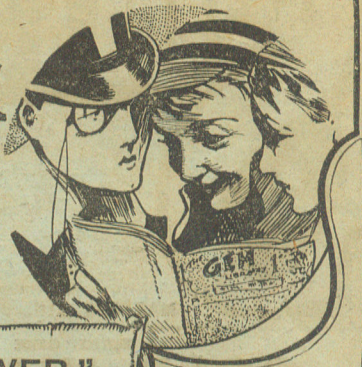


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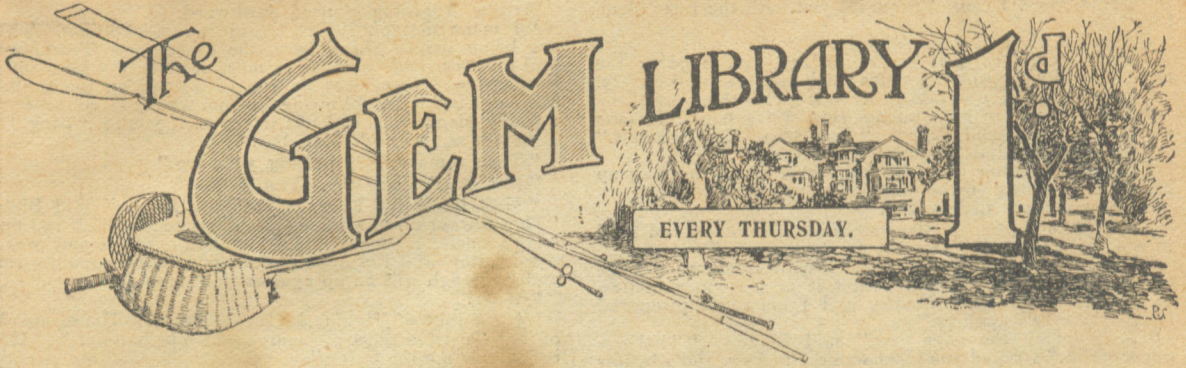
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A Tale of Tom Merry & Co. — at St. Jim's.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.

Arthur Augustus is Mysterious.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY gave his necktie a final pat, and turned from the glass in Study No. 6, in the School House at St. Jim's. There was a slightly worried expression upon the aristocratic features of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Blake, Herries, and Digby, his study-mates, were watching him with great interest. The swell of St. Jim's had been adjusting his necktie, after polishing his silk hat, evidently preparatory to going out.

He had not told his chums where he was going, or asked them to accompany him. He had only worn a worried look. Naturally, Jack Blake could not help seeing that something was "on," and he waited for Arthur Augustus to tell him all about it. But he waited in vain.

D'Arcy had polished his silk hat, changed his waistcoat, put on a clean collar, and adjusted his necktie in grim silence. That there was something on his mind was evident, but it had not prevented him from giving his tie that set which was the despair of the Sixth Form dandies at St. Jim's.

When D'Arcy turned from the glass, he found three separate stares focussed upon him. He affected not to notice them, and glanced round for his silk hat. He had placed it on the table after polishing it, and naturally expected to find it there. But it had disappeared.

"Bai Jove!" said D'Arcy.
 "Going out?" asked Blake pleasantly.
 "Yaas, wathah!"
 "For a walk?"
 "Ya-a-as, a kind of walk, deah boy," said D'Arcy, looking a little confused.
 "Oh, a kind of walk—not a common or garden walk," said Digby. "Going to hop on one leg?"
 "Certainly not!"

"Or crawl on your hands and knees?" asked Herries.
 "I wegard that question as wicidulous, Hewwies."
 "Or do a cake-walk?" suggested Blake.
 "Nothin' of the sort."
 "Then what are you going to do?"
 "I'm goin' out."
 "Like us to come?"
 D'Arcy looked more confused than ever. He fished out his eyeglass, and polished it with the corner of his cambric handkerchief, to gain time.
 "Ya-a-as, wathah!" he said. "I—I should like you to come, deah boys, but I am afwaid that I cannot ask you to do so, you know."
 "Why not?"
 "Because—because—"
 "Go on!"
 "Because, you see, it's—it's imposs."
 "You're going to meet someone?"
 "Yaas, deah boy."
 "Someone we're not to see?"
 "Yaas, wathah!"
 "Why didn't you say it was the young lady in the draper's at Rylcombe, and have done with it?" demanded Blake.
 D'Arcy turned pink.
 "I wegard your wemark as bein' in the worst of taste, Blake. I have a great respect for the dwapah's young lady in Wylcombe, and I wefuse to allow you to speak of her diswrespectfully."
 "I suppose it's diswrespectful to suggest that she might be seen out with you," said Blake reflectively. "Tell her I'm sorry."
 "I wegard that wemark as dewogatory to myself. Besides, I am not goin' to meet any membah of the gentle sex, deah hoy."
 "Who is it, then?"

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"I am afraid I cannot acquaint you with the facts, deah boy."

Blake looked at him suspiciously.

"Look here, Gussy, if you're rotting, you're going the right way to work to get a prize thick ear," he said darkly.

"I should uttably wefuse to have a pwize thick ear."

"You see, you're such an ass that we're bound to look after you," explained Digby. "You admit that yourself."

"I wefuse to admit anythin' of the sort."

"You had a letter this morning," said Blake, holding up his hand in a magisterial way.

"I do not deny it, deah boy."

"You gave a jump at the breakfast table when you read it, and spilled some of your tea on my trousers."

"I am very sowwy, deah boy. I expessed my wegwet at the time, but I am aware that it is a sewious mattah to damage a fellow's twousahs, and I am quite pwepared to offah anothah apology."

"Never mind the bags now," said Blake. "That's a minor point. I asked you what was the matter, and whether your noble governor had sent you a tenner and dodged the supertax, and you didn't answer."

"I was eatin' my bwackah, deah boy."

"You kept as mum as a boiled owl in class this morning."

"I decline to be compared to a boiled owl."

"And at dinner you never said a word to a soul."

"We are not allowed to talk duwin' dinnah, deah boy."

Blake grinned.

"No, I know we're not, but we generally manage to do it, all the same. After dinner we met your young brother Wally, and he was wearing the soiledest collar he's ever worn since he came into the Third Form—and that's saying a lot. And you never made a remark on it."

"Bai Jove!"

"In afternoon school," pursued Blake relentlessly, "you were an absent-minded beggar, and a bigger ass than usual, if possible. You told Mr. Lathom that a straight line continued to infinity was equal to the three sides of a deponent verb."

"Bai Jove! I am sure I nevah—"

"Well, it was something just like that, anyway," said Blake. "You had twenty-five lines for it, and you haven't done them."

"I shall do them pwesently."

"Now, most remarkable of all, when it's getting on to teatime, you are going out instead of thinking of tea."

"I am not vevy hungwy."

"The long and the short of it is, that you've got a secret on your chest, and you're keeping it so well that it's perfectly plain to the whole house," said Blake, with great severity.

"Bai Jove!"

"As your elder, and as your guide, philosopher, and friend, not to say your keeper, it is my duty to insist upon knowing all about it."

"Weally, Blake—"

"So just get it off your chest," said Herries.

"Weally, Hewvies—"

"We're waiting," remarked Digby.

"Weally, deah boys, I am sowwy to have this appeawance of keepin' a secwet fwom my chums," said D'Arcy, with a look of great distress. "I am perfectly aware that it is a wathah caddish thing to keep secwets."

"Then get it off your chest, ass."

"Imposs."

"What do you mean?"

"You see, it is not my secwet."

"Not your secret!" exclaimed Blake.

"Wathah not, deah boy."

"You don't mean to say that you're going around in possession of somebody else's secret!" exclaimed Blake, in great astonishment. "As head of this study, I must insist upon your restoring it immediately to its rightful owner."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Digby.

"Pway don't wot, deah boy. The secwet is not mine; it concerns anothah fellow, you know, and he has put me on my honah."

Blake looked at his elegant chum keenly. The distress in the face of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was not to be mistaken, and Blake's expression softened.

"Now, look here, Gussy," he said. "You know jolly well that we shouldn't want to inquire into any private affair of yours."

"Yaas, wathah, deah boy."

"But we can't have you going around like a boiled owl—"

"I wefuse to admit that I bear the slightest wesemblance to a boiled owl."

"With a secret on your mind," said Blake. "You're not the kind of chap to go in for mystery. Somebody's pulling your leg."

Arthur Augustus glanced downward.

"I mean metaphorically," said Blake, grinning. "You are being done. Look here, the other week Tom Merry had a letter, and went off to meet somebody with a lot of mystery, and there was no end of a buzz on the subject. We can't have you following in Tom Merry's footsteps like a giddy plagiarist. It looks to me as if you're rotting."

"I am not wottin', deah boy."

"Then somebody is pulling your leg."

"Not at all, deah boy. You see—"

"Most likely it's Kerr, of the New House," said Blake.

"He's always up to some dodge, disguising himself as somebody's uncle, or something. The letter you've got was a spoof letter, and the appointment is a spoof appointment; and the laugh will be up against this study if you go."

"Wats!"

"It's a joke of Figgins & Co., of the New House, or else of the Terrible Three," said Blake obstinately. "If it isn't, show me the letter."

"Imposs, deah boy; it's a secwet."

"Then how am I to know that it's not a jape if I don't see the letter?"

"You must take my word for it, deah boy."

"I'd trust your word, Gussy, but not your brains," said Blake, with a shake of the head. "It's not good enough."

"But I knew the handwritin' in the lettah, deah boy."

"That doesn't prove anything," said Blake. "Handwriting can be imitated. Wasn't that chap Gore expelled last week for imitating Tom Merry's handwriting, for instance?"

D'Arcy started a little.

"So you see," said Blake triumphantly, "that's no proof. Better ladle out the letter."

"Imposs."

"It's a blessed mutiny," said Blake. "I'd like to know where Gussy was brought up, to talk to his elders in this way."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Not a word! I'm ashamed of you."

"Weally, deah boy, I would twust you with the secwet like—like anythin'," said Arthur Augustus; "but it is weally not mine. And it is not a jape."

"Rats!"

"It is weally nothin' like a jape."

"More rats!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Scat!"

"It is useless to continue a conversation which consists wholly of the wude wepetition of oppwobwious expessions," said Arthur Augustus, with a great deal of dignity. "I will wetire."

"You can retire and eat coke."

"Where's my hat?"

"What hat?"

"My silk toppah."

"Where's Gussy's silk topper, Dig?"

"Where's Gussy's silk topper, Herries?"

"Where's Gussy's silk topper, Blake?"

"Where's your silk topper, Gussy?"

The chums of Study No. 6 asked the question in turn, with solemn faces. Arthur Augustus jammed his eyeglass into his eye, and looked from one to another.

"Weally, deah boys, I must have my topper. Someone has hidden it."

"Have you hidden Gussy's topper, Dig?"

"Have you hidden Gussy's topper, Herries?"

"Have you hidden Gussy's topper, Blake?"

"Have you hidden your topper, Gussy?"

Arthur Augustus breathed hard through his nose. His chums kept the most serious and solemn faces while they asked those questions in turn, in a sort of chant.

"Weally, deah boys, I must have my toppah."

"He must have his topper, Dig."

"He must have his topper, Herries."

"He must have his topper, Blake."

"You must have your topper, Gussy."

"I wefuse to wemain here and listen to the idiotic wepetition of absurd wemarks," said D'Arcy. "I will go in a cap. I wefuse to wemain anothah moment."

"He refuses to remain another moment, Dig."

"He refuses to remain another moment, Herries."

"He refuses to remain another—"

Slam!

The door closed behind the swell of St. Jim's with a slam that rang along the Fourth Form passage from end to end.

The Fourth-Formers burst into a joyous chuckle.

"Gussy's got his aristocratic back up," grinned Blake. "He has gone off in a noble wax! But I say, what on earth can the matter be?"

"Blessed if I know."

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Arthur Augustus was standing before the big glass, practising a tenor solo. He did not even notice the door open, nor see the three wrathful faces that glared in at him.

"Of course, it's a jape."

"Looks like it."

"You see, it's so like what happened to Tom Merry—getting a mysterious letter, and going out to keep a mysterious appointment, you know. Now, lightning never strikes twice in the same place, and so it's pretty certain that there isn't a real mystery this time. Tom Merry got mixed up with a Portugee and a box of diamonds; but I rather suspect that Gussy will only get mixed up with some jokers from the New House at St. Jim's."

"Ha, ha! Yes."

"Ergo—that's Latin—ergo, it's our business to keep an eye on him."

"What-ho!"

"We can't let him get into mischief, and we can't have this study spoofed, and grinned at by every monkey in the New House," said Blake. "We've got to look after Gussy for his own good, and turn the tables on the New House japers."

"Good egg!"

"Then come on, and we'll keep Gussy in sight."

"Right-ho!"

And Blake & Co. quitted the study, and went downstairs on the track of the swell of St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 2.

An Awkward Position.

TOM MERRY, of the Shell, was sitting on the stone balustrade of the School House steps, chatting with Manners and Lowther, when Arthur Augustus D'Arcy came out. The Terrible Three glanced at D'Arcy at once. Tom Merry & Co. were looking a little less cheery than usual.

They had been speaking about Gore—their Form-fellow who had been "sacked" from the school the previous week.

Gore had not been liked in the Shell, and he had been on specially bad terms with the Terrible Three; who had frequently interfered to check his bullying proclivities. The fault for which he had been expelled was that of imitating Tom Merry's hand in a letter, written for the purpose of embroiling Tom with his friends in the School House. The fault was a serious one, though Gore, who was less clever than he was cunning, probably did not fully realise how serious. The matter had come to light, and Gore had been expelled. The punishment was so severe that, though he certainly deserved it, most of the fellows felt sorry for him.

"It's rotten to be sacked from school," Tom Merry
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remarked, as he swung his legs on the stone balustrade; "and it's rottener than usual in Gore's case, because of the reception he was bound to get at home. Now, if I were sacked, my old governess would believe it was the Head's fault, and not mine, and she'd stick to me through thick and thin, in that unreasonable way women have—bless them! But Gore's governor, from what I've heard of him, is a sort of Brutus II."

"Brutus—chap who had his son's head cut off, wasn't it?" said Lowther.

"That's it—the original genuine Roman parent," said Tom Merry. "Of course, Gore's governor isn't so Brutus as Brutus; but I hear he's a tough customer. I couldn't help pitying Gore when I thought of his getting home, after the Head's letter to his father."

"Must have been rough."

"It must have been rock," said Tom Merry. "I rather think Gore's governor keeps a thick stick for Gore in the holidays. I dare say he needs it, as far as that goes; I know he never had all the lickings he needed at St. Jim's. But when Gore got home last week, he must have found the atmosphere—well, depressing."

"He should have thought of that before he did what he did do," said Manners. "Copying a chap's handwriting is forgery, though, I suppose, it never occurred to Gore in that light. And if the truth hadn't come out, it would have been jolly unpleasant for you."

Tom Merry nodded.

"That's so; still, one can't help feeling sorry for him."

"Hallo, here's Gussy!" exclaimed Monty Lowther, changing the topic as the swell of St. Jim's appeared in the doorway. "Going out—and without his topper! I say, Gussy, what are you doing in that cap?"

"I am goin' out, deah boy."

"What's the matter with the topper?"

"The silly asses in my study have hidden it, for a silly joke. I have wefwained fwom puttin' on my Sunday toppah, as there is a chance of wain."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I fail to see any cause for laughtah," said Arthur Augustus, turning his eyeglass upon the Terrible Three.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Whither bound, Gussy?" went on Tom Merry. "If you're going down to the village, I'll come with you, if you like, and see about my new footer while I'm there."

Arthur Augustus hesitated.

"I am not exactly goin' to the village, Tom Mewwy."

"Going that way?"

"Yaas, deah boy!"

"Good! I'll come."

"As a mattah of fact, deah boy, I—I shall be very pleased if you will stwoll with me as far as the gates, but no farthah," said D'Arcy, turning very red.

Tom Merry stared at him.

"Hallo! What's the game?"

"As a mattah of fact—"

"Not going to smoke in the wood, are you, Gussy?" asked Tom Merry solemnly.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"It's a dark secret," said Monty Lowther solemnly. "He is going to meet a masked man under the riven oak, and gain possession of the missing will—"

"Weally, Lowthah—"

Tom Merry slipped from the balustrade, and walked down the steps with the swell of the Fourth Form. Manners and Lowther remained where they were, swinging their legs, and they swung them skilfully in the way of Jack Blake as he hurried out of the School House a few minutes later.

"Oh!" roared Blake.

He fell over Lowther's feet, and rolled halfway down the steps. Lowther gazed at him with an expression of astonishment.

"Jolly good!" exclaimed Manners heartily. "I should like to see you do that again, Blake."

Jack Blake scrambled to his feet, and cast a wrathful glance at the chums of the Shell.

"I've a jolly good mind to wipe up the quad with you," he exclaimed; "but I haven't time—"

"Lucky for you you haven't time."

"Have you seen Gussy?" asked Blake, letting that remark pass unheeded.

"Yes; he's just gone down to the gates with Tom Merry."

"Good! Come on, kids!"

And Blake, Herries, and Digby swung away towards the gates. Meanwhile, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and Tom Merry had reached them, without a single word having been said on either side.

Arthur Augustus had opened his mouth several times, as if to speak; but had closed it again without uttering a word.

