo, but I'm obliged to you," said Billy gratefully. "I don't know what I should have done without you and the old bike! And that's a fact."

"Don't apologize," returned Patch cheerily. "We'll be back about five—that is, if the idiot policeman doesn't take it into his head to ring up and send a posse of constabulary on our track. I wonder how your mates have been doing back at Deepwater? Trust that brainy young brother of mine to concoct something ingenious to account for your absence! Wonder how he did it?"

That question was soon to be answered, when they arrived back at the College, and Billy was able to question the others as to what had transpired during his absence. He was vastly amused at the account of how he had been impersonated in the classroom.

He roared with laughter over the events narrated, and appeared a different fellow altogether now that the Black Star was once again in his keeping.

"What about hiding the Star this time?" said Jack.

"No Edgar Allan What's-this stunts," said Billy, grimly. "I'm going to put it under that loose flooring-board in the study. When the carpet's back in place no one could ever find it."

And that evening the Star was duly interred in its new hiding-place, the three study-mates standing round Billy Faraday as he replaced the board and the carpet, and left everything intact. "Let's hope it's safe this time," he breathed.

As the three boys returned from lunch next day, Jack opened the study door and fell back with an exclamation.

"Redisham!" he said.

"Yes, Redisham," said the owner of the name, in an obviously forced attempt to appear at ease. "What about it?"

The intruder was standing in the middle of the study, and it was evident that their entry had surprised him. But there was nothing to show that he had been up to any shady games. Jack closed the door. He had remembered that they had their suspicions of Monty Redisham, already—and it was not usual, at Deepwater, for visits to be paid to studies during the occupants' absence.

"What about it?" repeated Redisham, with a shade of defiance that showed that he knew he was suspected.

"Oh, nothing," said Jack carelessly. "What are you after?"

Redisham met his gaze squarely, and then glanced at Billy Faraday and Patch, who also were staring at him meaningly. He shifted from one foot to the other.

"I just came in to borrow a dicker," he explained.

"And that, I suppose," said Jack, "is why you shut the door?"

Redisham's lip curled. "I don't know what you are getting at, Symonds," he said. "It's true that the door blew to, in a gust of wind just now, but—"

The three pals looked at him queerly, and he resolved on a bold stroke. "Why, hang it," he said, taking the bull by the horns, "you look as if you thought—thought I was trying to pinch some of your mouldy traps!"

It was well done of Redisham. He met the charge before it was thrown at him. He experienced a distinct ascendancy.

"Oh, not at all," said Jack politely. "It looked queer for a moment that was all—the door shut, and all that. Of course," he went on,

with elaborate irony, "if it had been somebody else, then—!"

Redisham flushed under the sarcasm, and sat down with an affectation of carelessness, showing his violent green socks as he pulled up his immaculate trouser-legs.

"I'm glad to hear it," he observed, his little eyes flashing. "How did the race go this afternoon?"

For a moment Jack did not reply, but eyed their visitor narrowly. He would have given a good deal to be in a position to search the pockets of the greasy, smiling senior. But there was nothing to go on—nothing at all. Politeness had to be preserved. He too, sat down. Billy and Septimus Patch did not move from the door.

"And how's your friend, Mr. Daw, progressing?" asked Jack casually.

Either Redisham was a good actor, or he was genuinely surprised by the question. "My aunt!" he exclaimed. "Who told you that he was a friend of mine?"

"I thought it was general knowledge," replied Jack. "We all heard that you considered him a little tin god, or something like that. I confess I could never have much respect for him—unless perhaps I was in his debt, or something—"

He paused, and shot a glance at Redisham to watch the effect of this loaded remark. But the senior took it very well indeed.

"General knowledge is wrong, then," he said blandly. "Daw may be all right—to those who know him, but I'm not one, or even likely to be. You don't mind if I go now?"

"Wouldn't you like to try a cup of brew?"

"Not this time, thanks. I'll bring this dicker back directly I've used it. Ta-ta." And he closed the door behind him. Billy spoke impulsively.

"Well, that's fishy if you like! Wonder whether the brute found anything? Perhaps it's better to have a look."

He rolled back the carpet, and lifted the loose board. For a moment he lay face down with his arm fumbling in the cavity. Then he rolled over and sat up, his face gone suddenly white.

"Jiminy!" he gasped. "The thing's not there!"

CHAPTER XI

THE STAR MISSING

Jack Symonds uttered a cry of amazement, and even Septimus was stirred out of his usual calm.

"Not there!" repeated Jack. "Old fellow, are you certain? Surely it's not gone already!"

Billy rose to his feet with a gesture of deep despair. "Look for yourself, then," he said. "It's no go, Jack—I made certain before I spoke. She's gone this time—and I expect gone for good."

"Don't say that, comrade!" urged Septimus, striking him on the shoulder. "We got it back once, so why not again? Look here, there's—"

"Wait!" Jack interrupted him. "Ten to one it's that oily brute Redisham! He had the thing in his pocket all the time we were speaking to him. Oh, he's cool and all that, but I'm going along to ask him right out what he's done with it! There!"

Septimus Patch pulled him back from the door. "No, no, Jack!" he pleaded. "We've got no evidence that he's taken it, and if you went along that way he'd just laugh in your face, that's what he'd do. It looks to me as if he did pinch the Star, but—well, we can't do anything to him; he's got the whip hand over us. We'll find another way, never fear."

"But what way *is* there?" objected Jack.

Patch did not reply, but stared out of the window in deep thought. His eyes were narrowed to mere slits behind his great tortoise-shell glasses. He rubbed his hands together nervously.

"Give me time—give me time," he asked. "There must be a better way—let me think."

"And we're giving the beggar more time to hide it," said Billy Faraday.

"If he took it," said Septimus.

"What do you mean?"

"Why, just this. He must have been tremendously slick to have found the hiding-place, secured the Star, and replaced everything as before! How long could he have been in the room? Not long. Yet he had the nerve to do all that, knowing that we might be back any minute. Besides, why hadn't he gone when we arrived?"

"Why?"

"Seems to me he was just spying round. You remember he was standing in front of our lockers. Supposing that he had found the Star where we hid it. Would he be likely to hang round until we came? You can bet your life he'd be off in a moment! Again, why replace the carpet and the board? It only took longer, and delay was most dangerous for Redisham. Put yourself in his place. If you'd found the Star, wouldn't you have bolted right away? There'd be no sense in fixing up the carpet—your big idea would be to make yourself scarce, see?"

"So you think the Star went before Redisham came here?"

"I think so, comrade. Perhaps it went last night, and, if so, we know who took it!"

"Doctor Daw," murmured Jack.

"Of course, Monty Redisham is up to some dirty game or other. Quite likely he's in Daw's debt, and Daw is using him as a tool. But if we go to Redisham, and let him know we've suspected him to that extent, and that we've been robbed, then he'll tell Daw everything."

"But what are we going to do about it?"

"Lie low. Redisham can wait—I've got a scheme for fixing him later, getting him into a trap. But Daw's got to be watched—and watched closely."

"Well?"

The schoolboy detective looked thoughtful. Then he spoke with assurance. "Look here, comrades—Hullo, here's Fane!"

"What's the matter?" asked Fane immediately.

Patch explained, and then went on: "I was just going to suggest a scheme. Jack heard Daw say that he wanted to stay on here at Deepwater. Therefore, he's not likely to bolt with the Star, if he's got it. We'll watch him, see where he goes, and while he's out one of us can ransack his room. Probably, though, he has the Star on his person, and he'll be anxious to get it across to Lazare or Humbolt. As soon as he does that, we can have either of them arrested quietly, before they have time to get far!"

"Otherwise?" queried Jack.

"Otherwise," said Patch quietly, "we'll have to go to the Head, tell all we know, and trust to luck that we'll be able to outwit the brutes! But you know how clumsy that notion is—the Head would almost want written confessions and affidavits before he'd venture to arrest a master! And Daw would swear black, blue and all colours that he'd never seen the Star, and didn't want to. You see how hard it would be for us to do anything?"

Accordingly a close watch was kept by one of the four pals on Doctor Daw; but they had to admit that the man was a wonderfully good actor, for he showed no signs of confusion or excitement, and remained indoors for the greater part of the time. For two nights he did not go out.

One of these nights, however uneventful for Doctor Daw, was certainly crammed with incident for Redisham. Patch had promised that he would catch the greasy senior in a trap, and he held good his word. The society of the Crees proved to be the instrument of his downfall.

During preparation one evening, Redisham was surprised by a knock on his study door. Hastily extinguishing his cigarette, which, in flagrant defiance of all rules, he was smoking, he called out, "Come in!"

A very small and innocent junior entered.

"Please, Redisham," he said, "Mr. Daw said he wants to see you outside the Chemistry classroom door at once."

"What's that? Doctor—I mean Mr. Daw wants to see me now. Isn't he taking prep. in Big School?"

"Well, he is, but he stepped outside for a few minutes, and sent me up to find you. I think he only wants you for a moment."

"Confound him!" muttered Redisham, putting on his cap. "All right, youngster—cut away."

The senior lumbered down the stairs, a big, awkward figure that moved clumsily. It was nearly dark outside, but he distinguished the form of Mr. Daw outside the chemistry-room.

As he approached, the master slipped into the porch, and beckoned Redisham to follow.

"Come in here," he whispered. Inside, it was darker than ever. "Well," the master pursued, "and did you find it?"

Redisham shook his head. "No luck," he grumbled.

"Did you look?" said Daw cuttingly.

"Yes, I did! Honestly, I didn't have much time, but I looked hard enough. The young blighters came back and found me in the room at that!"

"All right. But see me behind the gymnasium after lights-out, to-night. I've found something—I want you."

Redisham uttered a grumbling protest. "I say, it's confoundedly risky to be strolling round after lights-out. You've always got me doing it now, and I'll be getting into trouble."

The master uttered a short laugh. "You'll be there, anyhow! And now I've got to get back to preparation."

They parted; but Redisham would have been considerably startled to have watched the master, who did not go back to Big School, but who joined Symonds and Patch at the side of the

chemistry-room, and shook with laughter. Also, as all the juniors of Salmon's house could have informed Redisham, Mr. Daw had undoubtedly been in Big School all the evening, in charge of preparation. Two facts that might have caused him some perturbation, had he been aware of them.

As it was, he walked into the trap laid for him as guilelessly as a snared chicken. He strolled round after lights-out to the side of the gymnasium, as directed by the bogus Doctor Daw, and waited, kicking his heels for a good five minutes.

"The man's a thundering nuisance!" groaned the unfortunate senior, looking round him. "Gee! What's that?"

His ejaculation had been drawn forth by the sight of a couple of men who, dimly visible in the half-light, had appeared round the end of the gymnasium.

Redisham wheeled round with a dismayed gasp, and prepared for flight. But he remained where he was, rooted to the ground with horror. About five similar dark forms had appeared quite silently behind him, and now confronted him evilly. With a shock of dismay he perceived that they wore black masks, and had their collars turned up about their ears.

"What—what d-do you w-want?" he said in a remarkably husky voice that somehow would not obey him. Redisham was a bit of a diplomat at times, but he had no physical courage. All his strength seemed to have left his legs, and he shook like a leaf in a gale.

"Shurrup!" came the low retort in ruffianly tones, from the foremost of the ugly-looking band. "Stow the lingo, or we'll throttle you! You one of the school kids, hey?"

"Y-yes."

The miserable Redisham heard footsteps behind him, and knew that the other two were close. He wished with all his heart that Daw would arrive. He would have been a good deal less hopeful had he known that Daw was, at that moment, asleep in bed.

Suddenly he was bowled over by his cowardly assailants, and gagged.

In approved bandit style he was trussed hand and foot, and a bandage was finally tied over his eyes, completely excluding everything from his sight. He groaned. What on earth had happened? He was being carried by two of the men over rough country, and presently he lost count of their steps. They went miles and miles, as it seemed; his heart descended into his boots. He could already see himself tied up in a sack and thrown into a lonely part of the river.

Suddenly the journey ended. As a matter of fact, he had been carried five times round the playing-fields, with suitable changes of ground, and the Crees had taken it in turns to lug him about, for he was of no mean weight. They now entered Salmon's and on tiptoe brought their prisoner into the boot-room.

Flat on the floor Redisham was laid, and the bandage was removed from his eyes. An oil lamp guttered above his head, throwing a faint, uncertain light that wavered to and fro, making everything indistinct. Before him sat the most fearsome figure of the lot—a short, thick man in a sweater and wearing a beard, who held a revolver in his hand—a wicked-looking thing that sent a frightened shiver down the senior's back. In point of fact, this was Billy's weapon, which he had brought out of its concealment for the purpose; undeniably it gave a touch of colour to the scene.

It was, as a matter of cold fact, unloaded; but Redisham in the depths of his funk could not know that. He lay and stared up at it goggle-eyed.

"Now," said the leader of the gang of roughs, "you're miles away from anyone here, so it's no use yelling. Get me? Take his mufflers off, Snyder."

The man addressed as Snyder elevated himself out of the gloom and came slowly forward. He undid the bandages that held

Redisham in durance, and the fear-stricken senior sat up, chafing his legs.

"See here, younker!" It was the awesome chief speaking again. "Are your people worth much?"

