

THE BLACK STAR

A SCHOOL STORY FOR BOYS

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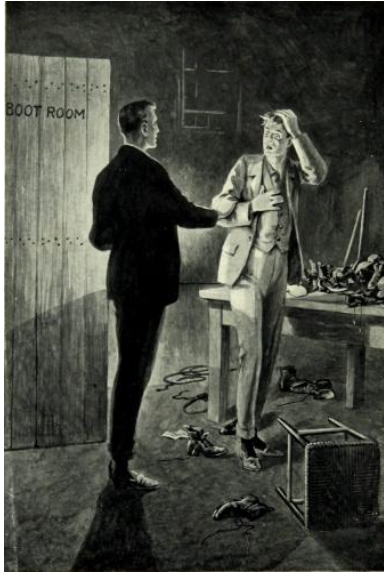
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"I wasn't trying to get out!"

THE BLACK STAR

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

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