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Tom Merry had observed these proceedings with increasing astonishment.

He remembered a previous occasion when D'Arcy had acted in that manner, and that was when the swell of St. Jim's was confessing to having fallen in love with a certain charming girl in Rylcombe. It was borne in upon Tom Merry's mind that the swell of the Fourth had surrendered to another attack of the grand passion.

In the gateway they halted, and Arthur Augustus opened his mouth again, but still he did not speak. Tom Merry gave him a sympathetic glance.

"Feel it badly?" he asked.

"Eh?"

"Kind of worries you, I suppose."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Going to see her now, I suppose? Well, buck up, and put on a cheerful smile, even if you don't feel like it," said Tom encouragingly.

"I fail to compwhend you, Tom Mewwy."

"If you feel at all nervous, I'll go instead," suggested Tom Merry.

"I am afwaid that wouldn't do."

"I dare say she'd be just as pleased."

"You are undah a misappwhension, Tom Mewwy. I am not goin' to meet a lady."

"Oh, my mistake!"

"And if I were, deah boy, I should not appwove of your alludin' to it in that light mannah."

"I stand corrected."

"Yaas, wathah! As a mattah of fact, there is no lady in the case. I am wathah wowwied, about a certain mattah."

"Confide it in your Uncle Merry," said Tom, "I'll help you out. Is it tin?"

"Tin! Oh, no; I've heaps of cash!"

"Well, everything else can be handled, except want of tin," said Tom Merry. "Tell me the difficulty, and I'll advise you like a Dutch uncle."

"I am afwaid I cannot confide it to you, Tom Mewwy, as it is a secwet. The chap has weally put me on my honah, you know—without askin' my permish."

"By Jove! That's rather cool!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"And who's the chap?"

"That's a secwet."

"What does he want you to do?"

"That's a secwet, too."

"Where is he now?"

"That's a secwet—"

"My hat! You're going in for secrets, and no mistake," exclaimed Tom Merry. "Do you think it would be a good idea to tell them all to me, and I will help you keep them?"

"Pway don't wot, deah boy. This is a sewious mattah. I should be vewy glad of your advice."

"How can I advise you if I don't know any of the circumstances?" asked Tom Merry naturally.

"Yaas, wathah; I suppose it would be difficult," assented Arthur Augustus. "Pewwaps I could put a case. Suppose a chap asked you—"

"Yes?" said Tom, as D'Arcy paused.

"Suppose he asked you—"

"Well?"

"Suppose, for instance, a chap asked you—"

"Go on!"

"It's wathah difficult to tell you about the mattah without lettin' you know anythin' about it, as a mattah of fact."

Tom Merry grinned.

"Yes; I suppose it would be."

"Howevah, I will put a case. Suppose a fellow asked you to help him—"

"Good?"

"A fellow you had nevah been on good terms with. You'd help him?"

"If I could—certainly."

"Suppose he was in a doocid awkward posish, and wanted you to help him out, you'd have no wesource but to do it?"

"I suppose so, if it were possible."

"And supposin' he had done a vewy wash thing, you know—acted the giddy ox, and didn't know what to do, you'd stand by him like—like anythin'."

"I'd do my best, I suppose."

"Yaas; but suppose you couldn't help him without appeawin' to a certain extent to back him up in—in—wejectin' pawental authority—"

Tom Merry's face became very grave.

"That's a serious matter, Gussy."

"And without bweakin' some of the minah wules of the school," concluded D'Arcy.

"I don't know, and I can't say, without knowing the chap and the circumstances," said Tom Merry honestly; "but it looks to me as if somebody is trying to lead you into trouble, Gussy."

"No; he's in trouble himself, and wants me to help him out."

"He's not a friend of yours?"

"No; we have always been on pwetty bad terms."

"What claim has he on you?"

"None at all, deah boy."

"Yet he has asked all this of you?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Why?"

"Because I'm a good-natured chap, I suppose."

Tom Merry wrinkled his brows.

"I can't make it out, Gussy. If you can't tell me any more—"

"I'm on my honah, deah boy."

"I see. Then I don't see how I can advise you; but I'd advise you to this much—mind how you go! If it's going to lead you to break any college rules, better go slow. It looks to me as if you were being done by an unscrupulous fellow."

"Yaas, I suppose he is wathah unscowpulous," said D'Arcy reflectively; "but I don't see how I can refuse to help a chap that's down. Thank you vewy much, Tom Mewwy!"

And the swell of St. Jim's went down the lane with a wrinkled brow. Blake & Co. came out of the gateway.

"Hallo, here he is!" exclaimed Jack Blake, as he sighted the elegant figure of his chum in the lane.

"Right-ho! On the track!"

And the chums of the Fourth started down the lane, keeping D'Arcy in sight; and the swell of St. Jim's, buried in his thoughts, did not look round.

CHAPTER 3.

Baffled Stalkers.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS walked quickly down the lane, looking neither to right nor to left, and apparently never thinking of looking backwards. After him went Blake, Herries, and Digby, at a distance of about a dozen yards.

The swell of St. Jim's reached the spot where the footpath through the wood to Wayland joined the lane, and there he stopped. All at once, as he was about to enter the footpath, he seemed to remember caution, and glanced quickly round him, as if to see whether he was observed.

Full in his view, as he turned his head, stood Blake, Herries and Digby.

Arthur Augustus started a little as he saw them. The three juniors grinned; but never a smile crossed the face of Arthur Augustus.

He simply surveyed them through his eyeglass; and then entered the footpath, and disappeared under the trees.

Jack Blake wrinkled his brows for a moment.

"Blessed if I make that out!" he said, in a puzzled way.

"He doesn't seem to mind our being on the track."

"He's going to dodge us in the wood," said Digby.

Blake sniffed.

"We haven't practised with the Boy Scouts for nothing.

He jolly well won't be able to dodge us!"

"I say," remarked Herries, in his slow and ponderous way. "Perhaps he was only rotting all the time, Blake, and he's taken you in."

Jack Blake glared.

"Oh! Do you think so?"

"I think it's very likely. He may be only leading you a dance, you know, so as to have a laugh against you when we get back to St. Jim's."

"Which ear?" asked Blake, pushing back his cuffs.

"Eh?"

"Which ear?"

"I—I don't catch on! What do you mean?"

"I suppose you're looking for a thick ear?"

"Eh?" Herries retreated a pace or two. "What are you driving at, you ass?"

"I thought you must be looking for a thick ear, when you suggested that a chap like Gussy could pull the wool over my eyes," said Blake darkly.

"Oh! But—"

"Come on; and don't talk rot!" said Blake severely.

"Gussy isn't rotting. I can't quite make him out; but there's something on!"

"If he's really going to dodge us in the wood, I'd better cut back and fetch Towser," said Herries. "My dog Towser will track him down."

"Your dog Towser can go and eat dog-biscuits! Come on!"

"But—"

"Rats! Come on!"

Herries reluctantly gave up the idea of fetching Towser. His faith in Towser was great.

The Fourth-Formers hurried on to the footpath, wondering what was in Gussy's mind.

The swell of St. Jim's did not seem to care whether he was followed or not; and yet he had declared that the object of the expedition was a great secret.

As a matter of fact, the swell of St. Jim's was playing a rather deep game—deeper than his unsuspecting chums gave him credit for.

In that cautious glance round at the beginning of the footpath he had caught sight not only of the St. Jim's fellows following him, but of three figures coming through the wood from the direction of Wayland.

The three were Grammarians, as he could tell at a distance by their caps, and he knew at the second glance that they were Monk, Lane, and Carboy, the leaders of the Grammar School juniors in their alarms and excursions against the juniors of St. Jim's.

On most occasions Arthur Augustus would have given the Grammarian three a wide berth, for he had only a ragging to expect at their hands. But on the present occasion he marched straight on towards them.

The Grammarians exchanged a grin as they caught sight of the elegant figure bearing down upon them.

"Gussy, by Jove!" said Monk.

"And on his lonesome!" said Carboy.

"We can't bust his topper, as he's left it at home!" said Lane regretfully. "Better give him a bumping, for daring to come and meet us in a cap."

"What-ho!"

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus, raising his cap gracefully to the Grammarians. "I am wathah glad to meet you wottahs!"

Frank Monk chuckled.

"The pleasure is mutual, dear boy!" he replied.

"Yaas, wathah, I twust so. Will you pway step into the trees here, as I want to speak to you, deah boys, without bein' observed."

"Certainly!" said Monk. "I suppose you know we're going to bump you for your cheek in meeting us in a cap?"

"Pway don't wot, deah boys!"

The swell of St. Jim's stepped aside from the path into the trees, and the Grammarians, wondering a little, followed him.

D'Arcy adjusted his eyeglass and looked at them.

"I pwesume you were goin' to play the giddy goat, deah boys?" he remarked. "Howevah, I have placed you upon your honah by comin' up to meet you, and I twust that you will not pwove yourselves unworthy of my faith in your honah."

"Well, of all the cheek—"

"And I have a little favah to ask of you."

"Oh, go ahead!" said Frank Monk, grinning. "We can't refuse anything to the one and only Gussy. You deserve anything—if only for your cheek."

"I fail to see where the cheek comes in. I twust myself to your honah, as one gentleman to another. Howevah, to wesume. I am being followed by thwee boundahs, who have taken it upon themselves to look aftah me."

"Your keepers?"

"Weally, Monk, I wegard it as oppwobwious to suggest—"

"Well, who are they—the village kids?"

"No. They are my study-mates in the School House at St. Jim's—Blake, and Hewwies, and Dig. I am weally vewy much obliged to them for takin' a fiwently intwest in my pwceedin's; but I don't want them to follow me now. It occurred to my mind when I saw you that you might stop them."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Of course, they will lick you; but while they are doin' so, I shall have time to get away—"

Frank Monk gave a snort.

"Lick us!"

"Yaas, wathah; but while—"

"Look here, you funny merchant, we'll do this for you. But, of course, you know that your chums will get a fearful licking if we tackle them."

"I am quite willin' to wisk that if you are, deah boy!"

"Look here, you ass—"

"I wufuse to be called an ass!"

"Better bump Gussy first, and then bump them," said Carboy. "Collar him!"

"I wufuse to be bumped. I have placed you on your honah, deah boys. I twust that you will not compel me to wegard you with contempt."

"You cheeky ass!"

"I decline to be chawactewised as a cheeky ass!"

"Oh, come on!" said Frank Monk. "Gussy is too funny to live! Get off, Gussy; and we'll wait here for your friends. Good-bye!"

"Thank you vewy much, Fwank Monk!"

"Not at all; it's a pleasure to lick St. Jim's kids! And you deserve any little thing we can do, for the jolly laughs you give us."

"Weally, Monk—"

"Travel along! I can hear them coming!"

"Bai Jove! Good-bye!"

And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy flitted off through the trees, and the three Grammarians took cover close beside the footpath, lying there in wait for the chums of St. Jim's.

Blake, Herries, and Digby came along without a suspicion of what was awaiting them. They had lost sight of Gussy on the footpath, however, and they were glancing among the trees to right and left in search of him. And Digby suddenly caught sight of a Grammar School cap among the brambles.

"Ware Grammar cads!" shouted Dig.

"At 'em!" muttered Monk.

And the three Grammarians rushed to the attack.

The St. Jim's juniors had hardly time to throw themselves into a defensive attitude when their rivals were upon them.

In a moment there was a wild scrimmage in the footpath. Blake went rolling over, with Monk rolling on him, and Digby was sprawling under the weight of Carboy. Lane, however, rolled on his back under Herries, who promptly sat on his chest and pinned him down.

The juniors struggled desperately in the grass. But they were two to one, and about equal as far as muscular power went.

Blake finally succeeded in rolling Monk over and getting uppermost; but it kept him busy to remain there.

Digby, at the same time, was got under by Carboy; and Carboy sat astride of him, and gently tapped Digby on his upturned nose from time to time, reducing Dig to a state bordering on frenzy.

"My hat!" exclaimed Blake, remembering Arthur Augustus, and the fact that his elegant chum had already had five minutes to make his escape in. "Here, this won't do!"

"Gerroff!"

"Make it pax, Monkey!"

"If you admit you're licked—"

"Yes, that's likely! You couldn't lick a Third Form fag from St. Jim's!"

"I'll show you, I—"

"Now, look here, Monkey. We've got some business on hand, and we've no time to waste on you. You'll make it pax, or I'll—I'll jam clods into your mouth!"

"Pax!"

"Ha, ha! Good!"

Blake jumped up, and his comrades followed his example. Both the Saints and the Grammarians showed many signs of the combat.

But Monk & Co. were chuckling. They had not had the best of the combat; honours were easy, as far as that went. But they had effected their purpose. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had had ample time to get clear.

Blake rubbed his nose, from which a thin, crimson stream was issuing.

"Phew! I say, Monkey, have you seen Gussy?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What are you cackling at?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Have you seen our Gus?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The three Grammarians roared; and Blake left off rubbing his damaged nose to glare at them in angry perplexity.

"What's the joke?" he demanded. "Have you seen him?"

"Ha, ha! Rather! He asked us to stop you!"

"Oh!"

"And we've done it!"

"You—you rotters!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Which way did he go?"

"That's telling!"

"You measly Grammar rats—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You apologies for measly worms—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, never mind slanging them now," said Digby.

"Let's look after Gus."

"Right you are! Come on!"

The Fourth-Formers of St. Jim's rushed on down the footpath. They left the three Grammarians roaring with laughter. Up and down the wood Blake & Co. sought their missing chum.

They went as far as the Wayland road in one direction, as far as the ruined castle in another. They went up the

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bank of the Ryll, and down by the Feeder, the stream in the heart of the wood.

But they did not find Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

As the dusk gathered they gave it up at last.

By that time it was probable that the appointment had been kept, and was over, and the swell of the School House was back at St. Jim's.

Wrathfully Blake gave the word at last to return.

"The young boulder's done us!" he said. "I never thought that Gussy was so beastly deep before."

"I warned you that he was pulling the wool over your eyes, you know. You remember that, Blake."

"I remember you said some silly rot or other, if that's what you mean. We shall have to hop it to get in before locking-up, so come on, and don't jaw."

"We should have found him all right if Towser had been with us."

"Oh, blow Towser!" said Blake crossly.

They arrived at St. Jim's just as Taggles was about to lock the gates. They dodged in, and gave the porter a series of cat-calls, to relieve their feelings. Tom Merry and his chums were in the hall of the School House as they entered, tired and dusty.

"Hallo!" said Tom Merry, with a grin. "Been in the wars?"

"Rats!"

"Or through a threshing-machine?" asked Lowther.

"Br-r-r-r!"

"Boxing with a motor-car, perhaps?" suggested Manners.

"Oh, go and eat coke!"

And the chums of the Fourth went on to the stairs, leaving the Terrible Three chuckling.

Blake turned round as he set foot on the stairs.

"I say, Merry! Has Gussy come in?"

"Gussy! Yes, he came in nearly an hour ago!"

"What!" roared Blake.

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing!"

"Where is he now?" asked Dig.

"In your study, I think. I saw him doing some shopping at Dame Taggles's, and I asked him if it was to stand us a feed, and he said it wasn't."

Blake & Co. went upstairs, breathing hard. Gussy had been an hour home. He had been comfortably ensconced in the study, enjoying a feed after his walk, while his baffled chums had been tramping up and down Rylcombe Woods in search of him.

The thought was exasperating.

The chums of the Fourth breathed vengeance as they drew near Study 6. To add to their wrath, the voice of D'Arcy could be heard raised in song as they approached.

D'Arcy was practising a tenor solo. D'Arcy, in the belief that he was destined to succeed Caruso as the premier tenor, had taken up Italian opera songs, and one of them was now ringing forth from Study No. 6.

*La donna e mobile,
Qual piume al vento—
Muta d'accento
E di pensier!"*

Blake snorted.

"That's the finishing touch," he said. "He shall have a bumping that will break the record. Come on!" And the three juniors rushed into Study No. 6.

CHAPTER 4.

Feeding the Brutes.

"*La donna e mobile—*"

Arthur Augustus was going strong.

He was standing before the big glass as he sang, evidently studying the attitude in which he was to stand on the operatic stage, when he had a chance of appearing at Covent Garden as the Duke in "Rigoletto."

He did not even notice the door open, nor see the three wrathful faces that glared in at him.

"Qual piume al vento!"

"Muta d'accento— Bai Jove!"

"My hat!" said Blake.

D'Arcy turned round.

Never had the swell of St. Jim's been so near to a heavy bumping as he was at that moment.

But the sight of the study mollified the chums of the Fourth.

D'Arcy had not been feeding on his "lonesome," after all, while they were hunting for him up hill and down dale.

The study table was spread with a gleaming white cloth, and a really respectable array of crockery.

And there were good things on the table—cake and jam and jelly. And in the fender were a meatpie and a pudding keeping warm, as well as a tin saucepan, with a dozen eggs in it ready to go on the fire.

"MISS PRISCILLA'S PERIL" Is the Title of the Story which Mr. Martin Clifford has written for next Thursday's Number of the "Gem Library."

Blake looked at these preparations for a feed, and his heart softened.

"Hallo, Gus!"

"Hallo, deah boy!"

Arthur Augustus extracted his eyeglass from his pocket, and jammed it into his eye, and looked at the three juniors.

"Bai Jove! You are in a state!"

"We've been looking for you."