"I—what do you mean?" spluttered Redisham.

"I means what I says!" said the fellow, in a low voice of concentrated fury. "Answer up, an' look slippy, or perhaps my finger'll slip on this 'ere trigger, and—"

"Please d-don't shoot!" quavered Redisham. "Do you mean have my people got much money?"

"Yes—have they?"

"Not very much—really."

"Crab apples!" cried the ferocious leader, angrily. "How much would they hand out to get you back, you miserable worm?"

"To g-get me back?"

"To buy you back! Shiver my timbers, but you've got more talk than a Madras monkey. How much ransom, hey? Five hundred?"

"I don't think so. Why, are you g-going—"

"Yes, my hearty, we're going to hold you to ransom!" came the disconcerting answer. "Is the figure five hundred?"

"But that's to-too much," shivered Redisham, squirming on the floor beneath the menace of the revolver, which the chief held in almost playful fashion four inches from his left eye.

"Too much! I should say it was too much!" rejoined the other, with promptness. "Five hundred for a bit of a puppy like you! Why, I'd not give five hundred pence! I'd throw the main deck overboard before I'd think of it! Wouldn't I?" he asked.

"I'm sure you would," said Redisham hurriedly.

"I expect your parents'll be downright glad to get rid of you, hey?"

"I—I suppose so."

"Well, belay my scuppers, if they don't part up with the boodle you'll be shipped to South America, that's all!"

"S—south America?"

"South America I said! They buy men for ten pounds apiece, to work 'em in the copper-mines. Think of it, hey! Workin' there year in, year out, and never see this place any more! Lovely prospect, ain't it? Like the idea?"

"N—no," said Redisham, to whom the idea did not appeal in the remotest way.

"Gr-r-rr! Of course you don't! But if your old man don't pay up, well—we'll have to get our tenner from you. Won't we, Snyder?"

"Sure," said Snyder. "But we'd only get eight for this goat—he's all flabby, no muscle, no chest, no nothink! Jest skin an' bone, that's all he is! Feel him!"

He did so, with his boot.

"That's so," agreed the chief. "He's just the spit of that bloke we shipped last summer—the bloke that pegged out on the voyage. Remember?"

"You bet," answered Snyder tersely. "They had to sling him overboard, and the sharks got the captain's tenner-worth! Just as well we got the money first, hey, mates?"

The mates all responded with a low, sinister laugh that made Redisham's blood run cold.

"See here," he pleaded. "Let me g-go!"

"Gr-r-rr!" snarled the chief. "Let you go! Likely, ain't it? Now, you stay here while we go upstairs and write a little note to your old man. You can add something that'll make them hurry up with the tin!"

"Or it's the South American mines for you!" grated Snyder, approaching his face closely to Redisham's.

"And no funny business," added the chief warningly, taking the

lamp and looking back as he closed the door. "You stay here like a good kid, an' remember it's no use singing out. Mind you're here when we come back or—"

He touched the butt of his revolver significantly, and closed the door. Dense darkness shut down on the miserable Redisham.

When he had waited twenty minutes in the same position, he was under the impression that he had waited several hours. He had never experienced anything like the dead, changeless silence that now reigned. For what seemed an age there was no sound—not even the smallest sound. And then, feeling that he would scream out if he did not do something, he commenced to explore his surroundings. He collided with an immense table, on which were piled boots—in incredible quantities. He could make nothing of this mystery. At every stage it became more and more weird. Boots! What could that mean? He was still wondering when he barged into something solid, and it went over with an ear-splitting crash. For some seconds there was silence. Then came footsteps; the door opened.

"I wasn't trying to get out!" he protested feebly; and then his jaw fell. The figure before him was Mr. Glenister, of Salmon's, and the young master was carrying a candle!

CHAPTER XII

BILLY WALKS IN HIS SLEEP

Redisham did not pause a moment. He flung himself forward, grasped the amazed master round the waist, and held on with all his strength.

"Oh, save me!" he gasped. "Hurry up, sir! Take me away—before they come back!"

"What—what?" muttered the master, fully convinced that Redisham had gone off his head. "What do you mean?"

"The bandits, the bandits!" babbled Redisham. "They said they'd come back—"

"Come back?" queried the dazed master. "The bandits? Let me go! I don't understand—"

"Oh, hurry up, hurry up," murmured Monty, in an agony of apprehension. "They've got pistols, and everything, and they'll get ten pounds for you if they catch you. It's awful! Come back to the school, sir—hurry!"

"Back to the school? Redisham, wake up! You must be dreaming—we're at the school now, and I want to know what you're doing in the boot-room at this time of night."

"You—what?" asked Monty Redisham, putting his hand to his head and staring round wildly. "Are we at the College?"

"Of course we are! Where else did you think you were?"

"But I thought—I thought," gasped Redisham, still failing to understand. "Then they didn't kidnap me?"

"No, no; of course they didn't."

"And they won't write for a ransom?"

"No—you've been having a nightmare, boy. Overeating, and reading novels! Come, get back to bed at once."

Hardly knowing whether he was standing on his head or his heels, Redisham was conducted back to his dormitory, where he undressed and got into bed. There, for the first time, it began to dawn upon him that he had been the victim of a practical joke. Hot waves of anger swept over him at the recollection. He had made a complete fool of himself.

"Dash it all," he muttered savagely, "what an ass I was! Ten to one it was those confounded Crees—got me outside the gym, carted me about, and took me into the boot-room. Well, this beats the band!"

He nearly choked with fury at the thought of his ignominious treatment.

"Wonder how they knew?" he went on. "Must have heard Daw—or perhaps it wasn't Daw at all! I see it all now! Thought at the time Daw was speaking rather strangely.... Jove!" he muttered, as another aspect of the case struck him, "some beggars must know ... about Daw and me! Symonds and Faraday and, and—oh, what a night!"

He pulled the sheets over his head with a groan, and tried to sleep.

As for Jack, he was in immense feather over the business. Not only had they satisfied themselves that Redisham knew nothing about the missing Star, but the four pals had also had the time of their lives. Those of the Crees who had had a hand in the tormenting of Redisham were all agreed that the jape was the boldest on record, and the tale, as passed on in an elaborated form, brought a chain of chuckles from everybody in Salmon's. And even at that Redisham was lucky; they knew nothing of his discovery by Mr. Glenister. All things considered, it was wiser to keep silence.

"I say, Jack," said Fane the next afternoon, "do you see by the paper that Harry Nelson is coming down to Windsor?"

"Nelson, the light-weight champion?"

"Yes. He's going to box an exhibition with some fellow or other at the opening of the new Sports Club up there. Look here—it's all in this," he added, throwing the paper across.

Jack read in silence for a few minutes. Nelson, the Australian champion, was going to pay a visit to Windsor, a large mining centre some ten miles north of Deepwater Bay. The exhibition was timed to come off that night.

"Nelson's real first-class, I've heard," said Jack.

"Yes, that's what they say about him," agreed Fane. "I say, how would it be to slip out to-night and see him?"

"If we—"

"The roads are pretty decent, and we could get on our grids all right—it shouldn't take more than an hour to reach there, at the outside."

Jack was silent. The proposition appealed to him greatly. "I've a good mind to come," he said at last. "Of course, there's the risk—"

"I know; but there's not much risk, after all—and it's worth it."

"Yes; it's worth while seeing Nelson.... All right, then, count me in. How about Billy or Patchie?"

Fane shook his head. "I doubt whether they'd want to come. In any case four fellows missing from the dormitory would be a bit over the odds—it wouldn't take much to get us pinched."

"You're right. Well, don't forget."

And they might have been seen speeding over the dark road to Windsor, later on, on their bicycles. They arrived in the town just before the performance was due to start, and got seats close up, near the stage, which had been converted into a ring.

All around them there was the noise of the crowded audience. Jack and Fane sat down guiltily, wearing plain tweed caps in the place of their college caps, but full of excitement. There was not long to wait.

"Gen'l'men!" shouted the announcer hoarsely; "Harry Nelson, light-weight champeen of Orstralyer!"

Nelson smiled and bowed. He had a square, alert-looking face and bright eyes.

The champion had brought his own sparring-partner, and shortly his robe was slung off, and he got to work. Jack and Fane whistled with admiration at the man's magnificent physique. It seemed incredible that such strength could be packed away in so small a parcel, for he was no more than five inches over the five-foot mark.

The spar was a brilliant one, as Nelson had opportunities for display that a serious contest would not have afforded him. Jack and Fane sat entranced at the show, watching the fast little fellow dancing about the ring as lightly as a feather. They were sorry when the bout came to an end. Nelson remained in his corner, and presently the announcer came forward with a surprise to spring on the house.

"I have much pleasure in stating," he said, "that Nelson will box four rounds with any man under eleven stone in the audience. If anyone can last the full four rounds, the management will present him with five pounds!"

"Hold me back!" said Jack, pretending to struggle towards the aisle, but taking care not to be successful.

"Hullo!" said Fane, suddenly. "Somebody giving it a flutter!"

Jack looked across the crowded house, and as the challenger gained the stage he let out a gasp of astonishment. For the man was none other than Humbolt, the intimate of Doctor Daw, and the colleague of the mysterious Lazare!

Jack remembered, now, that when he had first seen the fellow he had marked him down as an ex-pugilist. What sort of a showing would he make? Humbolt bent and whispered mysteriously in the announcer's ear.

"Gen'l'men!" cried the announcer, placing his hand upon the head of the grinning Tiger, "Doctor Daw—Doctor Daw!"

"Go on, Doc!" yelled some irrepressible from the back of the hall.

Jack was choking with laughter. The dour Humbolt must have a sense of humour after all, he thought, thus to assume the name of his colleague as a nom-de-guerre. The mental picture of the oily, shifty Daw in a boxing-ring caused Jack inward convulsions, which he had only just overcome when the gong went for the first round.

"Doctor Daw," in trousers and singlet, met a very different Nelson from the pretty sparrer of a few minutes ago. The light-weight champion went for his man in deadly earnest, and the sound of blows filled the hall. But Humbolt was no fool—far from it. He saw that Nelson was taking him cheaply, and waited his chance. He was badly knocked about for two rounds, or so it seemed from the audience. In reality he was taking any amount of punches on gloves or forearms.

In the third round a startling diversion occurred. Nelson was hammering his man in fine style, when suddenly "Doctor Daw" stepped forward with his right foot and slid his left back, thus reversing his feet. Then his left glove shot into the champion's unguarded body, and his right shoulder seemed to jerk back with the venom and force of the blow.

Down went Nelson amid a startled roar—and stayed down. Humbolt grinned widely, and strolled back to his corner. The champion was palpably knocked out, and with one of the neatest "plexus" hits that any man present had seen.

As soon as the light-weight champion had recovered his wind, he made a hurried exit. He was not staying to tackle any more dark horses of this stamp. And Humbolt was presented with the five-pound note in full view of the audience.

"By jove, that was neat!" said Fane. "Nelson took the fellow far too cheaply—and, of course, 'Doctor Daw' was heavier. All the same

—"

"You're right, laddie," said a venerable-looking old man sitting on Jack's left. "Nelson took that fellow too cheaply and I'll bet he didn't know who he was, or—"

"Why? Who was it?"

"Nobody here knows, seemingly," returned the white-bearded man, "but that was Jim Camp, who used to be light-weight champion about twenty years ago. That hit was his famous 'shift'—he knocked out scores of opponents with it, and then left the game suddenly—I don't know why. At any rate, it was believed that he'd gone to America. I've been puzzling ever since he started who he was—and I'm sure now, after seeing that old 'shift' again."

"Jove, that's interesting," said Jack. "Do you know whether 'Jim Camp' was his real name?"

"No, it wasn't his right name. I've forgotten what his right name was—something foreign, or foreign-sounding—"

"Not Humbolt?" suggested Jack gently.

"Humbolt! Bless my soul, I believe you're right! A funny fellow he was, too—not altogether straight out of the ring, they used to say. Of course, I don't know.... And he was always terribly afraid of snakes. One time he had a contest with a fellow who knew all about this snake business, and the cunning dodger actually came in with a belt made out of snake-skin—one of these big cobras, you know, with large markings that you could see a mile off.

"The buckle of the belt was a snake's-head design with the tail in its mouth, and it fairly gave Jim Camp the shivers. He fought about three rounds, and then his towel came in. He couldn't get near the thing, you see. Funny, isn't it, how we're all scared of some silly thing like that? Jim, they said, always made it an article in his agreements after that that the belt should be of plain design, with no snaky fancy-work on it, and so the trick wasn't tried again."

The veteran smiled at his memories, and the boys, finding it was rather late, decided to go. They did not care to stop for the rest of the programme, which was a twenty-round contest; and, getting their bicycles back from the shop, made off towards Deepwater.

They arrived safely, and without detection.

"What a term this has been," murmured Jack, "all flittings out and in, night and day. Rummy, isn't it?"

They entered the school by an accessible window, and made their way along the silent corridors. As they passed through, Fane gripped Jack's arm tightly.

"Jack!" he said. "What's that?"

In a moment his question had answered itself. "That" was the shadowy figure of a boy in his pyjamas; and as he passed a moonlit window they saw that it was Billy Faraday. They saw also, that he was sleep-walking, and that he carried the Black Star in his hand ... then out of the shadows a dark figure leapt upon the sleeping boy and flung him to the ground.