"Thank you vewy much."

"We're tired."

"You look it, bai Jove!"

"We're hungry!"

"I've got a feed weady for you, deah boys. I wathah thought you would be hungwy. Go and get a wash and a bwush down, and I'll have the eggs boiled by the time you return."

The Fourth-Formers looked at one another.

The planned bumping faded from their minds. In the face of a reception like this, how could they bump the swell of the School House?

"Right-ho!" said Blake. "Come on, kids!"

And the juniors adjourned to the bath-room. Arthur Augustus turned towards his reflection in the glass, and slightly closed one eye. If so aristocratic and dignified a personage as Arthur Augustus D'Arcy could be supposed to wink, we should certainly say that he winked at that moment.

Arthur Augustus had looked for trouble on the return of his study-mates. Perhaps he remembered the great maxim—"Feed the brute!" And, perhaps, that wise saying was partly the cause of that excellent feed being ready for the hungry Fourth-Formers.

Arthur Augustus drew a pair of old gloves from a drawer, and donned them, and then proceeded to place the egg saucepan on the fire.

By the time the juniors returned, washed and brushed, the eggs were done, and the pie was on the table, and D'Arcy was sitting ready to carve it.

Blake gave an appreciating glance at the table.

"Gussy, old man, this is all right!"

"Vewy good."

"It's cricket!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Wire in, kids!"

They wired in. If the sight of the good things prepared for them had made the juniors feel good-humoured, the feed itself was sufficient to finish the work of restoring matters in the study to their old footing.

"This is a ripping pie!" Blake remarked.

"Glad you like it, deah boy."

"The eggs are jolly good," said Herries.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"And the ham," said Herries. "It's jolly ripping. I'll take some of it round to Towser, when we've finished, if you don't mind."

"Good ideah, Hewwies!"

And the meal finished with the juniors in the best of tempers. Herries carried out about half a pound of best ham to Towser's kennel—a gift that Towser very much appreciated.

Blake rose from the tea-table with a satisfied smile.

"I feel better now," he remarked.

"Vewy good!"

"We licked Frank Monk and his friends in the wood, Gussy."

"Yaas, I was sure you would lick them."

"Well, perhaps it wasn't a very bad licking, as we made it pax."

"Yaas."

"And then we missed you."

D'Arcy chuckled.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"What are you guggling about?"

"I was not aware that I was gugglin', deah boy."

"Have you a pain anywhere?"

"Certainly not!"

"Then what—"

"I was laughin'," said D'Arcy indignantly.

"Rats! Don't do it any more, then. I'd almost rather you sang. Where did you go after we missed you in the wood."

"I went to my destination, deah boy."

"And what was that?"

"A seewet."

Jack Blake sniffed.

"Look here, you young ass!"

"I wefuse to be wegarded as an ass."

"You're going to keep this secret business up, are you?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Well, after that feed I don't think we'll bump you," said Blake. "But it's perfectly clear to me that you're being done by the New House rotters."

"Wats!"

"It's Figgins & Co. up to their games again," said Blake wrathfully. "They're taking you in with some silly spoof."

"Nothin' of the sort."

"I know better. I'm going to look into the matter, because it's impossible for us to allow the New House bouncers a grin up against this study. As for you, of course you're not responsible for your actions."

"Weally Blake—"

"And we'll jolly well go for Figgins & Co., anyway," said Digby, "just as a hint that we're not going to allow this study to be done."

"But weally, deah boys, Figgins & Co. have nothing wathawah to do with it."

"That's all you know," said Blake, with a sniff. "You think you met somebody at that giddy appointment, don't you?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"And you think it was somebody or other—"

"I pwesume so, deah boy."

"Well, it wasn't—it was Kerr in disguise."

"Wats! It wasn't anythin' of the sort."

"Look here, Gussy, can't you take my word?"

"Yaas, deah boy; but you don't know anythin' about the mattah, you know."

"I know you're being done."

"I am not bein' done."

"Well, I'm jolly well going to keep an eye on you, that's all," said Blake, with a shake of the head. "I know jolly well you're being spoofed, and there's not going to be a laugh up against this study if I can help it."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Br-r-r-r!"

And with that intelligible and extremely lucid rejoinder, Blake closed the discussion, and began to do his prep.

CHAPTER 5.

D'Arcy Expresses Regret.

TOM MERRY looked into Study No. 6 at half-past nine that evening. It was time for the juniors to go to bed, but Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was missing from the ranks of the Fourth Form. Several juniors had gone round to look for him, and Tom Merry happened to be the one who looked into his study.

The gas was alight in the study, and as Tom Merry glanced in at the open door, he saw that Arthur Augustus was there.

The hero of the Shell gave a low whistle of surprise. D'Arcy was standing at the cupboard in which the chums of No. 6 kept their provisions. He was engaged in taking out a quantity of eatables of various sorts, and packing them into a small handbag.

Tom Merry was naturally surprised.

If it had been Fatty Wynn, of the New House, he could have understood. But Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was the last person at St. Jim's who could be suspected of going off for a solitary feed all on his own.

The elegant junior heard Tom Merry's whistle, and he gave a violent start, and turned round. A pork-pie in a basin—one of Dame Taggles' works of art, very popular with the juniors—was in his hand. In the start he gave, it dropped to the floor, and the basin smashed into a dozen pieces.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "What the—"

"Bai Jove! You startled me!"

"It's bedtime. I came to tell you."

"Thank you vewy much, deah boy."

"What on earth are you doing with the grub?" asked Tom. "Not going to have a dorm. feed to-night, eh?"

"Oh, no!"

"Getting ready for a picnic to-morrow?"

"Certainly not."

"Then what on earth—"

"Pway do not mention this mattah to anyone, Tom Mewwy," said Arthur Augustus, his face growing very pink. "It is all right."

"You're going to give that grub to somebody?"

"Ya-a-as."

"Oh, I suppose Skimpole's been converting you to Socialism, and you're going to distribute all the grub to those who want it."

"Not exactly, but—"

"All right, it's no business of mine," said Tom Merry, more and more surprised by the confusion in D'Arcy's looks. "But you'd better come along now, or Darrel will be on your track."

"Yaas, I suppose so."

And Arthur Augustus thrust the half-packed bag under the study table, and followed Tom Merry.

"Oh, here he is!" said Blake. "Where have you been?"

"In the study, deah boy."

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"You've been keeping me waiting two minutes," said Darrel, of the Sixth, the prefect who had the pleasant duty of herding the juniors to bed that night.

"I'm awfully sowwy, Dawwel."

"Well, I won't knock your head off this time. Got to the dormitory," said Darrel, laughing.

"But I am weally sowwy I have kept you waitin', Dawwel. I twust you do not suspect me of lackin' in wespsect to a pwefect?"

"Oh, no! Cut along."

"I should wegard it as uttably unjustifiable to lack pwopah wespsect for a pwefect. Wespsect for constituted authority is the first mark of a decent chap."

"Yes; got to bed."

"And undah the circs——"

"Bed!"

"Undah the circs——"

"Bed!" roared Darrel.

"Certainly, deah boy."

And D'Arcy went up with the grinning juniors.

The Fourth-Formers went into their dormitory, and Darrel warned them of what would be in store if they weren't in bed by the time he came to turn the light out, and left them to turn in.

"Bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus remarked. "I am weally vevy sowwy I kept Dawwel waitin', you know. Do you think I have sufficiently expressed my wegwet, Blake?"

"Heaps, my son."

"I should not like a decent chap like Dawwel to imagine that I meant to be anythin' like diswespsectful, you know."

"That's all right, ass!"

"Weally, Blake——"

"Turn in, duffer, before he comes in."

"I wufuse to be called a duffah!"

Blake clambered into bed. Arthur Augustus sat on the edge of his, and told Blake what he thought of him. He had just finished, when Darrel came in. The Sixth-Former glanced along the line of beds, and discovered D'Arcy just undressing.

"D'Arcy!"

"Yaas, Dawwel."

"Why aren't you in bed?"

"I've been explainin' to Blake that I wegard him as a diswespsectful ass."

Darrel's face relaxed.

"You'd better turn in," he said.

"Certainly, deah boy."

"Buck up, then!" roared Darrel.

D'Arcy turned in.

Darrel was one of the best-tempered fellows in the Sixth, or Gussy would certainly have received some sounding spansks. He was finished at last, and Darrel turned the light out.

"Good-night, kids!"

"Good-night, Darrel!"

"I say, Dawwel, deah boy——"

"Well, what is it?"

"I twust you are satisfied that I did not mean to be diswespsect——"

Slam!

"Bai Jove! Fancy a chap shuttin' the door while I was in the middle of talkin' to him!"

"Well, he could hardly stay here all night, could he, so he was bound to interrupt you," remarked Kerruish.

"Weally, you Manx boundah——"

"Oh, shut up, and go to sleep!"

"I wufuse to shut up, and I uttably decline to go to sleep.

Blake, deah boy——"

"Good-night!"

"Weally, Blake, I was goin' to speak to you. Don't go to sleep for a minute."

Snore!

"I say, Dig——"

Snore!

"I say, Hewwies——"

Snore!

"Bai Jove! I say, you know—— I say, Mellish——"

"Hallo!" said Mellish.

"Do you think Dawwel slammed the door like that because he supposed that it was my intention to be diswespsectful?"

"Certain," said Mellish, grinning in the darkness. "The best thing you can do is to cut after him and apologise."

D'Arcy rolled out of bed.

"Thank you, Mellish, deah boy. I was weally thinkin' so myself."

"Gussy!" roared Blake, as he heard D'Arcy scuttle towards the door in his pyjamas. "You young ass! Come back!"

"I'm goin' to apologise to Dawwel."

"Come back!"

"I wufuse to come back."

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And D'Arcy hurried out of the dormitory, to catch the prefect before he had quite got downstairs. Blake yelled after him in vain. The whole of the Fourth Form in the School House dormitory cackled joyously.

Darrel was half-way downstairs when he heard an excited voice behind him. He had stopped on the landing to speak to Kildare, who had seen the Shell into their dormitory.

"Dawwel! I say, Dawwel, deah boy!"

"My only hat!" said Kildare, staring at the graceful figure in gorgeous pyjamas that came sailing down the stairs. "What's that?"

Darrel grinned.

"It's D'Arcy! You young duffer, what do you want?"

"I twust——"

"Get back to bed!"

"I twust you did not wegard me as meanin' to be diswespsectful——"

"Get to your dormitory!"

"Because nothin' was weally furthah fwom my intention."

"Be off!"

"Although I admit that undah the circs appeawances were against me——"

"Buzz off!"

"But I assure you——"

"Scat!"

"On my word of honah——"

"Sheer off!"

"As a gentleman——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Kildare. "I believe he's wound up!"

"I am not wound up, Kildare. I wegard the suggestion as fwivolous. I wegard it as my duty to explain mattahs to Dawwel, as one gentleman to anothah."

Darrel chuckled.

"And now you've explained matters, get back to bed before I spank you," he said.

"I should wufuse to be spanked. I——"

Darrel rushed upstairs, and Arthur Augustus rushed off, too. He went along the passage with his pyjamas fluttering in the breeze, and the outstretched hand of the prefect close behind him.

"Bai Jove, he's gainin'!" muttered D'Arcy, in dismay.

"I say, Dawwel—— Ow!"

Smack!

The open palm smote with a report like a pistol-shot, and D'Arcy bolted into the Fourth Form dormitory and slammed the door. Darrel, laughing heartily, went back to join Kildare. Arthur Augustus gasped as he made his way to his bed.

"Well, have you explained matters to Darrel?" demanded Blake.

"Ya-a-as, wathah!"

"What are you mumbling about?"

"I was not mumblin'."

"Did you get licked?"

"I should have wufused to be licked."

"Ha, ha, ha!" cackled Mellish. "I heard the spank! Ha, ha, ha!"

"It is twue that Dawwel smote me in a vevy wuff way as I came into the dorm. I have always wegardad Dawwel as a decent chap, and tweated him with pwopah wespsect, but I am afwaid that I shall have to modify my opinion now."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I fail to see any cause for wibald laughtah."

"Ha, ha, ha."

And the juniors chuckled many times before they went to sleep.

CHAPTER 6.

Midnight Feasters.

BOOM!

It was the first stroke of midnight.

The sound echoed across the wide, shadowy quadrangle, and the faint boom came through the School House dormitories.

In the Fourth Form dormitory in the School House only one junior was awake to hear it; and he was half-dozing.

But he started into broad wakefulness as he heard the stroke.

"Bai Jove!" he murmured. "That must be midnight!"

Eleven other strokes followed.

Then silence.

Arthur Augustus sat up in bed, groped for his eyeglass, and blinked up and down the long, dark dormitory.

"Are you awake, deah boys?"

There was no reply from the dear boys, excepting a snore or two.

"Are you all asleep?"

Still silence!



D'Arcy flew along the passage with the outstretched hand of the prefect close behind him. "Bai Jove, he's gainin'!" muttered D'Arcy, in dismay.

"Bai Jove! that's all wight."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy stepped quietly out of bed. He dressed himself in the darkness, even to his collar and tie. Then he stole quietly towards the door of the dormitory, and went into the passage, closing the door behind him.

There he paused, looking up and down the shadowy passage.

At midnight, every light was out at St. Jim's—seldom in a master's study there twinkled a light at that hour.

All was dark and eerily silent.

D'Arcy listened for some moments, and then moved off cautiously towards the stairs. He descended to the passage upon which the Fourth Form studies opened, and made his way towards No. 6.

Suddenly he gave a jump.

Study No. 6 should have been dark and deserted, like every other study in the passage at that hour.

Instead of which, a light glimmered from under the door.

D'Arcy stood still, staring blankly at the slit of light. The gas was burning in the study—it was occupied!

By whom?

That he had left his chums asleep in the dormitory D'Arcy knew. Who was in Study No. 6? Burglars!

Burglars—there was no other possible explanation.

A shade of vexation crossed D'Arcy's face.

Burglars would have to be interfered with, and captured—and that would excite a general alarm, and interfere materially with his plans for the night.

As he stood hesitating and doubtful, a sound came from the study.

It was the click of a knife on a plate.

D'Arcy started.

The burglars, with unexampled impudence, were undoubtedly feasting upon the provisions in the study—feasting before they went about their nefarious work.

The click of the knife on the plate was followed by another sound, which made the swell of St. Jim's start again; the sound of a chuckle.

D'Arcy drew a deep breath.

He knew that chuckle! It belonged to Monty Lowther of the Shell. In an instant the truth flashed upon his mind.

The Terrible Three were in the study. Tom Merry had seen him packing his bag, and had observed him pushing it under the table, when he called him at bed-time.

And this was the result.

D'Arcy crept on towards the door, which was partly open

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and applied his eyes to the crack between the door and the jamb, between the hinges.

It gave him a full view of the study's interior.

Three cheerful youths were seated round the table, which was spread with an array of good things. The bag, emptied, lay on the floor. Under the glimmer of the gas, the Terrible Three were enjoying themselves.

"My hat!" said Manners, as D'Arcy, unseen, peeped through the crack. "This is ripping. I like Gussy's taste in plum tarts."

"What-ho!" said Tom Merry. "The rabbit pie is a corker, too."

"To say nothing of the jellies," said Monty Lowther. "The jellies are spiffing. I think Gussy ought to have some sort of a testimonial for his skill in getting up a feed."

"Ha, ha, ha."

"Not too loud—we don't want to wake the beaks."

"Right-ho! pass the cake."

"Certainly, deah boy. Imagine it is Gussy at the head of the table," grinned Lowther. "Pway what can I pass you, Mannahs?"

"Ha, ha, ha."

"Pway don't abstain from anythin' you like, deah boy. I twust you will do your best to entertain yourselves."

"Ha, ha, ha."

Arthur Augustus breathed very hard through his nose. It was bad enough to see his bag of good things ravished under his eyes, just when he had come to the study to fetch it away, too. But to be imitated like this, in this disrespectful manner, was a little too much. D'Arcy came very near stepping into the study and saying things to Lowther, at that moment. But he restrained himself. He had very particular reasons for not wishing anybody to know that he was out of the dormitory that night.

"Blessed if I know why Gussy was laying in this stock," said Tom Merry. "He told me not to mention it to anybody."

"And you didn't."

"Not a word! You fellows will admit that I never said a word to you when I fetched you out of bed, and brought you here."

"Not a syllable," agreed Manners.

"I merely said 'come,' and you came, after I had jabbed a wet sponge down your neck."

"Yes, you ass."

"And you were quite surprised to find the grub here."

"We were."

"Gussy will be surprised, too, in the morning, when he finds that it's gone," grinned Tom Merry. "Blessed if I know what he was packing it in the bag for. But it was like his cheek to do it without consulting his uncles, and this will serve him jolly well right."

"Good! pass the dough-nuts."

"Here you are. Hush—was that a sound?"

"I didn't hear anything."

"I thought there was something."

D'Arcy almost held his breath. But none of the Terrible Three left the table. Monty Lowther yawned.

"It's your fancy, my son. This is the haunted study, you know, and it might be the ghost of St. Jim's."

"Oh, shut up!" said Manners.

Lowther grinned.

"Well, as the ghost turned out to be Binks, the boots, there's nothing to be afraid of," he remarked. "They've stopped up the secret passage that led into this study, too. The oak panel has been screwed down, and blocks of stone shoved into the passage behind it. A ghost as fat as Binks would never get through again."