CHAPTER XIII

A MYSTERY UNRAVELLED

Such was the rapid succession of events that Fane and Jack Symonds remained for a few seconds rooted to the spot, by sheer stupefaction and surprise. That Billy should thus be walking in his sleep, and bearing the lost Star in his hands, was strange enough, but that he should be attacked before their very eyes was quite astounding. They might well have been pardoned for a moment of inaction. Then the tension snapped. "Come on!" said Jack quietly. "It's that beast Daw!"

In their stockinged feet the two boys darted along the corridor. Billy Faraday had come back to the waking world with a startled cry, and seemed quite incapable of movement, while Doctor Daw, in his black suit, bent over him like a carrion crow, and struggled to wrest the Star from the boy's grasp.

He succeeded at last, and with a low cry of triumph, turned to escape. At that moment he was tackled madly by a bunched-up body that he might, given the requisite time, have recognized as Fane's. His legs were whisked from beneath him, and he sat down with an agonizing thump, while Jack Symonds collapsed upon him with all his heavy weight. The Black Star escaped from his fingers, and slithered along the tiled floor, where the now awakened Billy secured it eagerly.

"Give it up, give it up," ground out Jack, apparently endeavouring to fracture the tiles with Daw's head. "Come on—you're caught this time!"

"Gr-rr-r!" gurgled Daw. "Clug—gump!"

"All right," panted Billy in Jack's ear. "I've got it!"

Slowly the two boys allowed the infuriated master to regain his feet. He did so, and stood there, panting and scowling at them.

"You brats—you brats!" he gritted, between his teeth. "You

infernal brats!"

"I fancy," said Jack quietly, "that we've put a finger in your pie—what?"

Mr. Daw took a step forward, and his eyes blazed with intense anger. It looked very much as if he would strike the cool youngster before him, but his hand fell to his side again.

"Yes," went on Jack, "we've just about spoked your wheel!"

Daw seemed to make an immense effort for self-control. He swallowed several times. Then, "I don't know what you mean, you insolent puppy!" he burst out. "And I'd like to know just what you mean by attacking your master in this disgraceful manner—and also what you are doing out of your dormitory at this time of night!"

"Well, I like that!" exclaimed Jack. "After you jumped on poor Billy here, and—"

"That was my mistake," said Daw, who had recovered a great measure of his composure. "I took him for a burglar, as was quite natural. No boy should be out of his dormitory at this hour. I was bent on capturing what I imagined to be an intruder. But your offence demands explanation—and I must have it, at once."

"What about the Black Star?" asked Jack boldly.

Daw's self-control was excellent. "Black Star?" he repeated. "You are trying to be impudent, I suppose! Well, you'll suffer for it, upon my word. Go back to your dormitory at once—I'll send for you in the morning."

He turned and stalked away, a tall, black figure passing the floods of moonlight that entered the row of windows. The three chums watched him out of sight with mingled feelings.

"Well," said Jack grimly, "that was quick work, with a vengeance! I don't know what really happened now, if you ask me. Billy, old chap, what on earth were you doing with the Star? Where did you find it?"

"That's what beats me," said Billy, scratching his tousled hair. "I was asleep, wasn't I?"

"You were, until that brute Daw bolted at you. Didn't know you were a sleep-walker, all the same."

"Nor did I, old fellow. I thought I was safe in my little bunk, and I woke up to find myself on the floor and Daw falling all over me. I tell you, it shook me up a bit! I didn't know whether I was asleep or awake."

"That's all right," broke in Fane, "but, you mysterious blighter, where did the Star come from? Seems to me this beats Conan Doyle and his spooks into a cocked hat. I suppose a bally spirit guided you to the spot, or something—ten to one it was Daw's room, and the blinking old thief bolted after you and tried to get the Star back. Does that fit?"

"My only aunt!" exclaimed Jack. "My head's fairly spinning with the business. Old Billy must have supernatural powers—any of your ancestors witches, or anything like that, old man? Come on, don't let us worry about the rotten affair any more to-night. I've bitten off more mystery than I can chew! Off to bed, and be jolly thankful that we've got the Star back again. It is the real Star, by the way, and not a fake?"

"Oh, it's the real Star all right," returned Billy. "It's not going out of my pocket until we can find an absolutely safe hiding-place. Twice lost and twice found! Bit of a record, don't you think?"

"Bit of whacking great luck," said Jack.

Billy grinned happily, overjoyed at the recovery of the Star, and the three of them trooped off to their dormitory.

The next morning Septimus Patch listened to a full account of the events of that memorable night, and regretted that he had been absent, "snoring," as he expressed it, "in a manner more worthy of a pig than an investigator."

"What do you make of Billy's find?" Jack asked him, and the

inventor wrinkled his brows in perplexity.

"Well, for one thing," he said, "I don't believe that Daw had the Star. It seems incredible that Billy could have walked in his sleep and just collared the thing calmly! Look at it—the idea's piffle, plain piffle. No, the solution is something different, but I'm blessed if I can find—wait a moment!"

He held his head in both hands, and walked rapidly up and down the carpet of the study. Then he turned and looked out on the quadrangle for a few minutes. When he again faced his pals, they observed that his face was alight with what might prove the solution of the mystery.

"I believe I've got it, comrades," he said. "I believe I know what happened. Billy took the Star out of the hollow under the loose board, and hid it elsewhere. Last night he returned in his sleep and got it back again."

"My poor fellow!" exclaimed Jack. "It is so very painful."

"What's painful?"

"That rush of brains to the head! Doesn't your cranium feel tight —almost bursting?"

"Seriously, comrade." Patch's idea rode superior to Jack's frivolity. "Just cast your mind back over what happened. Billy had concealed the Star, but, of course, he didn't know that it was safe, even under the boards. The business preyed on his mind. It worked on him to such an extent that in his sleep one night he came and took the Star away—to put it in some safer place, goodness knows where.

"Then, we find that the Star is missing—how long after Billy shifted it, we don't know. But it was gone, we all know that. Billy here knew nothing about his sleep-walking—didn't even know that he was addicted to sleep-walking. And so he remembered nothing of having moved the Star. Of course, he worried some more about the thing, and did the same thing again—went out, got the Star from where he had hidden it, and was bringing it to

another place, when Daw happened to spot him, and, of course, pounced on it."

"By Jingo!" said Fane, regarding Patch with an admiring eye.

"Yes, that's what happened, comrades. And goodness knows where Billy would have put it if he hadn't been pulled up—perhaps in the Head's waistcoat, or else up the fireplace. Lucky things panned out as they did, eh?"

"I keep telling Billy he ought to go on the Stock Exchange," said Jack. "His luck's blown in the bottle, all wool and a yard wide!"

"Of course, we'll have to guard against this sort of thing in the future, however good his luck is. Next time coincidences might fail to—to—"

"—to coincide," finished Jack brightly. "Exactly. The best thing for us to do is to let me hide the Star, and then Billy can't get at it without my telling him, sleep-walking or otherwise."

"That's the ticket! You take the thing and hide it in some secure place or other—be sure we don't make a miss of it, this time—and then you can tell Fane and me, but not Billy. I don't think I walk in my sleep, and, as for Fane, he walks often enough when he should be asleep, but that's a different matter."

And so it was arranged. Jack concealed the Star that afternoon, in the most unlikely of places. He got an old rubber-grip from a bat, and inserted the Star in this, while he tied both ends securely with twine. The whole thing he attached to a fine fishing-line. Walking along to the river, he flung the Star into the water, and fixed the end of the line to the root of a tree some six inches under water. The line would never be seen; and unless something very like a miracle occurred, the package could hardly be recovered from the thick mud at the bottom of the river. He breathed a sigh of relief.

"Well, it's safe enough there," he murmured, looking round him. He had been only a few minutes at work, and there was no one in sight. "And nobody's noticed," he added, strolling off in the

direction of the school.

Still pondering the matter of the Black Star and all the trouble and excitement it had brought in its train, he was passing a clump of thorn-bushes, called by the College "Willy-Whiskers," when the hum of voices was borne to his ears by the breeze.

"Hullo!" said Jack, and pulled up. The place Willy-Whiskers was used, nowadays, only as a fighting-ground, when some particularly important encounter was mooted. Here the spectators could yell to their hearts' content, without fear of being "dropped on" by a passing master. Jack wondered. Was a fight in progress?

Irresolutely he moved forward; the sounds were totally unlike those usually accompanying schoolboy battles. Instead, it looked much as if there was a meeting of some sort being held in the heart of the thick tangle of thorn, the quaint shape of which had given it its name.

"... Those rotten Crees ... we'll be able ... shock of their lives ..." came the words, with significant gaps; and Jack immediately considered it his business to investigate. He thought that this was a meeting of the Calamitous Cripples, the rival society to the Crees—and he was not mistaken.

Approaching silently in the long grass, Jack Symonds peered curiously through the interstices of the jungle-like mass of thorn. There was Cummles, the renegade Cree, holding the floor, as usual; his fellows were asking him questions, to which he was replying confidently.

"We'll reel off as many copies of the notice as we'll want," he was saying. "The Crees will all fall for the wheeze, and everything should go well, with ordinary luck."

"How about the notice?" asked one of the Cripples.

"I've got a copy of it here," said Cummles; "we've got a jelly thingummy in our study that'll print off as many sheets as you like. I'll read it: 'Dear brother Cree, This is to let you know that a

special banquet is being given by the under-signed in honour of Jack Symonds, Chief Cree, in the old Science room on Friday night next, at half-past nine. As it is intended as a surprise to the Chief, the matter must be kept a secret from him and his immediate friends. All Crees to be present. Signed, S. Fane.'"

"That's all right!" agreed the Cripples, readily. "But how does it go on then?"

"Why, it's just like falling off a log—they all crowd into the old Science room, and then one of us will slip out and lock the door. Then the fun starts. We've saved up lots of bottles of that sulphuretted hydrogen stuff—you know, that rotten-egg smell—and we're just going to let them loose on the poor beggars. And other things that I've thought of. When they're just about done, old Simpole here will light a flashlight affair and take their photo—all sneezing and wrinkling up their noses with snuff and the awful smells—and we'll circulate that photo, or copies of it, all over the House. We'll call it, 'A Meeting of the Crees,' or something like that. The Crees will just about buck up when they see it, and it'll be the most spiffing score this term. Think of them—all dancing and prancing there, looking as scared as a lot of boxed-up rabbits!"

"I vote it a bonzer scheme!" came the admiring voice of one of Cummles's friends. "The only thing is, will it work all right?"

"Will it work?" demanded Cummles indignantly. "I should just say it will! How on earth can it go wrong?"

His questioner subsided into silence, and then Jack deemed it prudent to move quietly away.

"Will it work?" repeated the Chief Cree to himself. "Well, rather! Only in a different way from the one these Cripples intend...."

He chuckled to himself as he threw open the door of Study No. 9. Billy Faraday and Patch were there, and they had a queer-looking contraption on the table that Jack did not remember to have seen before. Patch's fingers were liberally stained with black ink, and

as Jack entered he scratched his forehead in a worried manner, leaving sundry streaks and blotches on his face.

"Hullo, Patchie!" exclaimed Jack. "What a dandy you are—always titivating yourself up. If it's not rouge or face-powder, then it's ink. A nice thick coating of tar would improve the appearance of your face wonderfully."

"Well, comrade, I do not grudge you your meed of humour. I know it's a bright spot in an otherwise gloomy life. But you might put it to better use—what about writing a funny column for our paper?"

"For your what?"

"Paper, comrade," explained Patch pityingly. "In the big cities they print the news on big sheets of paper, which people buy and often read. Ours will not stop at news, though. Critical comment on curious members of the school—frightful libels on all and sundry—all that sort of thing."

Jack's interest was now thoroughly aroused.

"What," he said, "you're not going to run a rival show to the *Gazette*?"

The *Deepwater Gazette* was the somewhat staid official journal of the College, which issued twice a year, and was religiously bought by the collegers, who read nothing of it excepting the sporting records. Patch showed, by a shake of his head, that he did not mean to push the official paper out of business.

"No, comrade," he said; "our paper will be brighter, full of snappy snips, and nifty news, quips and jests. This is a small printing-press"—he indicated the machine on the table—"and we'll turn out any number of copies, and—"

"Hold hard," said Jack suddenly, interrupting him, "I've just remembered...."

He went on to tell the tale of the plot that the Cripples were preparing against them. When he had come to the end of his

recital his companions whistled concernedly. But he went on—speaking in a low voice to them as they sat attentively listening to him—to outline a scheme for the reversal of the proposed jape. When he had finished they were both grinning broadly.

"Comrade," said Patch, "you have some of the elements of the practical joker in you."

"It'll be a tremendous thud for Cummles and his bright boys, at any rate," Jack assured him. "And Simpole isn't the only one who can take photographs!"

CHAPTER XIV

DOG-FACE

On the following Thursday afternoon there was a half-holiday, and Jack Symonds found himself suddenly without occupation. He had intended to go for a ramble into the bush behind the college, but at the last moment his proposed companion had been unable to accompany him. He was therefore at a loose end, but it was not in him to remain idle for long.