"Oh, cheese it," said Manners. "Of course, I don't

believe in ghosts, but midnight ain't the time to jaw on the subject."

"Ha, ha, ha."

"Stop your cackling. Jawing of ghosts makes me think of that tap-tap-tap of the spectre monk. Of course, we know it was only Binks in the secret passage tapping all the time. Still, it isn't so funny at night as by day."

"Right-ho!" said Tom Merry. "But we're not likely to hear the tap-tap-tap now that the secret passage has been closed up."

"No, but—hark!"

"My only hat!"

The Terrible Three sprang to their feet.

Through the silence came a weird, mysterious sound.

Tap! tap! tap!

CHAPTER 7.

Prisoners!

TOM MERRY stared at Manners and Lowther, and Manners and Lowther stared at him.

Tap! tap! tap!

It was the well-known tap of the ghostly monk; with which Binks, in the secret passage in the old walls of St. Jim's, had scared the whole school one Christmas-tide.

But the secret passage was closed up now, and Binks was in bed and asleep.

Tap! tap! tap!

"It's someone in the passage!" gasped Tom Merry.

"It's a jape!"

"Come on—quick!"

The Terrible Three rushed to the door of the study and flung it open.

The light from the open doorway extended several yards down the dark passage; but it revealed nothing but walls and doors.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had whisked down the passage, and ensconced himself in the nearest study, after administering that ghostly tap.

He was standing just inside Study No. 7 now, with the door ajar, a grin on his face in the darkness, listening.

The chums of the Shell stared blankly into the passage; somewhat like the Raven's unhappy master in the famous poem, seeing "darkness there, and nothing more."

"There's nobody here," muttered Lowther.

"There must have been somebody, though."

"Well, it wasn't a ghost," said Tom Merry. "Let's get back to the feed. It's time we were in our little bunks."

The Terrible Three returned into the study.

In spite of their nerve, however, they were a little disturbed, and they did not continue to feed with the zest with which they had commenced it.

"Blessed curious," said Lowther. "Pass the jam tarts, though."

Tap! tap! tap!

Tom Merry jumped up.

"That came from the next study, chaps!"

"Sounded like it."

"It was some chap japing us! Come on."

Tom Merry dashed out of No. 6, with Lowther and Manners at his heels. He ran into No. 7—but there had been ample time for D'Arcy to scuttle out first.

Tom Merry struck a match, and lighted the gas. The three chums of the Shell looked round the study.

There was no one to be seen.

"Look out!" cried Manners, suddenly.

But it was too late.

The door was jerked to from the outside, and, as the startled Shell fellows ran towards it, the key clicked in the lock.

Tom Merry dragged at the handle a few seconds too late. "Phew!" he gasped.

"Locked?"

"Yes."

"My only hat!"

They stared at one another in blank dismay. They were locked in Study No. 7 in the Fourth Form passage, without the slightest prospect of getting out until their unknown captor chose to release them. And they could not venture to make a row in the study, either, as any noise would bring down a wrathful master upon them.

The Terrible Three were certainly in what Arthur Augustus D'Arcy would have described as a deuced awkward "posish."

"Well, this takes the cake!" said Tom Merry, after a long pause which the chums of the Shell occupied by an interesting study of one another's features.

"It jolly well prances off with the whole bakery," said Lowther.

"We're locked in."

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"We are!"

"Somebody has trapped us."

"What-ho!"

"The worm tapped on the wall to make us come in here, and already had the key on the outside of the lock. He dodged out in time for us to dodge in."

"The rotter!"

"And we were taken in like innocent gulls."

"You were, you mean," said Lowther pleasantly. "We followed you."

"Exactly," said Manners.

"Oh, rats! Of course, I—well, I suppose I might have stopped to think. So might you fellows, for that matter."

"When I'm leader—"

"Now, don't you begin to jaw now, Lowther," said Tom Merry warmly. "Things are bad enough without your beginning to jaw. I put it to Manners."

"So they are!" agreed Manners.

"I jolly well think you're a born idiot!" said Lowther.

"I appeal to Manners."

"So he is!" said Manners.

"Look here, Manners—"

"What I think is—"

"Bosh!"

"Ass!"

"Frabjous duffer!"

"If you had stopped to think—"

"If you had stopped—"

"What's the good of—"

"Of all the asses—"

"Of all the silly dummies—"

"If you want a thick ear, Lowther—"

"You'll jolly well get one yourself—"

"I'll—"

"So will I—"

"Here, chuck it!" exclaimed Manners, pushing between the two excited Shell fellows. "No sense in slogging one another now. Besides, you'll wake up the whole School House. The question is, how to get out of the study."

"Well, there's something in that," agreed Tom Merry, calming down a little. "But you must admit that Lowther is an exasperating ass."

"Oh, yes, certainly!"

"You must admit that Tom Merry is a frabjous cuckoo," said Lowther.

"Of course."

"It seems to me that you admit too much, Manners I—"

"Now, don't you begin again," remonstrated Manners.

"We've got to get back to the dorm. somehow. Hark!"

"What's the row?"

"Somebody in No. 6. Listen!"

They listened close to the intervening wall. Faint but unmistakable sounds could be heard in the next room. The unseen individual who had locked the door was clearing away the remains of the feed, doubtless for his own benefit.

"My only hat!" murmured Tom Merry. "He must have planned all that, you know."

"I suppose so."

"I wonder who it is?"

"It can't be Gussy; he's not deep enough."

"I should think it was Gore; only Gore's been expelled, so it can't be he," said Tom Merry. "Blake, perhaps."

"I shouldn't wonder. I say, let's give a turn of the tapping for his benefit," said Lowther, with a grin.

"Good! Go it!"

Tap, tap, tap!

There was the sound of a gasping exclamation in No. 6, which came faintly to the ears of the juniors through the wall, and a crash.

The Terrible Three chuckled.

The fellow in No. 6, whoever he was, had been startled, and he had dropped a pork-pie on the floor, with ruinous results to the dish.

Lowther tapped again, but there was no more sound of alarm from the adjoining study. The raider was on his guard.

Tom Merry went to the door, and tapped there. He wanted to attract the attention of the fellow who had locked him in. In Tom Merry's opinion, the jape had decidedly gone far enough.

"I say, kid!" he called softly through the keyhole.

There was no reply. Tom thought for a moment that he detected the sound of footsteps in the passage, but he was not sure.

"I say, you ass, come here!"

"We want to get back to the dorm. We give you best. Do you hear? I suppose you're not going to keep us here all night. Where are you? Answer!"

But only the echo of the whispering voice came back.

"He's gone!" said Lowther.

Tom Merry sniffed.

"I suppose he has. My hat, I'll make him warm for it in the morning, if I can find out who it is!"

"Blest if I can guess, unless it's Mellish! It might be Reilly. But never mind that. How are we to get out?"

"We can't get out."

"What price the window?"

"H'm!"

Tom Merry went to the window, and opened it quietly. There was ivy below, but to climb out in the dark would have been fearfully risky.

"Blest if I like the idea of it!" said Manners.

Tom Merry gave a cry.

"Look—look!"

"What—what's the matter?"

"Look, the light!"

"M-m-my only hat!"

The chums of the Shell gazed in blank astonishment. Through the blackness of the night in the quadrangle a strange and flickering light shone.

CHAPTER 8.

The Mysterious Light.

TOM MERRY stared in blank amazement at the strange, flickering light that glimmered through the darkness of the quadrangle.

For some moments the chums of the Shell were silent with astonishment.

"It's in the old tower," said Monty Lowther at last.

Tom Merry nodded.

He knew that. The light that flickered through the darkness came from one of the windows of the ruined tower.

The tower, one of the oldest portions of the original structure of St. Jim's, had not been in a state fit for habitation for centuries. More than half of the building was gone, and what remained was a picturesque, ivy-grown ruin. But the lower part of the massive walls had stood the storms of many hundred years, and the narrow stone staircase within was still intact, as well as some of the little dusky chambers that opened off it. On half-holidays the St. Jim's fellows frequently explored the old tower, but no one could be supposed to have any business there at midnight. Yet there was the light, gleaming through the ivy that hung over one of the old casements.

"Blessed queer!" muttered Manners.

"Yes, rather. There are a lot of queer things happening to-night," grunted Lowther.

"You know that the tower is haunted—"

"Oh, rats!"

"It's jolly mysterious."

"But it's not a ghost."

"N-n-no, I suppose not."

"I suppose it's the chap who locked us in here," said Tom Merry. "He's out across there, and—"

"He hasn't!"

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"He hasn't had time to get there, that's all."

Tom Merry rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"N-no, I suppose you're right. He hasn't. It must be another chap."

"But whom?"

"Burglars, perhaps," said Manners. "What are you sniffing at, Lowther?"

"Why, what the dickens would burglars want to burgle a ruined tower for?" demanded Lowther. "They couldn't burgle anything but spider's webs there."

"Well, who is it, then?"

"Perhaps the ghost, or a ghost-hunter."

"It's somebody," said Manners. "But never mind, it's no business of ours, anyway. How are we going to get out of this study?"

"Ask me another."

"We can't stick here all night."

Tom Merry glanced out of the window again. The light was still burning in the window of the old tower.

He looked downwards at the ivy on the school wall. Then he shook his head.

"I don't mind taking a risk," he said; "but it's no good committing suicide. That ivy wouldn't bear a fellow's weight."

"Then what are we going to do?"

"We might bust the lock on the door."

"And make a jolly row this time of night. I can imagine Linton's face if he came down and found us here."

Tom Merry chuckled.

"I'd rather wait here till we're let out, than wake Linton. But we may be able to pick the lock somehow. There may be tools of some sort in the study."

"Good! Let's look."

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"Eureka!"

Tom Merry held up a screwdriver he had picked from the table-drawer.

"I'll jolly soon have that lock off!" he remarked. "It's only just screwed on, on this side. I'll get it loose, and we can shift the key. It's still in the lock."

"Good egg!"

Tom Merry set to work. With very little noise he removed the screws, and at the end of about ten minutes the lock was successfully opened. The Terrible Three turned out the light and left the study. Tom Merry looked a last time from the window. The light was burning steadily in the old tower.

But even as he looked it went out.

Darkness suddenly blotted away the flickering gleam.

"Still there?" asked Lowther, as Tom Merry joined him in the passage.

"It's just gone out."

"H'm! I was going to suggest a visit to the old tower, to look into it," said Lowther. Manners shivered.

"Ugh! Better let it alone."

"No good going now," said Tom Merry. "Besides, I rather think it would be better to get back to the dorm. I'm sleepy."

"Well, so am I, come to think of it."

"Let's look in No. 6 first."

They glanced into Study No. 6. As they expected, what they had left of the feast was gone. Every morsel had been cleared up, and the bag, too, was gone. All that remained were fragments on the plates, and the wrecked pork pie on the floor.

"A clean sweep!" said Tom Merry, with a grin. "My hat! I wonder who the chap was!"

"What price waiting up for him, and nabbing him when he comes to open that door and let us out?" suggested Lowther.

"He mayn't intend to come back and open it. If it's Mellish playing the trick, it's very likely he meant to leave us there all night."

"I'll talk to Mellish in the morning."

"Meanwhile—bed!"

"All right!"

And the Terrible Three returned to the Shell dormitory. They were puzzled by the occurrences of the night, and especially by the strange light in the tower; but that did not prevent them from falling fast asleep as soon as their heads were on the pillows.

CHAPTER 9.

Arthur Augustus is a Little Too Previous.

"B AI Jove, there's a wiah for me!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy made that remark, as he stood basking in the sun on the steps of the School House the following morning, before breakfast.

Arthur Augustus was looking a little sleepy about the eyes, but he had risen about the usual time, and no one in the Fourth Form had the least suspicion of the way he had spent the night.

The elegant junior was breathing in deep gulps of the fresh morning air, and trying to enliven himself that way, to make up for the loss of sleep. But in spite of himself a heaviness weighed upon his eyelids.

The sight of the telegraph-boy from Rylcombe coming across the quad drew the exclamation from D'Arcy's lips.

Jack Blake, who was sitting on the balustrade, swinging his legs, looked round.

"Hallo! How do you know it's for you, Gussy?"

"I'm expectin' a wiah."

"Oh! From the chap you were meeting last evening?" demanded Blake severely. "The plot thickens, does it? So he's wiring you!"

"Certainly not! I am expectin' a wiah from my governah," said D'Arcy. "My governah has been gettin' his cars up lately. He actually had the check, you know, to wreply to my last lettah, askin' for a fivah, by sayin' that since the Budget he was short of fivahs. Of course, I don't object to his gwumblin' at the Budget. Evewybody does that, and I suppose he wants to do the pwopah thing. But he didn't enclose the fivah. I wedged that as sewious."

Blake grinned.

"So I w'ote by return," went on D'Arcy. "I explained that I wasn't wespensible for Mr. Lloyd George's beastly Budgets and things. I suggested that he should cut down his expenditure in some othah way. My eldah bwothah, Conway, doesn't weally need so much, you know, and I suggested cuttin' down Conway's allowance instead of cuttin' down mine. Conway will be Lord Eastwood some day, and will have heaps of tin, so there's no weason why he shouldn't wuff it a bit now, you know. I wedged this as unanswerable."

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"Of course it was. Has the fiver come?"

"Not yet. I told the governah I was in a deuce of a huwwy, and asked him to wiah the cash. You can wiah the money, you know, by payin' somethin', or doin' somethin', or somethin'."

"Go hon!"

"That's how I know the wiah is for me. I wedged the governah as havin' played the game this time."

"If the wire is for you!" grinned Blake.

"Oh, that's all wight. I'm doocid short of money now, you know."

"Blessed if I know, anyway," said Blake. "Where's it all gone? I know you had a couple of sovereigns yesterday, and that fead you stooed couldn't have made a very big hole in it. I hope you haven't been bettin'," said Blake, shaking a warning forefinger at the swell of St. Jim's.

"I pwesume you are jokin', Blake? You have nevah known me to enter into any blackguardly twansaction of that sort."

"You haven't been spending it on Mild Moonshine cigarettes?"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Then where is it?"

"I've expended it, deah boy!"

"Oh, you've expended it, dear boy, have you?" said Blake. "As your uncle, it's my duty to inquire what you've expended it upon. I can't have you getting into ways of reckless expenditure. And, besides, I was going to borrow some of it."

"I am extremewly sowwy, deah boy—"

"Never mind the sorrow. Where's the tin?"

"Gone!"

"Where?"

D'Arcy coloured a little. He turned to look at the telegraph-boy, who was making his way towards the Head's house, and waved his hand to him.

The boy looked at him, and then crossed over to the School House instead of going to the Head's private door.

Blake tapped Arthur Augustus on the shoulder.

"Where's the tin?" he asked.

"Weally, Blake—"

"Is it a gidly secret?"

"Ya-a-a-as, in a way."

"Oh, I think I catch on! You've given it to the chap you met last night!" exclaimed Jack Blake abruptly.

"No-o-o exactly!"

"You've spent it on him, then?"

D'Arcy was silent.

Jack Blake's brow clouded a little, and he looked very seriously at his chum.

"Look here, old Gus!" he said. "This is a serious matter. I've looked on that affair so far as a jape of the New House chaps, to take a rise out of our study. But Figgins & Co. wouldn't touch your money. You've been done."

"I haven't been done."

"Where's the cash, then?"

"Weally, Blake—"

"You've been swindled by somebody."

"Weally, deah boy—"

"This wants looking into more than ever," said Jack, with a shake of the head. "I'm not going to have you looted in this way."

"I wefuse— Ah, here you are!" said D'Arcy, breaking off as the telegraph lad came up. "It's all wight."

"Will you take it in, sir?" asked the lad, who knew D'Arcy well by sight, having brought him telegrams many a time and oft.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Shall I wait for an answer, sir?"

"Yaas, pewwaps you'd bettah."

"Yes, sir."

Arthur Augustus jerked the flimsy envelope open, and took out the telegram. He did it as he was speaking to the boy, without even looking at the address.

His action appeared to have a curious effect upon the telegraph lad. His cheerful face assumed an expression of unbounded astonishment. His jaw dropped a little, and he stared speechlessly at the swell of St. Jim's.

He seemed incapable of speech for the moment, and in that moment the swell of St. Jim's read the telegram.

A puzzled look came upon his face.

"Bai Jove!"

"What's the matter?" asked Blake. "Bad news from home?"

"Oh, no! Why should Goah's father telegraph to me?"

Jack Blake gave a jump.

"Gore's father!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"If you please, sir," began the amazed telegraph-boy, "that telegram—"

"Let's look at it!" said Blake.

D'Arcy handed him the telegraph form. Blake ran his eye over it, and whistled.

"My son has left home. May possibly return school. Coming this morning.—RICHARD GORE."

Blake gave a long whistle.

"So Gore's bunked!"

"Appawently."

"Case of the Roman parent up to date, and the kid cutting up rough over it," said Blake. "I've seen Gore's governor, and he's not the kind of chap I should like to go home to in disgrace."

"Wathah nor!"

"But that wire—"

"If you please, sir—"

"That wire can't be for you, Gussy. Gore's father wouldn't wire to you. They've made a mistake in addressing the envelope at the post-office."

"If you—"

"I didn't look at the address, though," said D'Arcy, starting a little. "I took it for gwanted that the wiah was for me."

"Well, you frabjous ass!"

"I wefuse to be called a fwabjous ass! Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus stared at the pencilled address on the torn envelope in blank dismay. Even the swell of St. Jim's was a little staggered.

"What's the address?" demanded Blake.

"The Head!"

"Phew!"

"Dr. Holmes, St. James's Collegiate School, Rylcombe, Sussex," read out Arthur Augustus, in dismay. "My deah lad, what did you give me the wiah for?"

"You signed to me to come to you, sir, when I was going to the other door."

"Yaas, but—"

"You said you'd take it in, sir."

"Yaas, but—"

"I thought you were going to take it in to Dr. Holmes, sir," said the telegraph boy, looking a little scared. "I—I was knocked over, sir, when you opened it."

"Bai Jove!"

D'Arcy looked at the boy, and looked at Blake, and looked at the telegram. He had opened and read a telegram addressed to the Head of St. Jim's, and the thought of it almost made his head swim.

"My hat!" said Blake. "You were a little too previous, Gussy."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"It wasn't the boy's fault. You'll have to tell the Head that."

"Of course. I am not likely to twy to avoid the blame," said Arthur Augustus. "It was all my fault, or, wathah, it was a natuwal mistake to make."

"Bosh! You ought to have looked at the address!"

"It is easy to be wise aftah the event, Blake."

"You ass! I—"

"I decline to be called an ass."

"You'll get licked!" said Blake, who was really worried about his chum, and took the privilege of a worried friend in "slanging" him. "You cheerful ass—"

"Weally, Blake—"

"It means a licking, and—"

"I don't know! I shall explain to the Head as one gentleman to anothah—"

"Look here—"

"It's all wight!" said D'Arcy, going in.

"Where are you going?"

"To take this telegram to the Head and explain."

"You'd better let me—"

"Wats!"

"Look here—"

"More wats!"

And Arthur Augustus hurried off with the open telegram in his hand.

CHAPTER 10.

As One Gentleman to Another.

DR. HOLMES was at breakfast, in the bosom of his family, so to speak, when Arthur Augustus D'Arcy inquired for him. But it was impossible to delay. Arthur Augustus insisted upon being shown in at once, and he arrived in the breakfast-room of the Head's house, and found Dr. Holmes at breakfast with Mrs. Holmes and Mr. Railton, the House-master of the School House.

Arthur Augustus had a somewhat high colour as he entered the room with the telegram in his hand.

He bowed to Mrs. Holmes, however, in his usual inimitable manner; the greatest confusion of mind would never have made D'Arcy forget to be polite to a lady.

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"MISS PRISCILLA'S PERIL"

Is the Title of the Story which Mr. Martin Clifford has written for next Thursday's Number of The "Gem Library."

Dr. Holmes looked at him rather fixedly. The Head never liked being disturbed at meal-times, unless for a very good cause. But the sight of the fluttering slip in D'Arcy's hand mollified him. He imagined at once that the Fourth-Former had received bad news, which it was necessary to acquaint him with.

"Good-morning, D'Arcy!"

"Good-mornin', sir! I have just weceived this wiah—"

"Not bad news, I hope?"

"Oh, no, sir! I twust you will excuse me for intewwuptin' you at this moment, sir," said D'Arcy. "I twust Mrs Holmes will excuse me."

"Oh, certainly!" said Dr. Holmes, while the good lady nodded, with a smile. "What is the matter?"

"I am placed in a doocid awkward posish, sir."

"Indeed?"

"Yaas, wathah, sir! I twust you do not wegard me as a chap who would intentionally open a lettah or a telegwam addressed to anothah gentleman, sir?"

"I am sure you would not, D'Arcy!"

"I have had the misfortune to open one addressed to another person, sir; but it was quite by chance, sir, and I was not aware of it till I had wead it."

"That is rather unfortunate, D'Arcy."

"Yaas, sir. I was expectin' a telegwam frowm my govornah, sir—my fathah, sir—and when I saw the boy comin', I concluded it was for me. I took it frowm him; and he thought I was only goin' to take it in, you see. The boy was not to blame at all."

"Very good!"

"Then I opened it, without thinkin' of lookin' at the address, sir."

"That was very thoughtless."

"I suppose it was, sir, when you come to think of it. But I did not think of it at the time, as I thought the wiah was for me."

"Well, well! I quite believe your explanation, D'Arcy, as I am quite sure you would never be guilty of a dishonourable action," said Dr. Holmes. "The best thing you can do now is to take the wire to its proper owner, and explain and apologise. As a matter of fact, I really do not see that it was necessary to come to me."

"I am sowwy, sir!"

"Very good! You may go."

"But the wiah, sir—"

"Take it to the proper owner. I am sure he will fully believe your explanation, and accept your apology. Let it be a lesson to you in future to be more careful."

"Yaas, sir! The—"

"You may go!"

"The wiah—"

"Dear me! How persistent the boy is! I really do not make you out, D'Arcy."

"The wiah, sir—"

"Take it to the person whom it is for."

D'Arcy held out the telegram.

"It's for you, sir!"

The Head fairly jumped.

"For—for me!"

"Yaas, sir!"

"You—you have opened a telegram addressed to me!" almost shouted the Head.

"I have explained, sir—"

"Really, D'Arcy—"

"I am sowwy, sir! I beg to apologise most pwofoundly."

"Dear me!"

The Head glanced at the telegram, and started. "Very well! You may go, D'Arcy. Tell the boy there is no answer—or—and give him this sixpence."

"Yaas, sir!"

The Head glanced at the telegram, and frowned. Arthur Augustus turned to the door, and then turned back.

"I twust, sir—"

"You may go, D'Arcy!"

"Yaas, sir! But I twust you fully excuse my carelessness—"

"Yes, quite. It is of no consequence, as it happens."

"Thank you very much, sir!"

And Arthur Augustus left the room. The Head looked frowningly at the telegram, and read it aloud.

"Dear me!" said Mrs. Holmes. "The reckless lad! So he has run away from home!"

"It appears so."

And Mr. Gore imagines that he may have come back to St. Jim's," said Mr. Railton. "I do not quite understand that."

"Nor I," said the Head, stirring his tea. "The boy

never showed any great affection for the school while he was here; and he must know that I should not receive him if he came back."

"He may have had a very unpleasant reception at home."

"No doubt. And I must say that he fully deserved it."

"Yes, that is certainly true."

"If he reappeared here, I should send him back to his home at once, of course," said Dr. Holmes. "I cannot understand Mr. Gore's suspicion that he may be here. It is quite inexplicable to me."

And the Head looked perplexed all through his breakfast.

Meanwhile, Arthur Augustus returned to the door, and tendered the Head's sixpence to the telegraph boy; and surprised Blake by his cheerful smile.

"Not licked?" ejaculated Blake.

"Certainly not, deah boy! I explained the whole mattah to Dr. Holmes, and, of course, as a gentleman, he took my word."

Blake snorted.

"Well, you've got off jolly cheaply, you ass! I suppose it's fool's luck!"

"Weally, Blake——"

"Oh, come in to breakfast! Fancy Gore having run away from home!"

"Yaas! Cuvious, isn't it?" said Arthur Augustus.

But there was a peculiar smile upon his face as he spoke that Blake did not understand till afterwards.

CHAPTER 11.

No Information.

THAT George Gore had run away from home, and that his father was coming down to St. Jim's about it, was soon known all over the school. Blake and D'Arcy, as they had learned it inadvertently from the Head's telegram, did not feel justified in speaking of it, and they kept their own counsel; but they soon found that it was no secret.

Mr. Railton had mentioned the matter to several of the prefects, and asked them to inquire among the boys if anything had been seen of Gore about the school. That inquiry, of course, placed the whole school in possession of the facts.

There was a great deal of interest taken in the subject, both by School House and by New House fellows.

That Gore had acted like a rascal, and had richly deserved being expelled, everyone fully agreed. Even his former chum, Mellish, had nothing to say for him; though it was fully believed that the only thing Mellish blamed him for was being found out. But though the School House fellows would have sent Gore to Coventry if he had remained at St. Jim's, the fact that so heavy a punishment had fallen upon him disarmed their resentment. It was the old feeling, natural to British boys, of not hitting a fellow when he was down. Gore was down; and so the other fellows were greatly inclined to forget his rascality, and to wish that he had been given another chance.

And where was Gore?

The chap was certainly in trouble somewhere. The fellows who had seen his father declared that they would rather run away to sea than go home to him with a tale of being sacked from school. Gore senior was the stern parent in person. Gore had been at home about a week, and in that week he had probably been made to feel keenly that he had done the worst possible thing for himself in going home at all.

If things had been made very hot for him, his thoughts would naturally turn to the school he had left, and he would wish to return.

That was impossible. But if he had run away from home, it was possible enough that he might have wandered back to the only other spot that was like home to him.

Yet he must have known that the Head could have no resource but to send him back if he came. He had been expelled from St. Jim's—and a sentence of expulsion was not easily reversed.

"Can't help feeling sorry for the chap," Tom Merry remarked when he heard the news. "I wonder where he's gone?"

"He hasn't been seen about here, anyway," said Monty Lowther. "I shouldn't wonder, though, if he turned up to borrow some tin to travel off with."

Tom Merry nodded thoughtfully.

"That's quite possible. If we should see him——"

"We won't give him away!"

"Well, no, we couldn't. At the same time, it would be

a serious business to stand by a fellow in running away from home. A chap has no right to do a thing like that."

"N-no. But Gore never seemed to consider whether he had a right to do a thing before he did it," grinned Lowther. "But I don't suppose we shall see him."

"I hope we don't."

"We shall have the pleasure of seeing his governor though," said Manners. "I hear that he's coming to-day."

"We'll be in the quad to see him."

Kildare and Darrel came along, and they stopped the Terrible Three.

"Hold on, Merry! I want to speak to you," said the captain of St. Jim's.

"Go it, kid!" said Tom Merry cheerfully.

"Have you seen anything of Gore since he was sacked?"

"No, Kildare."

"Heard anything of him?"

"No!"

"Know any fellow who has?"

"Not that I know of!" Tom Merry laughed. "I'm not the fellow Gore would be likely to come to, you know. We were on jolly bad terms."

"I don't know. You're the good-natured sort of young ass who would help him, although you were on bad terms."

"Thank you!"

"Not at all! I hear that he chummed up chiefly with Mellish of the Fourth—but Mellish wouldn't be likely to stand by a chap in trouble."

"Well—no."

"I suppose I'd better speak to Skimpole, as he shared Gore's study. He's fool enough for anything, too."

And the two prefects looked for Skimpole.

Skimpole of the Shell was the amateur Socialist of St. Jim's—a youth with ideas. Gore and he had led a cat-and-dog life in their study, next to Tom Merry's in the Shell passage. But Skimpole was of the most forgiving disposition, and was never known to bear malice.

Skimpole was run to earth in the quadrangle. He blinked at Kildare through his big spectacles as the prefects came up.

"Skimpole! Have you seen Gore?"

"Dear me! Certainly. That is a very surprising question to ask, Kildare," said the genius of the Shell, blinking.

"You have seen him?"

"Certainly."

"Then he's here!" said Darrel. "I don't know where he can be. Nobody else that we've questioned seems to know anything about him."

"Where did you see him, Skimpole?" asked Kildare.

"Last, do you mean?"

"Yes, last, of course. I'm not asking for the particulars of your first meeting, you young ass. Where did you see him last?"

Skimpole reflected.

"At the gates of the school," he replied, after a moment.

"At the gates?"

"Yes."

"Had he just arrived there?"

"He had just gone there. He was in the station cab, you know."

The two seniors exchanged looks of astonishment.

"Blessed if I can understand that," said Darrel. "If Gore came here openly, he would come in a cab; but then we should all have seen him. If he came secretly, he'd sneak in somewhere. I can't make that out."

"Neither can I. Are you sure of what you say, Skimpole?"

"Certainly, Kildare."

"You're a little—er—short-sighted, I think. You might have mistaken somebody else for Gore, you know."

"Oh, no, I am quite certain that it was Gore. A lot of other fellows saw him," said Skimpole, looking puzzled.

"There was no reason to suppose that it was not Gore."

"Was he there quite openly?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Did you speak to him?"

"Yes; I told him that I was very sorry he had been sacked."

"And what did he say?"

"He told me to go and eat coke. I regarded that reply as almost rude."

"And that was the last time you saw him?"

"Yes, the last time."

"How long ago was it?"

Skimpole reflected again, rubbing his bony forehead as if to assist the mental process.

"Let me see! It must have been about six days—or perhaps seven——"

"What!" roared Kildare, while Darrel burst into a laugh.



The bedclothes were thrown aside and a sullen, sulky face was turned to the juniors. There was a general exclamation of surprise. "Gore!"

"It was one day last week," said Skimpole. "But I dare say you remember the day Gore was sent away. I have a rather weak memory."

Kildare breathed hard.

"Are you telling us about the day Gore went away, Skimpole?"

"Yes," said Skimpole, blinking in wonder. "You asked me about the last time I had seen him. That was the day he went away."

"You young ass!"

"Really, Kildare—"

"I wasn't asking you whether you saw him go away last week!" shouted Kildare. "The whole school saw him. I wanted to know if you had seen him since."

"How could I see him since he went away?" said Skimpole, in wonder. "I am somewhat short-sighted, but if I had the best sight in the world, I could not see the distance of fifty or sixty miles, and Gore's home is—"

Kildare and Darrel walked away, leaving Skimpole still talking. The amateur Socialist of St. Jim's blinked after them.

"Really, I do not understand," he murmured. "The stupidity of some of the Sixth is marvellous. Kildare is generally supposed to be an intelligent fellow, but really—"

And Skimpole shrugged his shoulders.

Kildare and Darrel caught sight of the chums of Study No. 6 in the quadrangle, and bore down upon them. Blake, Herries, and Digby stood their ground, but Arthur Augustus D'Arcy moved off.

"Pway excuse me a moment, deah boys," he said. "I'm goin' to have a look at Mellish's white wabbits."

And he walked away rather quickly.

The two prefects stopped to speak to the Fourth-Formers, taking no particular notice of the departure of Arthur Augustus. It was really Blake whom they wanted to question. Blake knew what was coming.

"Have you seen anything of Gore, you kids?"

"Not a hide nor a hair," said Blake solemnly.

"You don't know anything about him?"

"Nothing, Kildare."

"That's all right."

The prefects strolled back to the School House. They had questioned half the fellows at St. Jim's, and they felt that they had done their duty.

"It's all right," said Kildare. "The fellow hasn't come back. Gore senior is off his rocker."

And he made that report to the House-master, omitting, of course, the remark concerning Gore senior.

CHAPTER 12.

Gore's Father.

"**T**HERE he is!"

There was a rattle of wheels in the quadrangle, and a clatter of hoofs on gravel. The station cab from Rylcombe was well known at St. Jim's, and at the sight of it the fellows knew that Gore senior had arrived.

There was a rush from all quarters to see him. It was close upon time for afternoon lessons; but there was time for a look at the stern parent before going into the class-rooms.

Mr. Gore jumped out of the cab, ran up the steps of the Head's house, and rang and knocked. The knock could be heard half across the quad—the ring was audible outside the house. Mr. Gore was evidently a gentleman of strong character, and did everything in a heavy-handed way.

He was a short, stoutish gentleman, with a red moustache and fierce little eyes. He wore a black frock-coat and a silk hat, and a grey waistcoat. He looked like a prosperous merchant, and a man who could drive a hard bargain in business. Nobody would have suspected him of experiencing any tender emotions. And he was about the last man in the world whom anybody would have gone to in a time of trouble for counsel or assistance.

He was admitted to the house, and lost to the view of the interested crowd of St. Jim's fellows.

"Nice-looking chap," said Monty Lowther. "You see the marks on his chivy where he has been weeping over his prodigal son."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"More likely to see marks on the prodigal son," grinned Blake. "Fancy going home to that chap and telling him you've been sacked from school."

"Phew!"

"I can imagine his face—and poor old Gore's! Gore was a waster, but you can't help feeling sorry for him."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"And I'm not surprised that he's done a bunk from a nice, gentle, forgiving parent like that," Monty Lowther remarked.

"What'ho!"

While the fellows were passing observations, many of them extremely unflattering to Gore pere, that gentleman was shown into the Head's study.

Dr. Holmes greeted him courteously. He did not take to Gore senior personally, but he could feel for him in the worry his reckless son had brought upon him.

Mr. Gore sat down upon one chair, and deposited his silk hat and his umbrella on another. Then he looked straight at the Head, with so direct a stare that Dr. Holmes felt a little uncomfortable.

"Now, sir!" said Mr. Gore.

"Yes," said Dr. Holmes.

"I have called about my son, sir."

"Very good."

"You had my wire, sir?"

"This morning."

"Then you expected me?"

"Certainly."

"Have you any news for me?"

"None, I am sorry to say."

"Huh!"

Mr. Gore fired off his questions and remarks like a succession of very rapid pistol-shots. Dr. Holmes, who was used to more leisurely manners, was a little disturbed and confused. He could make allowances, however, for the grieved parent's natural feelings under the circumstances, and a little excitement was pardonable.

"Then my son has not returned to the school?"

"No, Mr. Gore."

"I am surprised."

"Indeed! Had you any reason to suppose that he would come here?" asked the Head mildly.

"Huh! If I had no reason to suppose that he would come here, sir, should I have been likely to come here myself?" said Mr. Gore.