"What are you going to do with your useless self?" he demanded of Billy jocularly.

"Didn't you know? Some of us are going for a sail on the bay."

"Are you? What ripping luck! Any room for a bad sailor who doesn't know a mainbrace from a companion hatchway?"

"I think we can find room," said Billy. "Don't you think so, Patchie?"

"I do, comrade. That is, provided he doesn't get his feet in the scuppers or start dancing a jig on the keel."

"Good-oh!" said Jack. "Are you coming now? Yes? Half a mo', till I run down into the Gym. and change. I'll meet you at the landing stage."

A spanking breeze was blowing as the little party of five put off from the jetty and slid out carefully into the blue expanse of the bay. The steering and management of the little craft, which was merely an undecked skiff, was undertaken by Billy Faraday. The boat was fitted with a single balance lug sail, but it was fairly large, and soon they were running before the wind at a smart clip.

"By Jingo!" said Jack, smacking Patchie upon the back, "this is exhilarating, isn't it?"

"Yes, comrade, it's not bad. When we get a little farther out you

may paddle your feet in the water," said Patch, kindly. "This, my lad, is the sea, the abode of the finny tribe—it is mainly composed of water, but there is a proportion of salt added, as you will observe if you drink about a quart of it."

"Get out," laughed Jack. "You're kidding me—aren't you? You're taking advantage of my youth and ignorance. And is it all wet?"

"Every drop," Patch assured him solemnly. "Think of it—all that immense mass, and not a dry spot anywhere throughout it. Doesn't the thought stagger you?"

"Now you put it in that way, it does," agreed Jack. "Beginning to blow a bit, isn't it?"

"Yes, comrade. If it keeps on blowing like this you'll have to hold on to your hat."

The playful wind caught Patch's words and tossed them away.

"You what?" yelled Jack.

"Your hat, comrade. You know what a hat is, don't you?"

"Yes—a thing the chap passes round after the cornet solo. I know. A cousin of mine had one once."

Jack's spirits, in fact, were becoming more and more volatile; this lively fooling only served to render him more buoyant than ever.

He now jumped up, making the boat rock perilously, and drawing a howl of protest from his fellow-mariners. Throwing out an arm he began to issue orders in traditional sea-dog style.

"Now then, my hearties!" he bellowed. "Lay on there, you pack of land-lubbers! Hoist the keel to the capstan-head—throw the main deck overboard! Step lively, now!"

"Oh, my only aunt!" groaned Patch, who felt distinctly unsafe in his position right underneath the straddling, swaying figure of Symonds. "You burbling lunatic—!"

"Belay there!" sang out Jack, unheeding. "Reel in the scuppers—make fast the poop!"

"Sit down, you're rocking the boat!" implored Patch in anguished accents.

"Unship the propeller-shaft—get a head of steam in the bowsprit!" came the amazing orders.

"Sit down!" wailed Patch. "You colossal idiot, sit—ouch! Gerroff!"

Jack had obeyed the order—quite involuntarily, as it happened. The bows of the boat had encountered a short, choppy sea, and Jack was sent flying into Patch's lap as a result.

"Wow!" gasped the inventor. "You're crushing—life out of—gerrup! Help!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" gurgled the three unfeeling spectators.

When the slight disturbance thus occasioned had quietened somewhat, the amateur sailors had leisure to observe that the sea had risen—had, in fact, developed a distinct chop. The breeze, also, had become appreciably harder.

"Jiminy, what do you call this?" asked Jack, as a lash of spray cut inboard, driven by the wind. "A giddy old gale, that's what it is!"

"Gale?" asked Patch superbly. "When you've been to sea as long as I have, my lad, you'll know better than to call a bit of a blow like this a gale."

"Well," sneered Jack, poking him in the ribs, "what's your name for it, then, my good admiral?"

"We sailors call this a stiff calm," said Patch, and the others yelled with laughter. "Yes, that's all it is to the man who knows the sea. You should just see a real gale, my boy! Why, I remember that in the Bay of Biscay I—"

He waved an arm grandly to emphasize the brilliant lie that he was evolving, but, at that moment, to a lurch of the boat, he slipped from his seat into the bottom-boards, where he lay floundering like a landed fish, in two or three inches of dirty water.

"Dear me!" said Jack, bending over him with a look of kindly concern. "Is that what you did in the Bay of Biscay? Poor fellow, what a time you must have gone through! And alive to tell the tale—alive and kicking," he added, as Patch's wildly-waving legs described in the air most of the problems of Euclid, together with some that Euclid never thought of.

"Ump! Ur!" said Patch, regaining his equilibrium with an effort.

"Don't say you've finished!" said Jack, clasping his hands in mock dismay. "You will do it again, won't you? I just loved that part where you stood on one ear—I thought that so clever!"

"It was quite unintentional," said Patch, wringing the water out of his trousers.

"You are too modest!" returned the irrepressible Jack. "Why, do you know how long it'd take me to learn all that? The best part of a year, and even then I'd have to—"

Amid the mocking laughter of Septimus Patch and the others, Jack found himself in the same plight as the unfortunate inventor had just quitted. A lift and twist of the boat upon a wave-crest, a slippery seat canted at an angle, had been the elements of his downfall. He lay upon his back, struggling.

"Well, comrade," grinned Patch, "that's very good for an amateur!" He stood over Jack's prostrate form, and began to recite. "Here, a sheer hulk, lies poor Tom Bowling! The darling of his crew! No more he'll hear—"

At this moment the sail indulged in that whimsical operation termed by sailors a "gybe all standing"—it wriggled violently from side to side, and the boom struck Patch on the head as he endeavoured to dodge it.

"Help!" he howled, pitching head-first into Jack's lap as the latter sat at the tiller. "The giddy thing's run amok, or something—it just jumped at me and thumped me on the head. I tell you—"

"Let's hope you haven't hurt it," said Jack anxiously. "You ought

to be careful with a head like yours—it's liable to break something! Don't sling it about in that wild way; you'll do some damage with it one of these days, and then you'll be sorry you didn't listen to the wise words of your uncle Jack."

"My boy," said Patch, "I begin to have a horrible suspicion of you. I think you've been trying to be funny! I thought you'd been looking queer all this trip—"

"Beloved One," Jack told him, "I haven't got to try to be funny. It comes sort of natural."

"Quite so, comrade, quite so. It's your face that does it. You happen to have been born with one of those faces that cause horrible merriment. A face that provokes ribald laughter. A face that—"

"I can't help my face," said Jack sorrowfully. "It is cruel of you to mention it, but I must tell the truth. Listen. When I was a child a careless servant let a tree fall on me and—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the others, in chorus, but Billy's voice cut in with:

"Drop fooling, you chaps. We ran into a bit of a squall just then, and I don't think we'll go any farther. A bit of a sea working up. Wind against us. We'd better slip back while our luck's in."

Accordingly the boat was worked around, and plugged into the choppy sea that stretched between the vessel and the college jetty.

A good four miles of water had to be traversed before they would arrive at their destination, and Billy, although he did not mention his qualms to his companions, felt more than a trifle nervous about the return journey.

The aspect of the sea had changed wonderfully since they had set out on their trip. Banks of cloud piled angrily up in the south, grey and threatening; and the wind was now undeniably vigorous. Moreover, the sea had risen; the waves were swift and

vicious, jumping at the boat in just that manner that the expert boatman dislikes. Added to that was the fact that the boat was small and heavily-laden.

"Jiminy," said Jack, "we're in for a blow on the way back." As he spoke the wind whipped the crest off a wave ahead of them and sheeted it over the occupants of the boat. The sail jumped and the mast groaned, and as Billy tacked expertly the boat heeled over dangerously, and unquestionably, without the drop-keel, the whole concern would have capsized.

Gust after gust now smote the vessel, and it required all of Billy's admirable coolness and splendid skill to keep them on their course.

"I don't like the look of the sky," said Jack suddenly to his friend.

"Neither do I, old man," returned Billy seriously. "It's getting very dark, and there's rain in those clouds, or I'm no judge."

Presently the hands were at work bailing out the water, for, despite all of Billy's management, some seas were shipped, and the boat was hardly of the kind to afford to become much flooded. And, most dismaying sign of all, the going became worse as time went on. Beyond question, the gale was growing.

The minatory rumbling of thunder now became audible, and the sky was rapidly overcast. In the consequent gloom, the boys lost sight of the far shore, which had previously been visible as a dark mass.

Crash! A tremendous peal of thunder seemed to split the heavens; it was directly overhead, which made it appear that the fury of the coming storm was directed particularly against the temeritous yachtsmen. Instantly down came the rain, sweeping over the sea in an enormous, sustained shower. The boys were wet through in an instant; and when, in a furious gust, the sail flapped against the mast, it was in wet folds.

Blinding as a close veil, the rain effectually sheeted out any sign of land whatever, and Billy Faraday felt a momentary qualm. He

thought that it was now impossible to steer for shore, and he knew full well that there were only one or two places in the bay where a decent landing was possible.

"Look here," he shouted, above the roaring of the rain and the continuous smashing of waves on the bows. "Look here, you chaps—I think we'd better cut before the wind, and miss call-over. I'm not in love with our chances of pulling through this welter."

"But where will you make for?"

"Dog-face," replied Billy. Dog-face was the name of a small island in Deepwater Bay, and its name was the result of a fanciful resemblance of the place, on certain days, to the face of a bulldog. It was out of bounds, and rarely visited by the boys, who had to get special permits to do so. However, there were no attractions on Dog-face, and the permits were seldom called for.

"Dog-face," repeated Billy Faraday, "that's our chance! We're not going to barge into the rocks on the other side of the bay, by jingo! But Dog-face sports a bit of a beach, and I think I can make it...."

His companions nodded in silent agreement. After all, Billy knew best, and the boat was shipping more and more water as she went forward. The captain of the little craft, therefore, put her about with the skill of a veteran, and they were instantly running before the wind with the utmost speed and momentum.

"Gee!" gasped Jack. "If we miss Dog-face and slam into the rocks at this rate, then we'll just about go up in smoke!"

"Keep your eyes skinned, then!" said Billy between his teeth. "Hop down the stern, you chaps—we don't want to run our nose under water."

They tore through the boiling sea at a tremendous pace. Huge waves pursued them, but never seemed to catch up. The sail was as tight as a drum; a wave of foam curled away from the bows of the boat.

"If this goes on," said Billy, all at once, casting a glance behind him, "we'll have to lower sail. Wonder it doesn't pull the stick out of the boat!"

In a few minutes he cast an anxious look ahead of him and called on his companions to say whether they discerned any signs of the tiny island. It was a small place, and in the rain and the gloom they might easily run past it. But then Patch gave a yell, and pointed.

"There it is, right ahead!" he cried.

"Good business!" said Billy Faraday. "We're safe!"

As if in mockery of his words, a colossal gust pounced on the boat and shook it as a terrier shakes a rat—and the thing Billy had feared came to pass. With a crack like a pistol-shot the mast snapped off short, and the sail and cords, in a tangled mass, collapsed over the bows.

Jack Symonds, impulsive as ever, leaped up to secure the wreckage; but the obstruction had brought the boat side on to the waves. That and his sudden movement were too much for the stability of the frail craft. As a following gust shrieked overhead the whole thing canted terribly over—and in a moment turned turtle.

CHAPTER XV

A JAPE GOES WRONG

Sudden as had been the accident, unexpectedly as it had swooped upon them, Billy Faraday had time to yell, at the top of his voice, a direction to the four others with him.

"Get ashore!" he cried; and had no time for more. He soused under the chilling flood; he went down and down, and finally, struggling, fighting for the surface, his head emerged, and he saw four other dark spots bobbing on the white, wind-whipped seas.

His advice had been sound. The island was comparatively close, and although the boat might be still afloat, if upside down, the shore offered the better chance of security. He struck out, and had the satisfaction of seeing the others do the same.

In point of fact, Patch could not swim more than a few strokes, and Jack was well aware of it. The two pals, who were always quarrelling in friendly fashion, were thrown out together, and Jack saw Septimus, after one or two wild strokes, vanish beneath the seas. He turned, and, rolling over on the surface, dived as cleanly as any Arab boy who plunges for pennies. He had been so quick that his hand caught at Patch's clothing, and in a moment he was hauling his chum to the surface. Arrived there, he made ready to swim ashore.

It was heavy going, for they were both in their clothes, and Jack was intensely grateful when a dark form slid over the waters and he recognized the overturned boat. With great difficulty he hauled Patch across the keel, where the young inventor hung on limply.

Shortly afterwards they felt the crunch of sand beneath the substance of the boat, and Jack knew that they were safe at last. Three drenched forms darted up and dragged the boat and its

occupants ashore.

"I'd forgotten Patch was no swimmer," said Billy; "but we're safe enough now, thank goodness—this is Dog-face."

"Look here—there's an oar in the boat," said Jack. "We'll be able to scull back, at any rate, when the sea goes down."

"Better—one washed ashore before you came," said Billy. "We'll be able to row! But I'm thinking of how they'll be worrying about us back at Coll."

"Can't be helped, old fellow. Jingo, this wind's cutting!" He shivered. "I'm wet through—isn't there a place where we can shelter a bit?"