"I—I presume not."

"My time is valuable, Dr. Holmes."

"I—I suppose so."

"What will be the state of my office this morning?" demanded Mr. Gore, as if the Head of St. Jim's ought to be well informed upon that subject. And he paused as if for a reply, and blew his nose violently.

"I—I really do not know," stammered Dr. Holmes, feeling that he was called upon to say something.

"Never, sir," said Mr. Gore—"never, during the past twenty years, have I missed appearing in my private office at exactly ten o'clock in the morning."

"Dear me!"

"Or stay! There was one occasion—the occasion of the

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funeral of Mrs. Gore, sir. On that occasion I was two hours late."

"Indeed!"

"This, sir, is the second occasion. And what will be the state of my office?"

"I—I hope things will go on as—as well as can be expected."

"Yes, sir, I hope so, sir; but I have no confidence that such will be the case. The master's eye, sir—the master's eye," said Mr. Gore. "I have always found, sir, that even the best-trained clerks will waste whole minutes when they do not fear observation."

"Really!"

"Yes, sir. Utterly regardless of the fact that they are paid for every minute of their time, which is spent in their place of business, they will waste whole minutes. The waste of a single second is, of course, sheer dishonesty."

"Dear me!"

"So I must get back as quickly as I can, sir."

"Pray do not let me detain you, Mr. Gore!" said the Head, who would have been very glad for his terrible visitor to get back to town as quickly as possible.

"Business first, Dr. Holmes."

"Ah, yes, of course."

"About my boy, sir. You expelled him from this school?"

"I was unfortunately compelled, on account of—"

"Exactly. You explained the whole circumstances in your letter to me on that occasion," said Mr. Gore. "I was greatly surprised."

"It must have come as a shock—"

"The crass stupidity of it in a son of mine—the utter lack of any grasp of the mere rudiments of business," said Mr. Gore. "I can understand a man forging a cheque. He gains a certain amount of cash. It is wrong—it is criminal; but there is common sense in it. My son imitated a schoolfellow's handwriting, not for the purpose of obtaining money, which would have been criminal, but for the purpose of playing a childish prank! The boy is a fool, sir."

The doctor coloured.

"I hope, sir, that you do not consider that it would have been better for Gore to imitate Tom Merry's hand for the purpose of obtaining money?"

"Certainly not; it would have been more business-like, that is all. The Gores, sir, have always been a business-like family."

"Ah, indeed!"

"Yes, sir. It was a great blow to me—a great blow. Such an utter lack of business ability in a son of mine amazes me—astounds me."

The Head was silent. He had not expected Mr. Gore to see the matter quite from this point of view, and he did not quite know what to make of it. The business aspect of the case seemed to trouble Mr. Gore much more than the moral aspect.

"When I had your letter, sir, I was amazed. I was shocked. When my son returned, I—"

"I trust you were not unduly harsh with him, sir," said the Head hastily.

"Not unduly so, certainly. I considered it my duty to flog him, and I gave him a very severe flogging."

"Ah!"

"Curiously enough, this seemed to have only the effect of making him more sullen."

"Very curious indeed!" said Dr. Holmes, with a tinge of sarcasm that was wholly lost upon Mr. Gore.

"I kept him upon bread and water for three days, and did not allow him to leave his room for that period. I thought that would be an excellent opportunity for him to reflect upon his faults."

"And then?"

"Then, sir, when he was released from his room, he had the astounding impudence to run away from home, sir."

"Amazing!"

"Yes, sir. I am afraid that he had been treated with undue lenity at this school, and was annoyed at a little wholesome severity."

"Possibly so."

"He has now been absent several days. It did not occur to me that he might have come back to school. The thought never crossed my mind, in fact, as I knew, of course, that you would not receive him here."

The doctor nodded.

"Of course I should not, Mr. Gore."

"Exactly. It was only when an inquiry agent whom I employed found that he had taken a ticket on the railway for Rylcombe, that I suspected."

"And when was that?"

"The day before yesterday, sir. My agent, however, only discovered the fact last night. Hence my wire to you this morning."

"I see."

"If he had come here, you would have detained him, of course, and communicated with me."

"Immediately."

"But as he is undoubtedly in hiding somewhere, it occurred to me that somewhere near this school, in the haunts he is familiar with, would be a probable place."

"If you are sure he came in this direction—"

"I am certain."

"Then it is very probable."

"Very good. But you have heard nothing of him?"

"Nothing."

"I presume you have made inquiries since receiving my telegram?"

"Yes; I have directed the prefects to inquire among the boys, but it appears that no one has seen your son, or heard anything from him."

"Has every boy in the school been questioned?"

"Probably not; but most must have been."

"It would be more satisfactory if every individual boy were questioned."

"I will ask the prefects to make further inquiries, if you wish," said Dr. Holmes, not without a slight touch of impatience.

"Thank you. I should be glad if you would." Mr. Gore looked at his watch. "I have to catch the 2.30 from Rylcombe; my time is valuable."

It did not seem to occur to Mr. Gore that Dr. Holmes's time was valuable, too.

"Then I will not detain you."

"I have not finished yet, Dr. Holmes. I wish to refer to the question of my son's return here. If you could receive him back—"

"Really, Mr. Gore."

"He has been severely punished. It was only a prank after all."

"It was a very serious prank."

"I have punished him, too. If he does not come back to St. James's, I shall send him into business immediately; but I should prefer him to finish his education at a public school. It is a question, of course, for you to decide. I might suggest that a little wholesome severity would be useful. I shall certainly be very severe with him for leaving the home of a kind and indulgent parent in this way." Mr. Gore's lips closed like an iron vice. "He thought his last flogging severe. He shall have reason to think it was a very light one."

"Really, sir—"

"As you refuse to take him back, I may as well take my departure—"

"One moment, sir. I—I have not refused—"

"You consent, then?"

"Pray give me a—moment to think—"

"Ah! I observe that you have not formed business habits, sir; but it is a matter of training, I suppose," said Mr. Gore. "I never require time to think, sir. How long do you require to think? I can remain with you another four minutes if necessary."

"I—I should prefer a day or two—"

Mr. Gore stared.

"Really, sir! I really could not remain here a day or two while you think—"

"No, of course not," said the Head hurriedly.

"Nothing of the sort. I should be far from expecting that—far from—wishing it. I will write to you."

"Oh, very well!"

"Meanwhile, if I hear anything of your son, I will inform you at once."

"Very good. If he turns up here, you can keep him, if he is to stay; and send him to me if you decide not to take him back."

"That is settled, then."

"Very good, sir. Good-bye!"

The Head bade his visitor good-bye with a great deal of pleasure. The station cab rolled off with Mr. Gore, destined to arrive at his office late for the second time in twenty years.

Dr. Holmes almost gasped for breath when he was gone. Mr. Railton came in, and looked at him with a slight smile.

"Bless my soul," said Dr. Holmes, "I—I have had a most disturbing interview, Mr. Railton. Mr. Gore is—is—really, he seems to me to bear a strong resemblance to a—whirlwind, or—a hurricane."

"I have noticed it, sir. He is a very business-like man."

"Indeed, he is. He wishes me to take Gore back into the school, Mr. Railton."

The House-master looked grave.

"That would be a serious step, sir."

"Yes, I am aware of it. But I am greatly inclined to try the experiment. In the first place, I think the lesson may have a lasting effect upon Gore."

"Yes, that is probable."

"In the second place, he seems to have been somewhat severely punished at home, in addition to the punishment he had here."

"So I should imagine, from Mr. Gore's look."

"And great severity awaits him when he is recaptured, now—unless I take him back. Of course, I should not suggest allowing him to pass unpunished after running away from home. Yet it is possible to be too severe."

"Quite true."

"And—and—" The doctor hesitated. "As a matter of fact, Mr. Railton—this is quite between ourselves, of course—as a—a matter of fact, it occurs to me that perhaps Gore's home training, and—and home influence has not been of the best possible, and—and that may have had something to do with his extremely unpleasant character. I think upon the whole that I am inclined to give Gore another chance."

And Mr. Railton nodded.

"I agree with you, sir."

"Then if he is found, he shall come back to St. Jim's. I am anxious about the foolish lad. Do you think it possible, Mr. Railton, that he is lurking in the neighbourhood of the school?"

"Quite possible, sir."

"Then, if he could be found—"

"I will do my best to find him, sir, and I think I can contrive it by enlisting some of the juniors in the search. To-morrow is a half-holiday, and I am sure most of the boys would gladly spend it in looking for Gore."

"A very good idea. Mr. Railton. Dear me, I feel quite disturbed still, and I sincerely hope that it will not be necessary for Mr. Gore to visit the school again on this matter."

CHAPTER 13.

The Mysterious Light Again.

TOM MERRY yawned, and sat up in bed.

It was very dark in the Shell dormitory, and Tom Merry hadn't the faintest idea what hour of the night or morning it might be.

It was quite dark still; and the hero of the Shell listened for the next chime from the clock tower.

Why he had awakened he could not tell.

He had been dreaming, a curious dream in which the burglar who had broken into the School House a week or two before was mixed up with the mysterious light in the tower, and both with the unexplained locking of the study door the previous night.

He had started out of the dream into a wakeful mood.

That strange happening of the previous night had not been explained. Tom Merry was still ignorant of the identity of the joker who had locked him up in No. 7 Study. The owner of that study was ignorant of who it was that had unscrewed his lock; the Terrible Three maintaining a discreet silence on the subject.

"Grooooooo!" murmured Tom Merry, as he sat up in bed, in the cool September night. "I wonder what's woke me up? That dream, I suppose. I wonder if there's a light in the old tower to-night?"

The thought was enough to make him get out of bed. It was the lingering thought of that mysterious light which had made him wakeful probably.

He tumbled out of bed, and pulled a washstand to the nearest window, mounted upon it, and looked out.

From the window, as from most of the windows of the School House, there was a good view of the ivy-mantled tower.

Tom Merry drew a quick breath as he looked.

From that window he could see the light—pale and flickering as before, it streamed out into the dusk of the quadrangle.

"Phew! It's there!"

Tom Merry gazed steadily at the light.

What could it mean?

Burglars, or any lawless intruders into the precincts of St. Jim's, seemed out of the question. They could have no business in the ruined tower; nor could they possibly be supposed to come there, in any case, two nights in succession.

It could hardly be a tramp who had taken up his abode there, either. Tom Merry had thought of exploring the old tower during the day, but the big door on the spiral staircase had been wedged fast somehow, barring access to it.

In the stillness and silence of the dark night, a strange and eerie thought came into Tom Merry's mind.

Was it the ghost?

If tradition was to be believed, the old tower was haunted by the spectre of a murdered monk, and the mysterious light was a sign that the ghost was walking.

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CHAPTER 14.

The Mystery of Arthur Augustus.

In the sunshine of day the idea would have seemed absurd enough, doubtless, but in the still and creepy hour of midnight it was not so absurd.

Tom Merry felt a shiver run down his back. But the next moment he dismissed the thought.

"It's rot!" he muttered. "There are no ghosts. It's some fellow playing a trick, and I'm jolly well going to look into it."

He crept back to Lowther's bed, and woke his chum with a gentle shake. Lowther started and yawned.

"Wharrer marrer?"

"There's a light in the tower again."

"Lemmelone!"

"Wake up!"

"Gr-r-r!"

Tom Merry shook him again.

"I say, Monty, old chap; I want to go to the tower and investigate."

"Go, then!"

"Aren't you coming with me?"

"Rats! No."

"Your mistake; you are."

And Tom Merry hauled the bedclothes off Lowther's bed.

The junior started up with a yell of wrath.

"You fearful ass!"

"Get up, then."

"Tain't rising-bell."

"I want you to come with me."

"I'll jolly well give you a thick ear, you ass."

"Oh, come on!"

"What's the row there?" came a voice from Harry Noble's bed, as the Australian junior sat up. "Who's that yapping?"

"It's Lowther. I'm waking him up. We're going out."

"Nice time for a stroll."

"There's a light in the haunted tower, and we're going to investigate," said Tom Merry. "You can come, Kangaroo."

"Good egg! I'm on."

And the Cornstalk jumped out of bed, and began to dress. Lowther dressed himself too.

Manners was snoring with suspicious regularity. He never snored, as a rule, and his regular snore awoke suspicion.

"Call Manners, Kangaroo."

"He's fast asleep."

"Stick this pin into him."

"Hallo!" said Manners, waking up suddenly. "You chaps going out?"

"Yes, and so are you."

"It's a chilly night."

"Then don't make me squeeze a wet sponge over you, or you may catch cold."

And Manners took the hint and rose peaceably. The four Shell fellows were soon dressed, and they quietly left the dormitory.

From a window on the landing they had a view of the tower, and they looked out to see if the light was burning. It was still there.

From a narrow casement about half-way up the ruined structure it flickered and gleamed out from the network of ivy tendrils.

"That looks jolly mysterious!" muttered Noble.

"It must be a joke; somebody playing ghost."

"Hardly."

"It can't be anything else."

"But if a chap plays ghost it's usually to scare somebody. Now, the chap who's lighted that glim in the tower doesn't know that anybody's awake to see it."

"N-no, I suppose not."

"So he's not playing ghost. I suppose he couldn't be playing ghost simply for his own amusement, could he?"

"It may be a feed, or something," suggested Lowther. "Some sort of giddy revelry by night, you know."

Tom Merry started.

"My hat! That's quite possible. Some secret grubbing business, you know. Perhaps the New House chaps."

"If so, there will be a raid on the grub," grinned Kangaroo.

"Come on!"

They descended the stairs quietly. The quarter to midnight had rung out, and the house was very silent, sunk in sleep.

But as they reached the lower landing Tom Merry gave a sudden jump.

"Hold on!" he whispered. "Listen!"

"What is it?"

"Listen!"

From the stairs they had just descended came a sound of cautious footsteps. Hidden in the darkness, someone was stealthily descending the stairs.

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THE Shell fellows felt their hearts beat hard. There was something very creepy and eerie in that stealthy sound of footsteps, in the deep darkness of the staircase.

Who—what was it?

Lowther leaned towards Tom Merry in the darkness, and put his lips close to Tom's ear and whispered:

"It's the chap who was out last night."

"Yes, rather."

"The chap who locked us in a Fourth Form study."

"What-ho!"

"Let's collar him!"

"Hold on! Might injure him—a sudden fright," said Tom Merry, in the faintest of whispers. "It might be a master, too."

"Phew!"

"It would be no joke to collar Linton in the dark."

"My only hat, no!" murmured Noble. And Manners chuckled silently.

"One of the masters may have seen the light, and may be going to investigate," whispered Tom Merry. "We'd better keep off the grass."

"Right-ho!"

"Quiet now—he'll hear!"

The chums of the Shell remained quite silent, hardly breathing as they crouched back into the shadows of the landing.

The stealthy footsteps came closer—closer—and passed. The unseen—not so much as a shadow had been seen—went down the Fourth Form passage, and the stealthy footfalls died away.

"My hat!" whispered Tom Merry. "You can guess where he's going."

"Same as last night."

"Yes."

"He jolly well won't lock us in a study to-night."

"Not much!"

"Let's go after the bounder," said Manners. "I jolly well want to bump him for that little trick. Come on!"

"Hush!"

"What's the matter now?"

"Hush—somebody coming!"

"My hat! The whole house seems to be walking to-night."

They crouched back again close to the wall. There were footsteps on the stairs—cautious, stealthy—but easily distinguished as belonging to two or three persons.

The footsteps came closer. Then they ceased, halting within half a dozen paces of the spot where the chums of the Shell had flattened themselves against the wall. The Shell fellows almost held their breath.

Then through the gloom came the sound of a well-known voice—whispering, but easily recognisable.

"Which way has the bounder gone?"

Tom Merry gave a gasp.

"Blake!"

There was a sharp ejaculation in the darkness.

"Hallo! Who's that?"

"It's I," said Tom Merry. "It's all right."

"Tom Merry?"

"Right!"

"Who else?"

"Lowther and Manners and Noble."

"What are you kids doing out of bed at this time of night?" demanded Blake severely. "I don't know whether I ought to report this to your Form-master."

"Oh, come off!" said Noble. "What are you doing out of bed yourselves?"

"Looking after Gussy."

"Gussy!"

"Yes. Have you seen him?"

"I can't see you," said Tom Merry, with a chuckle.

"Well, has he passed you, then?"

"Somebody passed us."

"Good! That was the duffer."

"But I don't catch on. What has Gussy got up for?"