"We can look," returned Billy; and presently they set off to explore the island. All at once Jack stooped and picked up a jam-tin.

"Hullo!" he said. "Here's a jam-tin—wonder who was the tripper? Fairly recent, too—the jam's still fresh in the bottom."

"Show me, comrade," said Patch, taking the tin and peering into it, his detective instincts aroused. He glanced round him. "It's a funny thing," he went on, "but I can smell something burning—the smell of smoke. Any of you notice it?"

"No," answered Billy slowly. "Where's it coming from, then? Surely not from shore."

"Unless the old Coll's on fire," suggested Jack with a grin.

"No—I thought ... I say, comrade, look at this—there's a giddy old cave here!"

"Where?" asked Jack, pushing forward.

"There—underneath that clump of bush. I can see the opening quite plainly, and if the smoke's not coming out of there I'll eat my hat."

Leaping up, the schoolboy detective pushed aside the screen of bushes, and the opening to a cave lay disclosed. Patch ducked his

head and made as if to enter, but Jack's voice arrested him in the cave's mouth.

"Hold hard, Patchie!"

"What's the matter?"

"If the smoke's coming out of there, then it's odds on that somebody's living in there. And they mightn't like you to butt in."

"Well, comrade, I'm cold and wet—surely they wouldn't refuse to let me come in and dry myself a bit?" He bent forward and yelled down into the opening. "Hullo, there! Anyone at home?"

There was no answer; he repeated the call.

"You see," he said to Jack, "there's nobody there. I'm going in, anyway. Coming?"

The five of them made their way through the narrow orifice which gave access to a cave of larger dimensions than they had expected. It was so dark that very little of the interior could be distinguished; the place smelt of tobacco, and there was a dying, smoky fire, which they could not fan into a blaze. Jack stumbled over a pile of bracken and a blanket.

"It seems to me that somebody's been here recently," he said. "In fact, they may get back at any moment."

"Not in this sea," returned Billy Faraday.

"All the same, it's probably a dirty old tramp, who'll hit the roof if he finds us here. I vote we get out—it's not very salubrious."

They returned to the beach, and sat down to watch the gradual subsidence of the storm. When Billy judged that the sea had gone down sufficiently, they put off and rowed for the College, which they reached about ten o'clock, under the fitful light of a moon that the clouds obscured from time to time. There was, they found, a good deal of high excitement at the school. During the storm, which had been quite exceptionally severe, the boys in the boat had been lost sight of, as it was impossible to see where they

had gone; one moment, the telescope held them in plain view from the College—then, briefly afterwards, the blinding rain had sheeted down to conceal them entirely.

And, as their absence grew more and more protracted, the anxiety of boys and masters both had been very considerable.

Great was their satisfaction and relief when the storm-tossed boat came up to the jetty; Silver and a number of other seniors, who had been scouring the troubled waters in a launch, gave a cheer and helped them ashore.

Even old Salmon showed that there was a human being behind the dry pedagogic mask that he wore. "I'm glad you're safe, boys," he said, shaking them by the hand.

"Thank you, sir," answered Billy Faraday. "The storm came down very suddenly—we'd simply no chance of getting back. We were swamped, as it was. I'm afraid we broke bounds for once—we landed on Dog-face. Luckily, the boat and a couple of oars came ashore with us."

They were hurried up to the school, where they changed and imbibed generously of hot coffee, while a few privileged seniors and masters listened to the tale of their perilous trip. After which they went to their dormitory and to bed.

Jack Symonds lay awake long after the regular breathing of his companions indicated sleep. He was staring intently at an invisible ceiling, and remained so for quite a long time. He was ruminating over the various excitements of the day, and his mind seemed to dwell, for no apparent reason, on one detached incident—the discovery of that dark, smelly cave on Dog-face.

Somehow, his fancy was intrigued by the thought of that cave. He could not help feeling that there was some significance attached to it; he was aware that there was something—

"Jiminy!" The exclamation came so loudly, so sharply, that he feared he might have roused some of his pals. But they slumbered on. Two fellows were snoring on different notes, and

their snores quarrelled comically; somebody groaned and turned over in his sleep; no other sounds could be heard.

Jack resumed his thoughts; that exclamation had betokened a discovery—light, in fact, was dawning on his mind. Now he could see what he had been thinking of. Ah! Of course ... Humbolt.

Was it a fact, he wondered, that "Tiger" was the occupant of the cave? The man, he knew, was lurking in the vicinity somewhere —what was more natural than that he should have selected the unknown hole, hidden away on deserted Dog-face, as his place of concealment?

"I wonder!" said Jack to himself. The idea seemed to hold water. Humbolt hiding on Dog-face! A little startling, but quite likely. Jack smiled grimly at the thought that, if his suspicions were correct, it was fortunate that Tiger had not found the intruders in possession of the lair. "Might have turned nasty," he murmured.

"Or, perhaps, it is only an old tramp ..." reflected the boy, turning over, and yielding himself to sleep.

In the morning Jack awoke, conscious of having forgotten something. Not the Humbolt suspicion—that could wait. Then he remembered. To-day was Friday—the great day fixed by the Cripples for the downfall of the Crees.

"Jingo," said Jack, "I'd nearly forgotten. Patchie, you old impostor, what about the bean-feast to-night?"

"Bean-feast, comrade?"

"Certainly. Aren't you going to the great banquet, spread or luncheon, that the Crees are giving in the old Science room?"

"Comrade, it had escaped my mind for the moment. However, I believe I am right in saying that all is in readiness for knocking the stuffing out of the despicable Cripples?"

"That's so, my genial old lunatic! And how progresses the *Busy*

Bee—that organ of wit and learning?"

Patch smiled, and indicated a pile of printed sheets that lay on the study table. "Those," he said, "are the inside pages—we're having eight pages in all. The remaining four pages will not go to press until—"

"Exactly," chimed in Jack. "Until—what?" And, winking at his pal, he laughed heartily.

"It occurs to me, comrade, that we could make a bit of capital out of the adventure of yesterday—what? Written up in terse, vivid style by our friend Billy, it should form a regular scoop for the *Busy Bee*."

"Of course—write it up as much as you like, but don't get too personal. I refer to our youthful pranks in the boat. Won't do to have Lower School getting a false notion of their seniors!"

And Jack, who cared nothing at all for his dignity as a member of the Fifth, grinned widely.

Nothing of particular importance happened during the day. Perhaps that was because all minds, Cripples and Crees alike, were looking forward to the night. The Cripples were looking forward to the downfall and abasement of the Crees. But the Crees, curiously enough, were expecting the same thing about the Cripples. And with more reason.

Cummles and his gang concealed themselves in the shadow of an ivy-clad wall in close proximity to the old Science classroom, which, for some reason or other, was at the present time quite unused.

They had not long to wait. In twos and threes the Crees came slinking through the darkness, to avoid possible detection at the hand of any master who might happen to be passing. The little parties vanished into the old Science room, whence arose, in the course of a few minutes, the murmur of talk.

"Got them beautifully," whispered Cummles, overjoyed at the

success of his plan. "They're waiting for Symonds and the other heads, but they'll wait a long time."

Jack, who with Billy Faraday and Patch, was hidden on the other side of the wall, could not help smiling at the misplaced confidence of the fellow. But the three of them remained quiet, and awaited further developments.

These came, but only after an uneasy quarter of an hour. One of the Cripples had locked the door, and the sulphuretted hydrogen had been duly released, but no wails or lamentations issued from the old Science room.

On the contrary, the place was as still as the grave.

"They're keeping jolly quiet," whispered one of Cummles's lieutenants to his leader.

"Y-e-s," agreed Cummles, inwardly a bit chagrined to think that the Crees were taking their medicine so quietly. Then suspicion smote him. "I say," he murmured, "we'll just open the door and see what's happened. Seems to me that gas might have laid them all out, or something. Be funny if—"

Moving silently forward, the Cripples approached the door, and stood there in perfect silence—a silence matched only by that on the other side of the door.

"Well!" said Cummles, unable to contain his curiosity any longer, and whipping open the door. The disagreeable smell from the bottles came to their noses, and one or two drew back.

It was just at that moment that one of the fellows at the rear sang out, in a loud, yet guarded voice: "Look out, you chaps—here's old Salmon."

A dark figure was certainly approaching from the direction of the school buildings, and it looked as if the Cripples were cornered. But necessity drove them; and, led by Cummles himself, they all bolted into the classroom and closed the door.

It would have caused them a trifle of concern had they known

that the figure was merely that of Jack Symonds; and that the supposed Cripple who had given the alarm was none other than Faraday himself. Billy had, as a matter of fact, joined the band in the shadows, and the rest had been easy. In the darkness he had escaped recognition; and the trick played by the Crees worked with smooth certainty.

Now, indeed, the tables were turned with a vengeance. The Crees, forewarned, had merely passed through the room and had made their exit by a window, which they were careful to close and shutter up behind them.

During the time of their supposed tortures, they had been quietly awaiting events elsewhere; and now the Cripples were securely captured. Billy Faraday sprang forward and turned the key that Cummles had carelessly left in the door; and he laughed quietly in the darkness.

"We've got them by their giddy wool, what?" he chuckled. "Ever see anything so neat?"

"We've done them brown," was Jack's opinion. Bending forward, he yelled through the keyhole: "Cripples ahoy! This is our dirty r-revenge!"

Cummles had realized as much when he found the room void of its supposed inmates.

"Let us out, you scugs!" he spluttered, half-choking with the abominable odours of which the room now fairly reeked.

"Nice and comfy in there?" demanded Jack. "Air a little close, perhaps!"

"Wait till next time, you Hottentot!" was the ungentlemanly retort.

The Crees had gathered round, and were enjoying the joke immensely. "Do you like snuff?" inquired Jack pleasantly.

"You—you—" choked Cummles, horrified. He knew that large bags of snuff were fixed in the rafters, and that a twitch cord that

led outside would tip them up. He was unaware how Jack had come to know of the existence of the snuff, but it was evident that Jack did know—and, what was more, intended to use it.

"Easy on, Symonds!"

"Snuff said!" joked Jack in reply, and gave a pull to the cord that retained the snuff in position.

"I say, this is—arrh! atchoo! This is—hum-hum-atchoo! atchoo!—a bit thick—at-choo! at-choo!"

"Symonds, you beas—'-choo!"

A volley of sneezes threatened to lift the roof off. The Cripples were ready to die with sneezing and breathing the foul gases that pervaded the place, but Jack had not finished yet.

"I say—want to come out?" he inquired.

"Yes—shoo! Arr-rum! At-choo! Quickly, let us—at-choo!—out!"

"Well, listen," dictated the calm voice. "You must all go down on your knees and humbly beg to be let out—get that?"

"Yeshoo! Yes! Hurry up! Atchoo! Hishoo!"

"If I open the door and find you another way," insisted Jack, "I'll keep you here for another ten minutes!"

"All right! Hishoo! At-choo!"

"Right! All down on your knees?"

"Yes."

"Look up and look pretty," urged Jack, flinging open the door. The Cripples were heartily sick of their confinement in that room of terrors. They were all kneeling, to a man, with running eyes and moist noses and contorted faces, begging for deliverance.

"Now, that flare—sharp!" rapped out Jack; and as he said the words an immense flare of light, blindingly white, threw the whole room and its suffering occupants into being. The Cripples, too surprised to move, remained in their attitudes of meek

supplication, and Jack Symonds laughed outright at the mere sight of them.

Patch, though, was directing the lens of a big stand-camera on the scene, while Billy Faraday held aloft the flare.

"Thank you, gentlemen!" said Jack crisply, as the flare faded. The surprise of the Cripples gave place to anger—they were furious, realizing that they had meekly sat—or rather kneeled—for their photographs.

"Get 'em—hishoo!" cried Cummles; but as he dashed forward Jack and the others whipped up the camera and made off. They did not care about standing there and listening to the polite conversation of the Cripples.

As for the latter, they were a sadly disgruntled lot as they sneaked back to their dormitories, muttering threats of murder and sudden death against the victorious Crees.

CHAPTER XVI

BILLY VANISHES

One of the cricket features of the Deepwater College year, although it was no part of the school competitions, was the traditional match against Windsor, which was held in the mining town about the end of the season.

The cricketers of Windsor were keen, and generally managed to make a decent struggle. Last year, in fact, they had beaten Deepwater; and the collegers were burning to avenge that defeat this time. But, as sometimes happens, there was a dearth of good cricketers at the College—their team was lacking the one or two brilliant players that pull a side out of the ruck.

"All mediocrities, every man Jack of 'em," said Martin, the captain of cricket at Deepwater. "If they all played on their top form, we'd scratch up an average score. But the worst of the beggars is, they're so jolly unreliable. Might make a good hatful of runs one day, and a blob the next."

Silver, who was a fair bat when he got really set, nodded in gloomy sympathy. "And this year we want a Trumper so badly," he replied. "Remember the way the townies jeered at us last time? And they didn't beat us by much. This year, it seems to me, matters will be worse. Why, if London, or Scott, or any of our green men get the barracking really warmly, then they'll just crumple up. Almost puts me off my play, and I'm an old bird. Martin, old chap, it looks bad."

"Well, better luck next time," said Martin.