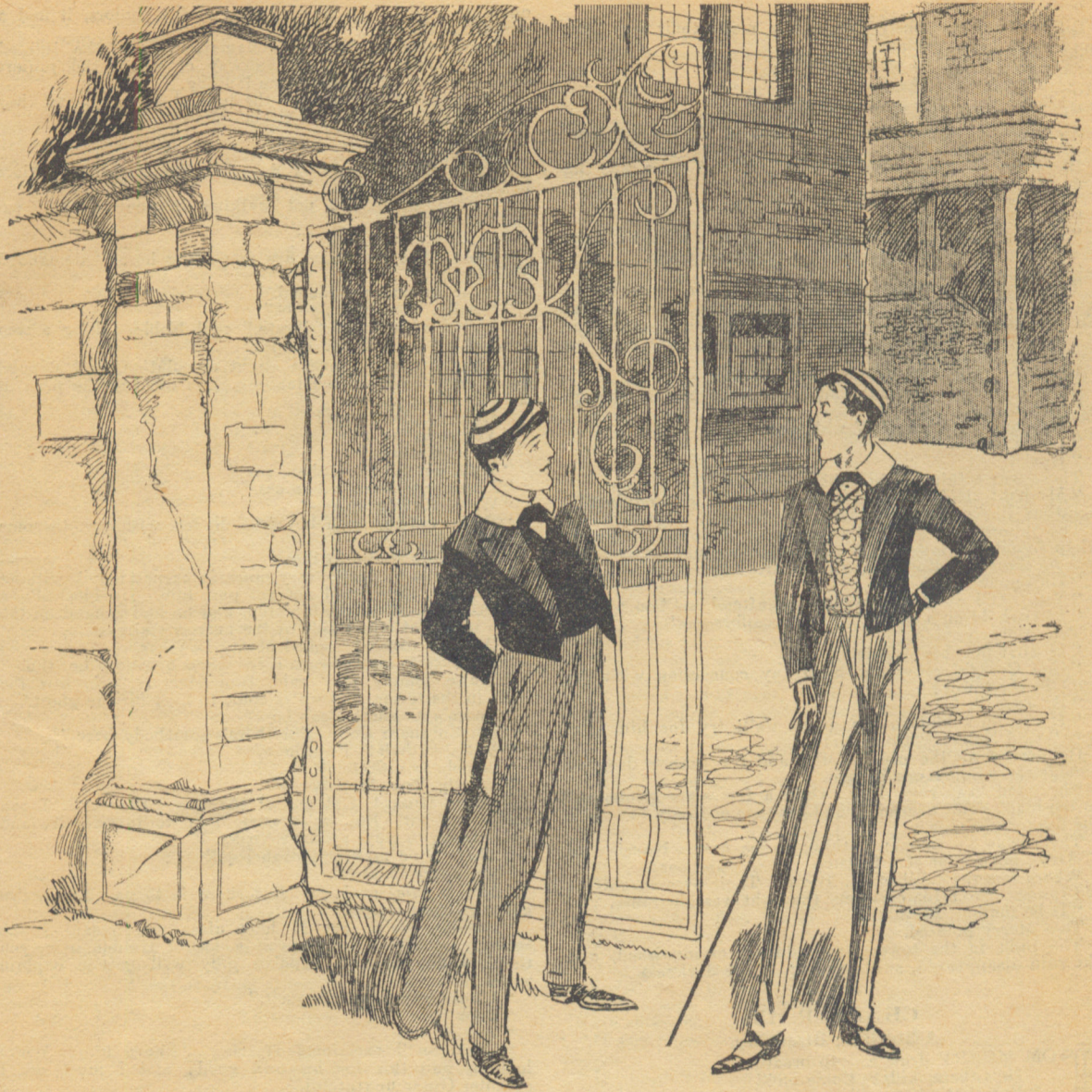
"Can't make it out, unless he's walking in his sleep. But he's been jolly mysterious lately," said Blake. "I'm keeping a fatherly eye on him. He was sleepy all day to-day, and it struck me he had been up the night before. You see, he's been keeping mysterious appointments with some spoofer, and we're looking after him. I thought at first it was Figgins & Co. trying to take a rise out of Study No. 6; but I find that the spoofer, whoever he is, has been making Guss spend money. That looks serious. He's got himself tangled up in something, and we're going to untangle him."

"I see. Then it was Gussy who—" Tom Merry paused.

"Who what?"

"Never mind; go on."

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The two juniors halted at the gateway. Tom Merry gave D'Arcy a sympathetic glance, "Feel it badly?" he asked.

"You were going to say something."

"I've changed my mind. Go on."

"Oh, all right! I woke up several times to-night, and each time I looked at Gussy's bed. Last time I looked it was empty, and I thought I heard the door just closing."

"I see."

"So I called Herries and Dig—"

"You jabbed your silly finger into my eye," growled Herries.

"And bumped your fatheaded elbow on my nose," said the voice of Digby.

"Well, I was in a hurry. I didn't want to lose Gussy."

"You've lost him all the same."

"Tom Merry's found him, though," said Blake, with a chuckle. "Which way did he go, kid?"

"Down the Fourth Form passage."

"Good! We'll go after him."

"We'll come, too," said Tom Merry. "If Gussy's sleep-walking, he'll have to be taken care of by an older and more sensible chap—"

"Eh?"

"Well, you can't be too careful, you know."

"You had better be careful, I think; you are in great danger of getting a thick ear, Tom Merry."

"This isn't a time for you kids to begin cheeking your elders."

"Poo-o-o-o-oof!"

"Look here, Blake—"

"Oh, cheese it!" said Kangaroo. "Let's get on with the washing."

"Well, if Blake will jaw—"

"You haven't explained yet what you're up at this time of night for," said Blake suspiciously. "Was it a jape on us?"

"Oh, no! We're ghost hunting!"

"You're what—whatting?"

"Ghost hunting."

"If you're trying to be funny—"

"Look here!"

"Look at what?"

"From the landing window, towards the old tower."

Jack Blake looked, and uttered a suppressed exclamation. The light was still burning steadily in the old casement.

"There was a light there!"

"There was one last night, too," said Tom Merry.

"We're going to investigate."

"Good! It's curious! We'll come with you when we've caught Gussy, and yanked the young ass back to bed."

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"This way, then."

Quietly and cautiously the juniors made their way into the Fourth Form passage.

Tom Merry uttered an ejaculation.

"There's a light in No. 6!"

"Phew!"

"Gussy's in the study!"

The juniors stared along the passage. There was certainly a light in No. 6.

But even as they looked it went out, and there was the sound of a closing door.

"He's coming back!" whispered Blake.

"Wait for him, then."

"Careful how you touch him, in case he's sleep-walking. It's dangerous to wake up somnambulists suddenly.

"Yes, rather!"

The juniors drew close to the walls of the passage and waited. They naturally assumed that the swell of the Fourth, after finishing his business in the study—whatever it was—would return to the dormitory. In that case, he would have to pass them.

But they listened in vain for his footsteps.

Several minutes passed; but the silence of the passage was unbroken.

"He's not coming back!" whispered Digby.

"Looks like it."

"Hark!"

There was a faint click audible in the stillness.

"My hat! He's opening a window on the ground floor!" breathed Blake excitedly. "He's going out! Come on!"

The juniors ran along the passage and down the stairs. They found the lower hall window unfastened; but there was no sign of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"He's gone out!"

"Yes. And we're jolly well going after him!"

"I say, hold on a minute! Is it possible——"

Tom Merry paused.

"Is what possible? Quick!"

"Can Gussy's going out have any connection with the light in the tower?"

"By Jove!"

"If we miss him in the quad, we'll try for him that way," said Noble. "Come on!"

He pushed up the sash quietly, and the juniors dropped outside the window one by one.

The quad was very dark. Only a few stars glimmered in the black vault overhead, and they seemed only to render the darkness visible.

There was no sound; nothing to be seen. No sign of D'Arcy; not a hint of a footstep.

Where was the swell of St. Jim's? Their eyes sought the old tower. From the casement the light was gleaming.

"Is he there? Ah, look!"

Tom Merry pointed.

The light in the tower was suddenly extinguished, and the ruin disappeared, swallowed up in the darkness.

CHAPTER 15.

A Startling Discovery.

TOM MERRY drew a deep breath.

"He's there, kids! Come on!"

"But—but what——"

"We shall soon see."

They hurried towards the old tower. They knew the way well enough; but in the dark they had many a stumble before they reached it.

As they came closer they saw that the light, which had seemed to be extinguished, was only concealed by a cloth that had been dragged across the window. On closer view several stray gleams of light were visible.

The door in the thick stone wall of the tower stood wide open.

The juniors entered it, and they found the oaken door on the spiral staircase open, too. It had been wedged when Tom Merry tried to open it that afternoon. It was pretty clear now that it had been wedged on purpose from behind.

The juniors stepped quietly upon the winding stair. As they ascended there came a glimmer of light from above. The lamp was still burning in the room there.

Was D'Arcy there?

Another minute would tell!

In single file the juniors pressed on up the staircase.

There was a sudden clink as Lowther's foot slipped on a loose stone.

"My hat!"

Clink! Clink! Clink!

The stone was rolling down the steps, with a separate clink on each one. The noise was slight; yet in the intense

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quietude, and to the startled ears of the juniors, it had a sound like thunder.

There was a startled exclamation from the lighted chamber above, the open doorway of which the juniors could now see on a little stone landing.

A form came quickly into the lighted doorway, and they recognised the swell of the School House.

"Gussy!"

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus stared down at the group of juniors in blank astonishment.

"Gussy! So you're not walking in your sleep!" exclaimed Blake.

"Certainly not, Blake!"

"Then what the deuce are you doing here?" demanded Tom Merry.

Arthur Augustus reddened.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"We've come to investigate," said Noble, taking a step upward. "Get on, you chaps!"

Arthur Augustus gave a slight ejaculation, and stepped down one step from the landing. He blocked the path of the ascending juniors.

"Hold on, deah boys!"

"You're in the way, Gussy!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Well, get out of it, then, ass!"

"I wefuse to be called an ass."

"We're coming up——"

"Pway wetire, deah boys! I do not wish you to come up."

The juniors stared at him.

D'Arcy was evidently very much in earnest; and, without using force, they could not get past him. He blocked the way as he stood on the top step, and he had a hand on the stone blocks at either side of the narrow staircase.

"Off your rooker?" asked Monty Lowther.

"I wefuse to answer such a fwivolous question, Lowthah."

"We're coming up," said Tom Merry. "We saw the light in the tower, and we've come to look for the ghost."

"There's no ghost, deah boy."

"I know there isn't. But there's somebody here."

"Yaas, wathah! I am here."

"Somebody else, too."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"Come, Gussy! Get out of the way. Blessed if I can make you out. But we've come here to investigate, and we're going to clear up the mystery."

"There is no mystewy, deah boy."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Not to you, perhaps. But there is to us. And we're going to clear it up."

"Besides, we've got to look after you!" said Blake severely. "We've been given a lot of trouble over you the last day or two. You've jolly well got to explain yourself."

"I wefuse to explain myself."

"Look here——"

"Wats!"

"Come on!" exclaimed Herries. "Shove him! We're looking into this for his own good; and I must say I consider Gussy ungrateful."

"I should be vewy sowwy to be considahed ungwateful——"

"Then explain yourself, you bounder."

"Let us pass!"

"I am sowwy, but that is impos."

"Look here——"

"I beg you to wetire."

"We're jolly well not going to retire!" said Tom Merry warmly. "I don't want to have to tread on you, Gussy——"

"I should uttably wefuse to be twodden on."

"But I shall have to do so if you don't clear out of the way."

"Wats!"

"Rush when I say the word," said Tom Merry, looking round. "If Gussy isn't out of the way by the time I say

"Three!" rush him."

"What-ho!"

"I wefuse to be wushed. I——"

"One!"

"I wegard you as a set of wottahs. Undah the circs——"

"Two!"

"I shall wesisit you by force——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Three!"

"Weally, deah boys—ow!"

The juniors rushed up the stairs. Arthur Augustus was borne backwards by the rush, and

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deposited in a sitting posture on the little stone landing, with a bump that made him gasp.

The juniors rushed past him into the lighted room.

Then they uttered exclamations of surprise.

The chamber was empty!

On a stone ledge stood a lamp, burning. A large cloth had been pulled over the casement. On the floor were plates, cups, saucers, knives and forks, and the remains of a meal, as well as a bag containing a quantity of provisions—the same bag that the Terrible Three had seen in Study No. 6. In a corner of the room were a heap of bedclothes—the sheets and blankets so new that they were evidently recent purchases.

There was little more to be seen.

The juniors gazed round the room in amazement. It was clear that someone had been using it to live in, and sleeping there; but whoever it was, he was not now visible.

Why had D'Arcy guarded the room so obstinately?

"You uttah wottahs!" Arthur Augustus followed the juniors into the room. "You feahful boundahs! I—"

He broke off, and stared round the room, with a surprise as great as that of Tom Merry & Co. It was plain that he also expected to see someone else there.

Tom Merry tapped him on the shoulder.

"Who was here with you, Gussy?"

"I wefuse to weply."

"Where is he now?"

"I weally do not know."

Harry Noble laughed suddenly, and ran towards the heap of bedclothes in the corner. A suspicious bumpiness about them attracted his attention. There was certainly no one in the bed, but—

"Here he is!"

Noble stirred the bedclothes with his foot. Underneath them, hidden between the heap of blankets and the stone floor, a form wriggled.

"Come out!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Ha ha ha!"

"Come out, whoever you are!"

The bedclothes were thrown aside, and the hidden form revealed. A sullen, sulky face was turned to the juniors. There was a general exclamation of surprise.

"Gore!"

CHAPTER 16.

The Return of Gore.

"GORE!" It was Gore! The cad of the Shell—the fellow who had been expelled from St. Jim's—sacked from the school.

The mystery was explained in a moment.

The juniors stared at Gore, and Gore stared at them. The cad of the Shell was scowling savagely. But his expression slowly changed.

"You've found me out!" he snarled.

"Bai Jove!"

"Looks like it," said Tom Merry. "We hadn't the faintest idea it was you here. Why didn't you have sense enough to keep the window covered?"

"How was I to know anybody would be up at this time?" growled Gore. "Besides, I left it to guide D'Arcy. When he got here he covered the window."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"My only hat!" ejaculated Blake. "So this is the giddy mystery. It was Gore you had that blessed letter from, Gussy?"

"There is no secwet about it now, deah boy."

"He had the colossal cheek to ask you to help him."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"And it was Gore you went to meet—eh?"

"Yaas!"

"And you brought him here—"

"He came here latah that night."

"And that's where your tin went?"

"Well, I lent it to Goah, you know, to make some purchases. We put our heads togethah, you know, and decided that he could stay here for a bit, until things turned wound."

"D'Arcy was very decent," said Gore, with some feeling in his voice. "I know it was like my cheek to ask him, but I was desperate. There wasn't another chap at St. Jim's I would have asked—"

"You had your own friends—"

Gore laughed bitterly.

"They would have done a lot, wouldn't they?"

"H'm! Not much, I suppose."

"I was weally vevy pleased to help Goah. The only thing I didn't like about the bizney was appeawin' to back him up against pawental authority. But I explained to

Goah that my helpin' him must not be undanstood as appwovatin' of his wunnin' away fwom home."

"You fellows don't know what I've been through," said Gore huskily. "You don't know my father. He's not a bad sort, in his way. But he's as hard as nails. He gave me a licking. I've been flogged here; but what you get here was a joke to it."

"Phew!"

"Then I had three days' solitary confinement on bread and water."

"My hat!"

"And then I bolted."

"Well, I'm not surprised," said Tom Merry. "I'm sorry for you brought it all on yourself, and we did our best for you when the row came."

"I know you did; and I sha'n't forget it, either," said Gore. "I treated you like a mean cad, and you tried to help me with the doctor. It was jolly decent of you, and I shall remember it. I've had a rough time. I had hardly any money. I slept out of doors one night, and it rained. Ugh! Then I thought of St. Jim's. I daren't go home. I'll never go home. My pater would go for me bald-headed. I wouldn't mind so much if he was just a bad-tempered man. But it isn't that; he does it from a sense of duty. When a pater licks you from a sense of duty, you know how he lays it on."

And Gore groaned reminiscently.

"Yaas, wathah, I suppose it would be wuff."

"Then he's going to shove me into the office, and make me work my way up from the lowest position," said Gore. "I won't have it. I'd rather go to sea."

"I'm sorry," said Tom Merry, again. "I don't see what's to be done. I wish you could come back to St. Jim's—if you'd try to be decent."

"If I had another chance—"

"The doctor isn't likely to change his mind," said Noble. "He had his back up awfully over that letter business."

"I was a silly ass," groaned Gore. "I—I never thought about it, really, before I did it. It was a jape. I know it was a rotten sort of jape, but it never struck me that I was forging in imitating another chap's hand. Honest."

"You must be a silly ass, Goah."

"I suppose I was a silly ass, or I shouldn't have got into a fix like this."

"Well, you needn't worry about our finding you out," said Tom Merry abruptly. "We won't tell about your being here, you may be sure of that."

"Yaas, wathah! You can wely upon honowable tweatment fwom these chaps, Goah."

Gore nodded eagerly.

"Thank you!"

"I don't know what good it will do you to stay here, though," added Tom Merry. "You are bound to be discovered sooner or later."

"I—I suppose so."

"And what then?"

"I shall have to bunk, I suppose."

"Why not go back to your father?"

Gore shivered.

"If you knew my governor, you wouldn't suggest it," he said.

"It wouldn't be pleasant, I suppose—but it must come in the end."

"I'm not going home."

"But how is it to end?"

"I don't know—and I don't care!" said Gore doggedly.

"I'm not going back to the governor. If the Head won't let me return to St. Jim's, I shall go to sea. I'd rather go to sea than work in the office under the pater's eye. You don't know my pater."

"Well, you can rely on us, as far as that goes. Only don't let that light be seen from the tower again. A master might see it any night—"

"A master has seen it," said a deep voice in the doorway.

Mr. Railton stepped into the light. The juniors stared at him blankly.