Screw, the third selector of the team, a player from Cooper's House, sighed and cast his eye over the team-list, which, scribbled hastily in pencil lay on the study table before them. "This is an inclusive team—not an exclusive," he remarked, tapping his teeth with his pencil. "What about Faraday—is he

worth his place?"

Silver considered. "Well," he answered, at length, "that fellow's a bit of a puzzle. One match he's a rattling good player, and the next he's a hopeless duffer. I suppose, though, he'd better go in. He's a good sort."

"Not that we want them because they're good sorts," said Screw sharply. "I've more than one decent bat over in Cooper's, and only I happen to have seen Faraday—"

"Oh, there's no question, when he's in top form," said Martin. "Look here, we've got the thing practically settled. What about drafting that notice out and getting it on the board? Turn the blighters out for practice—we've simply got to make some sort of a show."

When the Saturday appointed for the match came round, the show that the Deepwater fellows made was, as Silver said, "rather contemptible."

The Windsor team, electing to go to the wickets, knocked up a breezy 276—then came the great debacle. The School, despite its strenuous efforts, scraped together a mere 95.

"If only we'd topped the century!" groaned Billy Faraday, at the end of the first day's play, as it was a two days' match. "It mightn't have looked so bad, then. But now—!"

"We've got to pull up—that's the only thing," came the answer of Martin, across the luncheon-table. "Slog for all we're worth when we get in next time—and chance it. But, first of all, we'll have to shake up our dreadfully crook bowling. Of all the feeble lobs, those of Screw's were the feeblest and the lobbiest I ever saw."

"Here," protested Screw. "Here, I say—"

"Don't argue, Screwdriver, old boy! You know you were just absolutely off—"

"Well, you needn't—"

"No, but I choose to. I want to wake you up—to rouse you into

something remotely resembling form! Mind, you're not the only one. I was worse myself. Only it's never any good relying on me."

"Rats," said Screw politely. He knew very well that when Martin assumed this flippant mood he was liable to do damage to someone or something. When Martin declared that it was no use to rely on him he meant that he was out to perform wonders. But as he led his team out into the field next day and gave the ball to Screw for the opening over of the second innings, his dogged chin was stuck out defiantly.

"Now, Screwdriver! This is a ball—for bowling with, not for serving up to the batsmen in suitable form for boundary hits. See whether you can hit the wicket. The wicket's the three little sticks with bits of wood called bails—"

"Gimme the ball," said Screw sharply; and Martin looked to see how the first ball of the innings would turn out.

Screw, with his mettle roused by Martin's chaff, took a short run and fired down a perfectly horrible delivery, that whizzed off the pitch and went a foot over the batsman's head. The next ball the batsman fumbled, and jerked out to cover. Martin watched for the next ball....

Then he gasped, and uttered a short exclamation of delight. The third ball had flicked the middle stump clean out of the ground!

"That's the stuff, Screwdriver! Up guards, and at 'em."

The next batsman took his stand with respectful attitude. The man who had just been dismissed was one of their star players, and the manner of his downfall was not altogether encouraging. Still—

He played his first couple of strokes very cautiously, then, when the last ball of the over was delivered, jumped out and smashed it to the boundary, four feet over the head of long-on. It was a great drive, and the town supporters yelled with pleasure.

Soon the home team were playing steadily, and had almost

forgotten their inauspicious start. Confidence grew; there came out one Swan, a mighty thumper, who treated the bowling with arrogance. He was a big fellow, with the muscles of a giant, and the way he banged the unfortunate leather in the first over he received was horrible to behold.

The comments, audibly hurled from the onlookers, were not calculated to set the School team at their ease. When Screw went on to bowl there were alarming groans, for the luckless Cooper's House fellow, since his initial success, had descended rapidly from good bowling to mediocre, and from mediocre to shocking.

Martin's jaw projected more than ever, and he persisted with his bowling changes, but it was evident that he was getting no good out of them. About the only man in the team who hadn't bowled was Faraday, and when the skipper called him over he accepted the ball with no small qualms.

"I'm no Gregory, you know," said Billy deprecatingly.

"No matter—surely you're as good as any of the other chumps!" said Martin.

"A desperate move," commented Billy, walking back to begin his run.

He sent his first few balls so disgracefully wide as to evoke a storm of jeers from the town supporters, who, it must be confessed, had no scruples of sportsmanship to hold them in check.

With Billy, this sort of treatment meant that he would really wake up and show what he was made of. He raged inwardly, but he seemed perfectly calm as he strolled back from the crease, his leisurely gait drawing more comment from the crowd.

"What price Algernon?"

"Look out—he's going to bowl!"

"Don't hurry—all day yet!"

Billy was one of those fellows who are seldom disconcerted by

chaff such as that. But he was stung; and showed it by the deadly intent he put into his next ball, which hissed furiously for the wicket in dismaying fashion. But the leviathan of the Windsor team whirled his bat and smote the ball generously.

Mid-on was in two minds about the ball. It was coming to him very fast, and would probably hurt severely if he stopped it. On the other hand, it was a catch—of a sort. He had not decided whether to try for it or leave it—which is a detestable state of mind for any fieldsman—when it was upon him. He made a belated, miserable attempt—and missed by feet.

Instantly the scorn of the townsmen was poured out upon him.

"Butter-fingers!"

"Get a bag!"

"Mind you don't get hurt, Percy!" piped an impudent treble, and mid-on blushed to the roots of his hair.

"The scugs!" muttered Billy savagely. He was feeling just about fed-up with the whole business, and the total lack of sportsmanship on the part of the crowd annoyed him intensely. At the same time, he showed no signs, but merely put all he knew into his bowling.

He sent along a fine delivery with his very next ball—and almost fainted with astonishment. The slogger, Swan, had almost missed the ball—and it was tipped fairly into the hands of Screw at short-leg. Screw held the ball and remained staring at it as if hypnotized. Swan opened his mouth, shut it abruptly, and stalked off the field.

"Good man!" yelled Martin. The crowd was silent, for they had been enjoying the slogging of Swan, and this fluke catch was not a satisfying way of getting a man out.

As for Billy, his determination was doubled. He got the next man, to his own intense surprise, before he was really set; and the score was beginning to assume a reasonable aspect—four men

for thirty-nine runs.

Martin's hopes of victory began to soar, and the amazing Billy, in successive overs, whipped over two wickets for eight runs.

"Where on earth have you been living, all this time," demanded Martin of Billy, during a change-over. "Talk about hiding your giddy light under a bushel! Demon bowler, eh? Why, you'd give Spofforth fits! Keep it up, old chap, and I'll stand you the best feed you ever clapped eyes on."

Billy grinned. "This is my day out," he said in reply. As a matter of fact, he had become worked up by the treatment of the School by the onlookers, and the desperate state of the match. It was his way, in matters of pressing importance, to rise to the occasion; and no one could gain-say that he was doing so now. Martin put him on again.

When Windsor went out, in their second innings, for a mere fifty-two runs, the spectators could hardly credit their eyes. Why, they had expected a rattling fine inning from the first five men, and then a "declaration." This was most unusual! After all, there might be something left in the School side yet—it would all depend upon how they would bat.

It was early evident that the school were out to win the match by dogged run-getting. Martin and Silver played a careful partnership, taking no chances, until Silver obtained the confidence which he had so disastrously lacked in the first innings.

Once there, really "set," Silver looked round and began to play a faster and more open game. The Windsor team were sent scurrying all over the field, chasing the leather; and the score of Deepwater College rose notch by notch.

All the same, there was a considerable discrepancy still between the scores, and both sides were now striving with all their skill for a win. Doggedly as the School batted, sneaking every run that could possibly be sneaked, the Windsor team battered with an

equal doggedness at their defences.

No longer, now, did the derisive comments come from the crowd. The finish had the appearance of being exciting—very much so; and flippancy was forgotten. Instead, roars of cheering greeted especially adroit moves from either side; any partisanship previously allowed to show was now lost in the expectation of a hard-fought finish.

Martin went out, with a useful score, and Screw came in. Screw was, generally speaking a rather weak sort of bowler, but as a batsman, the only word that aptly describes him is "furious." There was method in his dashing, wild-seeming attack, though; and his lively innings for thirty runs tickled the crowd immensely. He received an ovation from the town's supporters, and grinned happily.

"They didn't care for my bowling," he remarked to Billy Faraday, "but my innings seemed to please them."

"Rather! I say, isn't old Silver knocking up a score? He's sixty-four now, and once he's set he's liable to stay there for ever."

"That's Silver's way. It wouldn't surprise me to see him rake in a century. Now he's in the mood, and has his eye in, the bowlers can't shift him!"

"And if we've any sort of luck—"

"—we ought to win," completed Screw, with a twinkle of pleasure in his eye. "Jove—there's another boundary; go on, Silver! Silver!"

When Billy's turn came to bat, he felt distinctly nervous. He had had such incredible luck with his bowling that it was far too much to expect that his batting would be of the same fortunate brand.

He was second-last man, and a dozen runs were yet required to win. Martin could hardly contain himself as he watched the bowler's run up to the crease. By luck, or skill, or both, the School had almost pulled the fat out of the fire—and it would be

tantalizing if they were to fail now—within sight of victory.

Martin held his breath as the ball was delivered. None knew better than he that Faraday was nervous—he could see it in the batsman's stand, his whole attitude. Martin stood and looked ... and then executed a wild leap of excitement.

"Oh, good man! Good man!"

"Hit like a Trumper, sir!"

It was a splendid carpet-drive to the boundary, and it clicked against the railings with a sound that could be heard all over the field. Martin simply gasped. If only those two men could knock up a dozen between them, then—!

"Then," he yelled, slapping Screw on the back, "then we win—we win!"

Screw was equally excited, and the two of them could scarcely wait for the ball to be bowled. That first drive had done Faraday good—immense good. It had cooled him and steadied him. He set out in earnest to notch those few runs necessary for victory. He played with judgment that sent Martin into ecstasies—played with judgment that baffled the fieldsmen, eager as they were, and ready as they were to make him pay for the slightest mistake.

"Oh, boy! That's done it!" roared the School team, as Billy lifted the ball into the outfield, and the score of Windsor was overtaken. The two scores stood level—dead level. The bowler looked grim, and compressed his lips. Couldn't he somehow flatten this batsman with his next ball: Wasn't it possible to make it a drawn game, even at this stage?

It wasn't. Billy snicked the ball past square-leg, and ran it for two.

"Good-oh, the Billy-boy!"

"Oh, you little pearl!" burbled Screw, almost speechless with joy.

The match was won—and by more than a margin. Billy and the last man knocked up twenty-eight runs between them, and of

which Billy made twenty. Windsor found themselves up against a most unlooked-for defeat.

It was almost dark when the youngsters had changed and were ready for the char-à-banc which would carry them back to Deepwater.

"Well, we did it!" said Martin to Silver, as they sat in the vehicle. "We did it, old boy!"

"And young Faraday's come on wonderfully," returned Silver. "Where is he, by the way? Seems to me all the others are here now. What's keeping him?"

But Billy would have found a good deal of trouble in returning to the char-à-banc. After he had dressed, he was met at the door by a grimy-looking youngster, who, however, said that a friend of Billy's wished to see him.

"He's an old bloke," said the youth, and Billy wondered who the dickens it could be. Some obscure acquaintance, he imagined, who would talk rot about how finely he had played....

A motor-car was waiting in the gloom at the back of the pavilion, and after the glare of her headlights Billy found it difficult to recognize the man in the tonneau. He came forward questioningly.

"My dear boy, how are you?" said a strange voice.

"I'm afraid—" began Billy, and then gasped. For the man bent suddenly forward and gripped him fiercely by the throat!

Billy had no time to cry out, no time to call for help, even if the surprise of the moment had permitted. The clutch on his throat was the tightest and the strongest he had ever experienced; he was dragged ruthlessly forward till his chin met the side of the car, and at the same time a rag that smelt of some strange chemical was forced against his nostrils. He tried hard not to breathe, but the breath came, and with it giddiness—and darkness.

It had been chloroform—that was the word that his whole brain shouted, and it accompanied his nightmarish swoop into insensibility.

Back in the char-à-banc his companions were becoming a trifle impatient.

"Did any of you see where Billy got to?" asked Silver.

One of them knew—said that he had seen Billy speaking to the grimy youth at the door, but had thought no more about it.

"It's a funny thing—cut back and see whether he's in the dressing-room," said Silver.

But no; Faraday was not there—nor, indeed, anywhere in the neighbourhood. The team spent a fruitless half-hour in the search, and concluded that Billy must, for some strange reason or other, have gone back to Deepwater alone.

"Perhaps he met a friend who gave him a lift," suggested Martin. "But it's funny he didn't let us know."

"I believe Billy comes from Victoria, though," said Silver thoughtfully. "Would a friend of his be hanging around this place? Perhaps ... anyhow, we'll wait for a bit."

They waited, but as Billy did not show up within another quarter of an hour, they concluded that he had unaccountably gone on his own; and they set out for the College with some misgivings, but hoping that there was nothing wrong....

But before we follow them back to Deepwater it will be well if we turn back the hands of the clock a matter of some twelve hours, and glance at what had been taking place there.

In the first place, there had been a considerable sensation early in the morning, when a notice went up on the Salmon's House board; a notice that attracted a noisy, mystified, questioning crowd of juniors and seniors alike.

OYEZ! OYEZ! OYEZ!

Be it known that a new publication entitled the "BUSY BEE," will be published this day, SATURDAY, and will be on Sale at Study No. 9, Salmon's House—Price ONE PENNY. Negotiable VALUE in the shape of stamps, cricket-bats, chewing gum, suspension-bridges, etc., etc., will NOT be accepted.

IMPORTANT!—No Free List.

The "BUSY BEE" is a real live-wire, top-notch, rip-roaring, and snorting good paper—you simply cannot afford to miss it!

HOP IN NOW FOR YOUR CUT!

Magnificent Illustrations—
Astounding Articles—
Criticism that Stings—
Red-hot Revelations—
Libel by the Armful—
Look for the Pink Label!

SEP. PATCH,
Printer and Publisher.

This was the flaring notice, executed in giant capitals, and with lavish expenditure of red and green inks, and the comment it provoked was considerable. Curious seniors and excited fags marched in a body to Study No. 9, and found the genial Patch, his sleeves rolled up, standing behind an improvised counter—he had moved the study table into the doorway. On the table stood a stack of printed papers.

"What's this rot about a paper?" demanded one of the fellows.

"Pay your penny, comrade," urged Patch blandly, "and see for yourself! I thank you."

Once started, the demand for papers was extensive, especially as the purchasers evinced great interest in the contents of the *Busy Bee*. Within a few minutes the stack on the table had diminished

by half. In all parts of the House fellows were studying the papers with amused expressions.

All at once there was a sound as of an enraged dinosaurus, and Cummles strode angrily along the corridor.

"Where's Patch?" he yelled.

"Here, comrade! What do you require? Have you a spare penny? Then I would suggest—"

"Suggest be jiggered! This is what I've come about." He lugged a copy of the *Busy Bee* out of his pocket, and held it about two inches from Patch's nose. "See that—that!"

He pointed with his finger. "That" was a reproduced photograph, covering half a page of the paper; and it depicted that humiliating scene on the night—now a week back—when the Cripples had been photographed in the old Science room.

The thing was horrible in its deadly distinctness. Against a dark background the white, piteous faces of the Cripples, distorted with sneezings, dipping into handkerchiefs, in every phase of distress, showed as plainly as a lantern-picture.

Patch looked at it and laughed with immense heartiness.

"Ha, ha, ha!" he chuckled. "Yes, very funny indeed! Screamingly funny! I'm so glad you noticed it—one of the features of the issue!"

"Funny, you goggle-eyed idiot!" roared Cummles. "Funny! You call that—" he choked, "funny?"

"Why, of course! Don't you think—"

"Look here," interrupted Cummles, "it's like your thundering cheek to print that photo, and you're not going to sell any more of your burbling papers!"

"No?" queried Patch politely. "Well, well! It's a lovely day, isn't it?"

"Bother the day! Look here—look here—"

He was quite speechless by now, and he made a sudden dart at

the pile of papers, with the evident intention of seizing the lot.

"What are you up to now, Cummles?" asked a quiet voice. It was the voice of Fane; and the bully-killer himself stepped from the interior of Study 9 across to the counter.

"I'll soon show you what I'm up to!" said Cummles, too heated to avoid a possible row with the youngster who had thrashed him early in the term.

"Well, I'm sorry to interfere in your amusing little games," returned Fane evenly. "But it happens, old tomato, that we don't want you in here. Hook it!"

"Hook it?" repeated Cummles furiously.

"Yes—hook it, scoot, buzz off, vamoose!"

"And mind the step," added Patch thoughtfully.

Cummles gave a sort of howl. He dived forward, seeking to upset the counter by lifting a table-leg; but Fane, vaulting over the obstruction, landed heavily on his back and bowled him over with no ceremony at all.

"Ow! Oof!" howled the bully. "Gerroff! Lemme get up!"

"Dear me—I didn't notice you there," said Fane sweetly. "Dropped something?"

Cummles, his face as black as thunder, jumped up and faced his tormentor in a furious rage. He drew back his right arm, as if to swing for the other's face.... Fane eyed him calmly.

At last, "All right—we'll see!" fumed the bully with sharp realization that he did not care to come to blows with the bully-killer. Those small, hard, knuckly fists of Fane's were too damaging to be rashly invited. "We'll see!"

And Cummles made the best of a bad scene by striding off without another glance at anyone.

The *Busy Bee* had made a sensation, there was no doubt. The reproduced photograph of the Cripples, labelled "The Martyrs'

Meeting: Cummles and Co., and their Ju-Ju," together with the satirical article that accompanied it, was a journalistic "boom" of the first water. And Cummles and Co. raged impotently. They could not prevent the sale of the *Busy Bee*, and the whole school was presently laughing at them.

Having sold all the copies that had been printed, Patch and the others set about their amusement for the day, which the cheerful Septimus intended to celebrate in a way all his own.

He had persuaded Jack to give him a hand with one of his inventions, and Jack, having nothing in particular to do, had consented.

All that afternoon Jack slaved in the workshop, surrounded by levers and wheels, steel bars and cranks. On his glumly remarking that *they* were the two biggest cranks, Septimus cheerfully replied, "Speak for yourself, old Sport. And when I've sold this invention for a million, I'll remember that the ox was worthy of his hire."

Jack groaned.

It was not until the cricketing team had returned that they came back to the house. Arrived there, Jack learned that Billy Faraday had not come back with the others.

"No," he told Silver, "he's not been back, I'm pretty sure. I wonder —"

He bit his lip and frowned. Was it altogether possible that Billy had fallen foul of Lazare and his gang? It seemed a trifle ridiculous, but—

Just then a fag entered the room, carrying a letter in his hand.

"For you, Symonds," he said.

"Ha!" said Jack. "This is probably from Billy, and will explain. How did you come by it, youngster?"

"A fellow on a bicycle was passing the gate, and he gave it to me. Said it was for you, and I brought it along."

"Oh, thanks. You can cut now." He looked at the address—his name, in pencil. Then he ripped the envelope open. He pulled out a thin sheet of paper, like a leaf from a pocket-book. He looked on it with growing amazement, that was replaced by an expression of horror.

"Jove—they've got him!" he said, hoarsely.

"Got him?" repeated Silver. "What do you mean?"

For answer, Jack passed over the sheet of paper.

"Faraday is held a prisoner," it ran, "and says the Black Star is with you. Keep this to yourself, and meet me, with the Star to-morrow night, nine o'clock, at Day's Corner. Attempt no treachery, or it will be the worse for your friend—and yourself. It is the only way. Your failure to turn up as stated or any trickery will be the end of Faraday.—LAZARE."

"Whew! Is this a joke?" asked Silver. "And who the dickens is Lazare?"

But Jack did not answer him. He stared at Silver as if he were not there, and his face had gone perfectly white.

CHAPTER XVII

HUE AND CRY

"Old fellow!" burst out Silver, clutching Jack by the arm; "you look as if you'd seen a ghost! What in the world's all this rot? You don't mean to say—"

"Mean to say!" cried Jack, suddenly coming to life. "Look here, Silver—I'll tell you the truth. This letter's from a couple of low-down crooks who've got hold of Billy some way or other, and if we don't look out he'll be—"

"You mean he's been kidnapped?"

"Kidnapped—yes. Come along to our study, old chap, and we'll see what we can think out. I tell you, it's an ugly hole, and I'm a good bit scared!"

Silver followed Jack to Study No. 9, where Fane and Patch were already ensconced. The ominous note from Lazare was passed around, and the four sat down together to consider what would be their course of action. Silver, of course, wanted to know a great many things all at once, but he got, at least, an inkling of the ill-fated Black Star and what had already happened during that memorable term.

"Well, comrades," said Patch, "we've just got to do something! I've been thinking. First of all, we go to the Head, and make a confession of everything we know. Then, we'll have to get Doctor Daw arrested—he thinks we haven't got anything against him, but we know enough to get him hooked for conspiracy! That should put him out of the road. Then—"

He paused and considered.

Jack remembered something. "Oh, I've got another stunt that may be of use! You know that cave on Dog-face? I've always thought that that's where Humbolt was hiding—and probably Lazare as well. Now, if that's so, then we ought to find Billy

there."

"Good for you, Jack!" cried Patch. "It should be worth trying, at any rate. We could sneak over and hold the beggars up—nab them. That would just settle things handsomely, but I don't know whether we'd be able—"

"Wouldn't we?" demanded Fane, fiercely. "If Billy's there, on Dog-face, I don't see any reason why we shouldn't row over and get him back!"

"Humbolt's got a gun, and he might use it."

"No matter. There's Billy's pistol here, and we'd have everything in our favour. We could creep in on the beggars late at night, when they're asleep—!"

"Well, if boldness counts for anything, the scheme ought to be a good one. But—"

"Another thing is, if we don't do that, what on earth are we going to do? If Jack calmly hands over the Star, we've no guarantee that Billy's going to be let go free again! With giddy criminals like Lazare and that other fellow, goodness knows what might happen. Why, they might even shut Billy's mouth by—well, throwing him into the bay—anything.

"If we try to nab the chap when he meets Jack, he'd probably smell a rat, and do what he says! Or put a bullet into Jack—I wouldn't trust the beggars a foot, and that's a fact! The only way is to hop into them when they're not looking; and the trip to Dog-face looks good to me."

Patch considered, rubbing his chin with his forefinger. He took off his spectacles and polished them.

Then, "It's a risk," he said. "But, now you put it that way, I reckon we can't do anything else! If we collar Billy and get away with him, then the other fellows could wait till afterwards, see? The police could be put on their track, and, depend upon it, they'd be grabbed sooner or later. But once we've got Billy safe, we can tell

them to go and eat coke!"

"Of course we could; we'd have the whip hand over them. My opinion is—make the trip to Dog-face now—or very soon—and tell the Head nothing about it."

"Why not?"

"Well, simply because, if we tell the Head, he won't let us go."

Patch seemed to ponder this statement for a minute. "Yes," he said at last, "that's true enough. The Head would forbid it, and get some blundering bobby to take the job on. Look here—who will go?"

"The lot of us," said Jack decisively. "I suppose Silver's on, aren't you?"

"Sure thing," said Silver quietly. "We can get a skiff out of the sheds. I have the key—and sneak out along the edge of the bay. It wouldn't do if we were to strike out boldly for Dog-face! We'd be spotted pretty quickly. But what are our plans?"

"We'll see, comrade. First of all, we'll have to reconnoitre. Then we'll make sure of our attack. I've got an idea—we won't go until about two o'clock in the morning. If they've got a watch out at that time, then all I can say is, they're pretty cautious!"

And so, finally, it was arranged. The conspirators went to bed early that night—and they awoke early the next morning. At five minutes past one, to be precise, the little band of four cautiously left the school grounds and presently came to the river, where they launched a skiff on the softly-lapping water.

It was an adventure that was as wine to the spirit of Jack Symonds and his pals. They were strung to a high pitch of keenness, by the thought of Billy Faraday and what was happening to him; and if there was a trace of nervousness, the darkness of the night and the danger of the venture might have excused it.

Out they rowed into the bay, hugging the shore closely, as they

turned in the direction of Dog-face. The skiff crept along almost without sound; there was the ruffle of parted waters, and the subdued grumbling of the oars in the row-locks. Despite this, they made progress; and soon the black bulk of Dog-face lay blotted against the stars.

"Softly now," said Jack Symonds. "Quit rowing—we'll drift there. The tide is just right, fortunately. Easy."

In breathless silence the skiff drifted down on Dog-face. There was much starlight, and there was no knowing whether they were being observed or not. At any moment there might ring out a challenge, or perhaps they might be fired upon, and no questions asked. It was a nerve-testing time.

Finally, the keel grated on shingle; the slight sound was swallowed up in the wash of tiny waves on Dog-face. Patch leapt out, and after a minute or so of whispering it was decided to leave Silver in the boat, ready to push her out and pull for the College. The boat was backed into the beach again so that her stern rested lightly on the shingle; Silver, paddling softly, kept her nose pointed away from the shore.

Then, the three others stole quietly away. Nothing was left to chance; they took ten minutes to approach the entrance to the cave, using the utmost caution, striving to make only the most infinitesimal sounds.

At the mouth they listened for a long, long time; but they could hear nothing.

"We'll just have to chance it," Patch whispered in Jack's ear. "We'll have to go right in. You've got the pistol—let me take the torch and go first. You be ready to let fly if anything happens." Fane gripping a cricket-stump in the manner of a club, brought up the rear.

It needed a fine nerve to enter that noisome cave, at dead of night, and not knowing what dangers attended the act. But the three pals did not hesitate at all. They slipped inside; all was

perfectly quiet.

It suddenly occurred to Patch that perhaps they had been wrong from the outset—perhaps their whole supposition was at fault. That would account for the silence—there was nobody here.

"Soon settle that," he murmured. "Ready, Jack?"

"You bet." Jack's voice came back in an unfaltering whisper. He gripped the revolver tightly; he could not deny that it lent him confidence.

Patch pressed over the switch of the electric torch, and swept the cave with light. The place was bare of any occupant. Only, in one corner, what looked like a bundle of rags lay humped up; and Patch tiptoed across.

"Billy!" he said softly. And it was indeed Billy himself. They shook him by the shoulder, heartily glad that he was alive and soon to be at liberty.

He opened his eyes, and stared for a moment without comprehension. Then, "You chaps!" he said. "This is great! I never thought—here, cut off these things."

They snicked the cords that bound, and he stood up, rubbing his cramped limbs, and shaking them all by the hand.

"Jingo, but you're dinkum pals," he said. "I thought they had us beaten, but—"

"Who is it?" asked Patch. "Lazare and Humbolt?"

Billy nodded. "Yes, the brutes! They tried torturing me, and they got the information they wanted—I said that Jack had the Star. I had to—they made me."

Billy smiled a wry sort of smile. "They've got a little motor-launch, too, and I suppose they thought I was safe enough here. But they may be back at any moment. We'd better clear."

"True for you," said Jack; and the four of them got out of the cave into the faint starlight. "Phew! I can't say that the merry old cave

is exactly—"

There was a sudden blaze of light, and he stopped short.

"You will put your hands up, and drop that gun," said a strange voice. "Look sharp!"

Under the menace of a heavy revolver Jack had to drop his own weapon. He almost groaned with despair. Just at the moment of their triumph, Humbolt had returned, and, what was worse, he had already got the upper hand.

Helpless, the little quartette of schoolboys faced the grinning Tiger, who was clearly enjoying his victory to the full.

"Thought you were clever, eh?" asked Tiger, in a sneering voice. "You're a lot of fools, that's all, and you've put your foot in it this time, let me tell you." He turned to Billy. "Well, my young spark, is the chap that hid the Star among this lot?"

"He is," returned Jack quietly. "Look here, my good fellow, we're sick and tired of hanging on to the rotten old Star. You've got us beaten now, haven't you? If I promise to bring the Star right back with me, you won't harm me or my friends here?"

"No," said Tiger, shortly. "Provided you stick to your part of the bargain."

Jack was very much at his ease by now, but he was thinking with lightning rapidity, and trying to remember something that the old gentleman had told him on the night of the boxing in Windsor about this very Humbolt. Ah, he had it!

"Yes," he pursued, shivering, "this place gives me the creeps, and I wish we'd never had anything to do with the Star. Why, we nearly got bitten by a snake coming up here—"

"What!" said Humbolt, sharply.

"Yes, a great big black snake, and it ran into that crack you're standing on now. A whopper, it was—"

Jack had staked everything on that throw. He had remembered

in time what he had been told about "Jim Camp's peculiar horror of snakes," and desperately he brought the subject into the conversation.

It was amazingly successful. At the first mention of snakes, Humbolt had looked distinctly uneasy. But when Jack added that the reptile had sought refuge in the ground at his feet, the outwitted man could not resist a long, searching glance at the fissure referred to.

It was his undoing. Jack Symonds was ready; and, like some splendid machine, touched off in an instant, he sprang through the air and crashed heavily upon Humbolt.

Taken by surprise, Tiger's grip upon his weapon naturally relaxed, and the impact sent it flying a dozen feet away. But he was too strong, too solid, to go to the earth. He stood and wrestled furiously. Jack grabbed the man's arms and tried to prevent him from getting in a blow, for he had seen the effect of Humbolt's hitting, and had no desire to be hit himself.

The man was very strong, a very pocket Hercules. And Jack, athletic as he was, felt himself gradually being overmastered. The thick, short arms struggled in his hold; one got free, and Jack felt it drawn back, and waited, heart in mouth, for the sickening thump—but it never came.

Instead, Humbolt staggered, gave a groan, and Jack saw that he was falling. Hastily he glanced up and saw Fane surveying his cricket-stump ruefully.

"I'm sorry I hit from behind," the latter said, "but the beggar was out to spifflicate you. I banged him on the head."

"Good man—don't apologize," said Jack, with immense cheerfulness. "Come on—cut!"

Even as Jack jumped away, Humbolt, dazed as he was, made a blind grab at his legs. The man's tenacity was admirable; he was possessed of the instincts of a bulldog-ant. And, seeing his late captives, escaping, he roared out at the full pitch of his lungs.

"Lazare! Quick! Help! Lazare!"

So Lazare was somewhere handy, then! Or was it only a bluff? Bluff or not, they raced madly for the skiff, calling out to Silver as they ran; and after a brief, rocky journey, came upon the shingle-beach and the boat.

Everything worked with silken smoothness. The four boys packed into the boat, taking an oar each, while Patch made ready to steer.

"Six good ones," said Silver; and Jack, with the best oar in Deepwater College beside him, was strangely thrilled. He put lots of weight and pull into those six strokes, and the skiff shot out from under the black shadow of Dog-face across the smooth, tinkling water. A breath of sea-breeze fanned their faces.

"We've done them!" said Jack, delightedly. "After all—and I thought we'd regularly slipped when Humbolt caught us!"

"Don't be so sure," said Patch. "Listen."

"What?"

The next moment his question was answered. There came the muffled pop-pop-popping of a motor-boat exhaust, and a white speck suddenly shot into view, around one of the capes of Dog-face Island!

CHAPTER XVIII

CONCLUSION

"Jingo!" said Jack, excitedly; "they're after us—I can hear them! Buck up, you fellows—we'll spurt and beat 'em yet."

In Jack and Silver the escaping skiff carried perhaps the best oarsmen at Deepwater College; and they now bent to their task with a will, and Fane and Billy Faraday, who were rowing in the bows, took example from their pals.

The skiff shot ahead; the ripple of water from the bow changed into a rushing, steady note. The sea was calm as a millpond, and now that they were out into the bay, the sound of the pursuing motor-boat came staccato and clear.

There was no pretence now of hugging the shore; they were making a bee-line for the College jetty. But they were visible to the men on board the motor-boat; and, fast though they were going, there was no question as to which craft showed the superior speed. The white speck of the power launch grew in size until it was almost distinct in the starlight.

Lazare, or Humbolt, or perhaps both of them, were shouting—but the grimly-determined schoolboys paid no heed. As if they intended to pull up! But the miscreants in the launch had another argument—and a more forcible one.

There came the clear report of a revolver, surprisingly minute in the enormous space of the bay, and a bullet ricochetted from the surface not eight feet from the skiff.

"I say—" began Billy.

"Don't say anything," said Patch tersely. "Two can play at that game, Humbolt! Give me that pistol, Jack."

"What are you going to do?" asked Billy, straining at his oar.

Patch did not reply. He turned round, and waited until a red flash

and a delayed explosion advertised another shot. Then he lifted his pistol carefully, and fired two shots in rapid succession at the pursuing craft.

Some sort of a result was instantly perceptible. There came a distinct thump! and a snarling sort of noise that ended rather abruptly. Followed by three shots from Humbolt in quick time, all of which were without effect, although they whistled unpleasantly close.

"Pull!" sang out Patch. "Pull like the dickens! I believe I've stonkered their engine. Listen—she's misfiring like anything!"

Indeed, the explosions of the petrol launch were now decidedly irregular—and after a while they ceased altogether.

"Done them!" panted Jack. "Diddled the beggars again! Patch, you ought to get a King's Prize for that shot!"

Triumphantly the Deepwater College fellows pulled at their oars, and there was still no sound from the rival boat. After an interval the engine took up its beat again—but slowly and uncertainly, as if it were likely to break down at any moment.

"They're going slow!" announced Patch. "We can dish them at this rate. Isn't that the Coll. jetty across there? By jove, there's a light—it must be the Head! Pull up, my giddy buccaneers!"

Falling to the oars with a will, the boat's crew soon arrived at the jetty. They listened there for any sound of the petrol launch's engine; but the immense bay was quite still.

"They've broken down," said Fane, "or else they've turned back, and we can't hear them. What price capturing the beggars! Get hold of Mr. Glenister, and a few hefty fellows out of the Sixth, and we could grab them."

"If so, we mustn't lose any time," said Patch. "Come along, you fellows!"

They raced back to the College, and hurried in through a window that they had conveniently left open.

There they had the greatest surprise of the night. They were moving along the masters' corridor, on their way to the Head's study, when Doctor Daw's door opened, and the accomplice of Lazare himself appeared. He was carrying a handbag, and wore an overcoat—his other attire was all for travelling.

Lightning comprehension burst on Jack's brain.

"You third-rate scoundrel!" he said. "So you're getting out of it, are you?"

"Getting out of what?" snarled Daw, obviously affrighted by the coincidence of the boy's arrival and his departure.

"You know," returned Jack grimly. "You'd better stay, though, because the game's up."

"I don't know what you mean!" ground out Daw savagely. "Let me pass, you young cubs, or I'll find a way to make you!"

And he lifted his arm threateningly. It was a fatal move. Young Fane, the bully-killer, had a habit of jumping through the air and collaring people who thus threatened him. He jumped now, and his healthy weight, slung around in the vicinity of Daw's neck, hurled the master to the floor with a resounding crash. Jack, only a whit slower than his pal, jumped too, and the both of them held the fellow pinned to the floor.

But Daw was really desperate. What had given him the alarm—had sent him out of his room, in escape, at this hour—was not obvious. But what was obvious was that he was madly anxious to get away. He fought like two men, and the two powerful boys had their work cut out to secure him. Once he planted a fist in Jack's face with tremendous force, and Fane alone kept up the struggle.

But Billy and Silver were at hand, and, recovering from their indecision, they too hurled themselves upon the villain.

Suddenly the Head's room was opened, and the Head, in dressing-gown and carrying a light, appeared on the scene. He

saw five persons struggling in an inextricable knot upon his floor, and for the moment he did not know what to think. His first thought was that these were burglars; then he recognized his own boys.

"Patch! Silver!" he ejaculated. "What is this disgraceful conduct? What do you mean by being out of—"

At that moment Fane secured an expert wrestling hold upon the struggling Daw, and that person, recognizing defeat, burst into a torrent of quite unprintable profanity.

"My goodness!" exclaimed the Head, his ears assaulted by the outburst. "Daw—is that you? And what is the meaning of this?"

"I'll tell you what it means," said Jack trenchantly. "This man here is in league with a couple of kidnappers and thieves, and we're holding him for inspection. You'd better telephone to the police, sir. His friends are out on the bay with a couple of revolvers and a damaged motor-boat."

"It's a lie," roared Daw, accompanying the words with a few vile adjectives.

"That will do, Daw," said the Head coldly. "There is no need to swear like that—even if this charge is a false one. Surely you can make some explanation. I cannot believe that you are—"

"Sir," said Jack boldly, "I make no charge I cannot support some way or other. This man is dangerous, and I give you my word of honour that he should be tied up pending explanation. He must not be allowed to escape."

There was something in the earnestness of the boy's tone that had an effect upon the Head. Daw, writhing and cursing ineffectually, was not a sight calculated to inspire one with a sense of his innocence. Patch settled the question by producing the revolver and holding it to Daw's head, while the others bound his hands and feet.

"This must be explained," said the Head grimly. His eyebrows

had gone up at the sight of the revolver, but its effect had been to lend colour to a somewhat fantastic story. "I was seeking a little relaxation," he explained, "by a quiet hour of reading, being unable to sleep. I am interrupted—but come into my study."

In the study, accordingly, the full story was told, and the Head was vastly surprised. Jack withheld nothing—even describing the various nocturnal excursions that the Star had necessitated. The adventure of the Indian hawker and the substitution of a dummy for Billy in the Upper Fifth class, however, he deemed it advisable to suppress.

"You have been very frank, my boy," said the Head approvingly, "and I quite believe your story. It is a thing that I never imagined would happen at Deepwater—it seems, you must admit, utterly far-fetched. No doubt you would have been well advised to have made a confidant of myself or one of your masters at an earlier stage, but I am glad that everything has turned out for the best. The only thing that remains is the apprehension of those two criminals on the boat."

"It is nearly daylight, sir," said Patch. "If you were to ring up the police-station at Windsor, no doubt the police could prevent the escape of the men!"

"I shall do so, and at once," said the Head. "It is highly necessary that they should be taken. And as for Redisham of the Sixth, I must find occasion to speak severely to him. In my opinion he is more misguided than depraved, and a word at this stage will mean all the difference for him."

"I think he could be let off lightly, sir," said Billy. "He's not a bad fellow at heart, but I fancy Daw had some hold over him."

"Whatever that hold may have been," said the Head gravely, "I imagine that it will be valueless in the near future. The authorities will be able to see to that. And now I must ring the police-station."

He did so, and with the result that, promptly advised of the facts,

the police secured their men the next day, and were greatly pleased to have caught Lazare in particular. The man had been wanted for years, but had always had just that skill to keep clear of their meshes.

Billy put his case in the hands of a lawyer, and the three associates were convicted—and in one of His Majesty's prisons were kept from mischief for a period of many years.

The four friends in Study 9 were not displeased that the exciting events of the term had now come to a definite stop. As Billy remarked, holding the flashing, sparkling Star in his hand, "It was pretty fierce while it lasted, but the pace was a killer! I'm glad it's all over, real glad. Although it's served to give me three of the best pals a fellow ever had.... Yes, chaps, it's all over—the excitement's done. And the Black Star will be in Mason's hands before we return for next term."

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END