Gore gave a groan, and collapsed against the stone wall, in utter despair. The tears ran down his cheeks, very seldom thus moistened.

"It's all up!"

Mr. Railton looked at him steadily.

"I half expected to find you here, Gore. I caught sight of the light in the tower before it was covered up. It occurred to me that you might be, as your father supposed, lurking in the vicinity of the school. I did not expect to find so many of the boys of my house here at this hour."

"If you please, sir—"

"You need not explain, Merry; you did not subdue your voice, and I have heard enough of your words as I came here to enlighten me. Who has been supplying Gore with food in this place?"

D'Arcy stepped forward sturdily.

"I have, sir."

"Ah! You stole out at night to do so, I presume."

"Yaas, sir."

"And the others, I suppose, came to look for you. Very good. You boys may return to your dormitories, and I shall overlook this matter. As for you, Gore—"

"Oh, sir!"

"I think you have been severely punished for your fault, serious as it was—"

"Won't you speak to the Head for me, sir?"

"Do you deserve it, Gore?"

The cad of the Shell hung his head.

"No," he said, in a low voice—"no, I don't, sir! I—I'm not asking it because I think I deserve it. I—I don't know what will become of me if the doctor doesn't take me back, sir."

Mr. Railton's face relaxed.

"That is a better spirit, Gore. If you were sensible of the wrongdoing you have been guilty of, there would be hope of your amendment."

"I'd try to do better, sir. I—"

"Very good! The Head has almost decided to give you another chance; I think I may say that he will do so, if you show real signs of a desire to improve upon your past."

"Oh, sir!"

"I can answer for it that you will be given a chance, at least; and it will depend upon yourself during the next few weeks whether you are allowed to remain at St. Jim's after this term."

The tears streamed down Gore's face.

"Oh, sir! You sha'n't be sorry for this. I'll do my best—indeed I will, sir!"

"I hope so, Gore. You may now go to the Shell dormitory, with Tom Merry. As your bed there is not made, you can turn in with one of the others for to-night."

"With me," said Tom Merry.

"Very good," said Mr. Railton. "I will see you to the house."

And the School House master did not lose sight of the juniors till they were safely ensconced in their several beds.

When Mr. Railton had left them, Gore, in Tom Merry's bed—rather cramped for room, but very relieved and happy in mind—lay silent for some time.

When at last he spoke, it was in a low and tremulous voice.

"Are you asleep, Merry?"

Tom Merry came out of a doze.

"Yaw-aw! Somebody speak?"

"Yes, I spoke."

"Hallo! What is it?"

"I'm sorry I woke you. I didn't know you were asleep."

"No harm done; I shall be asleep again jolly soon. Did you want to say anything?"

"Ye-es."

"Go ahead!"

"I—I—I—"

"Play up!" said Tom Merry encouragingly. "Haven't you got enough of the bedclothes? There's some more blanket."

"I—I wasn't thinking of that."

"You've got more than half the sheet. I haven't any at all on this side of me."

"I—I wasn't thinking about the bedclothes."

"What is it, then? The bed? I'm sorry if you're cramped, old chap, but, you know, these beds are only made for one. I'm almost over the edge as it is."

"It isn't that."

"What the dickens is it, then?" asked Tom Merry, puzzled.

"I was thinking of the future."

"Oh! You are a funny merchant, to wake a chap up in the middle of the night and tell him you're thinking about the future!" said Tom Merry, in wonder.

"I—I—it doesn't matter. Good-night!"

"But it does matter," said Tom, fully awake now. "What is it? Go ahead!"

"I—I—"

"Go it!"

"I was thinking—"

"Yes?"

"You've treated me awfully decently over this matter, Merry."

"Oh, is that all?"

"So have the other chaps."

"That's so."

"Especially D'Arcy."

"Yes; he's a good little ass."

"I—I think I'm going to try to run a bit straighter in future. That's what I wanted to say. I—I think I could do it better if—if you helped me a bit."

"What-ho! I'll stand by you like a Dutch uncle."

"I'm going to give up smoking, and—and playing the fool generally," said Gore. "I'm going to drop that rotten silly bosh of a smart-set business. I'm going to play the game—if I can."

"You can—if you try."

"Do you think so?"

"Sure of it, old son."

"Well, I'm going to have a jolly good try," said Gore. "That's all."

"Good egg!" said Tom Merry. "I'm with you. Keep it up, and it grows easier. Good-night, old son."

"Good-night!"

And there was silence in the Shell dormitory.

The return of Gore was something of a surprise to the St. Jim's fellows; but they were glad for him to have another chance. His father was informed, and replied by post, and was kind enough not to call personally, much to the relief of the Head.

Gore had his chance. It remained to be seen whether the fellow who had always been called the cad of the Shell would be able to "run straight." But one thing was certain. In his efforts to "play the game" he could count, at least, upon the friendly support of Tom Merry & Co.

THE END.

ANOTHER GRAND TALE

OF

TOM MERRY & CO.,

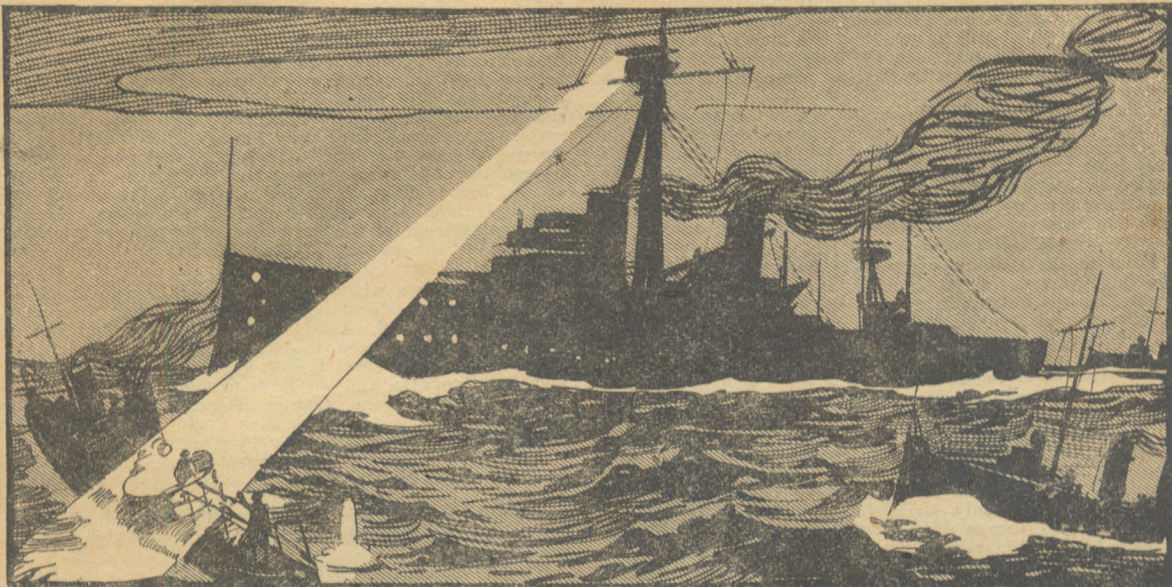
By Martin Clifford,

NEXT THURSDAY.

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BRITAIN AT BAY.



A Powerful and Stirring War Story.

THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

Sam and Stephen Villiers, two cadets of Greyfriars School, by a combination of luck and pluck render valuable service to the British Army during the great German invasion. They are appointed special scouts to the Army, which is forced back on London by Von Krantz, the German commander. At the time when this instalment opens, Sam and Stephen are with Lieutenant Cavendish, who is in command of a captured German warship named the *Furst Moltke*. They take an active part in a great action between the massed fleets of Britain and Germany, in which only five of the German ships remain afloat after the final destroyer attack. These five, battered and crippled, now try to draw off.

(Now go on with the story.)

The Surrender of the Sachsen.

Admiral Frobisher, however, splitting his force into two parts and closing in closer than ever, poured in a tremendous fire from his heavier ships, whilst the swiftest circled round to cut the Germans off from all escape. The *Furst Moltke* was in the latter division, and she was in time to head off the first of the fugitives, the big cruiser *Munich*.

"We've got 'em now!" said Cavendish grimly. "This is the end of the cruisers!"

A thundering broadside from the *Munich* was poured into the *Furst Moltke*, dismounting yet another of Cavendish's guns. But the British gunners worked the remaining pieces with such deadly swiftness and accuracy that after a sharp duel the German ship was left a riddled and helpless wreck upon the sea, her stern sinking rapidly in the water.

The other British ships, having hemmed the Germans in, finished the conflict swiftly. The last four cruisers tried for a few minutes to reply to a devastating fire, which crippled two of them, and on the others making a futile attempt to break through and escape, one of them was rammed by the British flagship and went down. The three remaining on top of the water hoisted the white flag and surrendered.

A wild cheer echoed all down the British line as the signals ran to cease firing. The cruiser-battle was won. All that remained of Admiral von Birne's squadron were a

few stripped, smoking hulls, scarcely able to steam or steer, and some crippled ships on the beach at Spurn Head, where they had fled as a last chance of saving their crews. The rest were under water.

The British destroyers, having done their work under Sir Francis, had been called away to join their flotilla to that of the battleship squadron to the southward. But a whole host of smaller torpedo-boats, both British and German, had now rushed to the scene as soon as the flag of surrender was flown, and were picking up the crews of the sunken ships on both sides. The surrendered cruisers were quickly taken charge of by six ocean-going torpedo-boats, which marshalled them off in the direction of the Humber's mouth. As for the German flagship, she had gone down, and three torpedo-boats were rescuing what remained of her crew.

"The day's ours!" cried Stephen exultingly. "Oh, Bob, it was a gorgeous fight! And awful, too!" he added, in a lower tone, looking round at the grim traces of it over the surrounding sea.

"It's not over yet!" said Cavendish. "Ours is only the smaller half. The battle-fleets are at it yet—an', by Jove, there's the signal for us to close in towards them!"

The admiral's flagship, her bloodstained sides showing how she had suffered in the fight, turned her head southwards and gave the squadron its orders to follow. In line abreast the big, battered cruisers steamed swiftly towards the main battle.

During their own hard-fought struggle, those on the cruisers had had no leisure to see or consider what was going on elsewhere. All they knew was that the tremendously heavy firing to the south of them proved that the battle-fleets were fighting it out to the death.

But now, as they neared the scene, the boys for the first time realised what a terrific combat had been going on. The thirty odd British battleships were still in the very thick of it, but it was plain to all eyes that the fight was near its end.

"Great Cæsar!" exclaimed Cavendish. "The Old Man's got 'em by the short hairs!"

The Kaiser's battle squadron, in sober truth, was all but decimated. Eleven of the German High Admiral's ships were at the bottom, eight of them showing the points of their steel masts above the surface, for the sea was of no great depth.

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"MISS PRISCILLA'S PERIL" Is the Title of the Story which Mr. Martin Clifford has written for next Thursday's Number of the "Gem Library."

Six more were out of the fight, lying motionless and useless, or else staggering towards the land and hoping to reach it in time. As to the rest, Lord Howard's battle squadron was wiping them out one by one.

Sam and his brother, despite all that had gone before, fairly gasped as they watched. It was a stupendous thing to see, this battle of monsters. Four British ships were sunk or out of action, and four only.

Lord Howard on his flagship, the Invulnerable, with his three other huge ships of the Dreadnought class, manœuvred separately, while still controlling the whole Fleet. He had principally to deal with the corresponding four ships of the German squadron, the flagship Sachsen and her three consorts.

Two of these had already succumbed to the power of the British 12-inch guns, whose terrible projectiles played on their enemies with a force that no ship could withstand for very long. Lord Howard had gained the advantage at the outset by wrecking the conning-tower of the Dresden and breaching her forward armour by several huge shells driven into the same spot each time. The Prussen succumbed twenty minutes afterwards.

Even as the cruisers arrived the boys saw the third of the huge German ships attacked by a desperate rush of eight British destroyers, five of which she sunk, only to receive mortal injuries herself a few seconds later as two of the most powerful type of torpedoes struck her huge bulk deep under water, blowing in her side and flooding her starboard engine-room, while a third exploded under her propellers and rendered her helpless. She began to sink rapidly, leaving only the German flagship remaining of the four monsters.

Among the smaller ships—which were yet huge and powerful enough of their kind—the destruction was tremendous. All hope of victory for the German fleet was gone; they could only strive to do as much damage as might be and escape if luck favoured them. But the British High Admiral had no intention of letting them go. His great horde of steel-clad ships centred all their fire upon the survivors, following them as they steamed at full speed to the eastward.

"Won't he let us join in?" cried Stephen, dancing with impatience, as the cruiser squadron was signalled to divide.

"Lord Howard? He don't want to throw us away," said Cavendish, who was no less impatient. "That's the worst of a cruiser. Any of those big battleships could smash us to blazes with two or three shots; our armour isn't meant to stand against such guns as they carry. The Old Man's givin' us a job of some sort, though. Good! We're ordered out along the line!"

The remnant of the flying German fleet was now doing its utmost to escape. Ship after ship dropped out and failed to keep up, however, under the devastating fire of the British squadron. Yet, despite all he could do, Lord Howard was unable to stop the flagship Sachsen. She was a full knot faster than his own ship, and her engines were undamaged still.

None of his own squadron could catch her, and her escape was the last thing the British admiral wished to see. His signals were flown at once, and the three fastest of Frobisher's cruisers—swifter than any of Lord Howard's battleships—were ordered to cut across to the southward and get round the fugitives.

Foremost of the three chosen cruisers, and swiftest of them all, was the Furst Moltke. Her crew felt a wild exhilaration as she dashed out to overtake this mighty foe.

"My word," gasped Stephen, "we've got the honour now! Are we to tackle the Sachsen, of all ships afloat? Howard's goin' to sacrifice us, then, to try an' get her stopped—oh?"

"No, not that," said Cavendish, with a grim smile. "The whale's harpooned, an' we're told off to lance her."

Stephen wondered what on earth the young commander meant. The Furst Moltke was tearing round in a huge circle, so as to get to the farther side of the German flagship without coming within range of her guns. Before Stephen could put a question to his brother, the Furst Moltke's guns, which had been silent, suddenly opened fire at a couple of German torpedo-boats that came racing at her.

So near were both the boats, and so unexpected their attack, that there was no time to manœuvre. The vicious little assailants were sent to stop Cavendish at any cost, and they closed on him from right ahead.

The Furst Moltke charged one with her ram, cutting the frail vessel in two like a match-box and passing clean over her. The other torpedo-boat came dashing past, barely a hundred and fifty yards away, the water flying up all round her in great spurts from the shell-fire. A glimpse was caught of wild-looking, smoke-blackened men busy at

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her torpedo-tubes. There was breathless suspense on the Furst Moltke; it seemed a miracle that the boat was not hit, and in another moment the torpedo would have been fired. In the very nick of time a six-inch shell caught the German boat and sent her to her last account, the torpedoes with her.

"Whew!" said Cavendish, wiping his forehead. "That was a near thing. She couldn't have missed us at that range. My gunners aren't used to such close quarters, though."

Up came the Furst Moltke, now on the far side of the Sachsen and drawing level with her. Far away to port, beyond, the Invulnerable and Dreadnought were exchanging a heavy fire with the Sachsen as they raced after her, but she was fast leaving them behind. And now Cavendish, with what seemed foolhardy boldness, held right in towards the great German battleship, as fast and as close as he could go. His 6-inch guns and the one big 9.2 weapon opened fire rapidly. It looked as though the cruiser were going straight to absolutely certain destruction. But, to the astonishment of the boys, and of nearly everybody on board, the Sachsen only replied with her small quick-firing guns.

"Now d'ye see what I mean?" said Cavendish. "Her starboard batteries are silenced. We're on her blind side."

It was as he said. Lord Howard had signalled him the news when giving him the order. During the fight the German flagship's great 11-inch guns on her starboard side and fore barrette had all been dismounted and silenced, and her turrets were jammed. Now that she was flying eastwards the British battleships could not overtake her and reach that side; but the swift cruiser could, and did.

"By gum, it's great!" cried Stephen. "Shall we get her, the plum of the fleet? Can our guns do her any harm?"

"The 9.2 will at this range," said Cavendish, "for her armour's weakened already, an' I'm goin' right abreast her!"

Crash! Crash! Crash! went the shells from the British cruiser's guns, thudding upon the huge citadel of the battleship and concentrating their fire. But it was not the 6-inch weapons that told; it was the big 9.2 in Cavendish's fore barrette, smartly handled and firing three shots to the minute, which made the German feel its weight.

At any ordinary range even such a gun as that would never have damaged the mighty Sachsen; but Cavendish, instead of being two or three miles away—which is not at all far for modern warships—had brought his vessel almost within pistol-shot.

The single big gun, so close at hand, consequently told strongly even on the Sachsen's armour, weakened as it was by the encounter with Lord Howard's 12-inch batteries not long before. Cavendish kept his fire directed straight upon the same spot in the Sachsen's citadel.

The German's smaller guns were answering the cruiser with a fierce, drumming fire, and the Furst Moltke was swept fore and aft by the small projectiles. They did much minor damage, but had no power to beat the armoured cruiser off, and steadily the firing from her fore barrette continued.

The Sachsen tried her utmost to bring her port-side guns to bear on her enemy. She swerved heavily again and again, and twice nearly described a complete circle, like some great whale battling with a swordfish.

But the swifter, more nimble cruiser followed her every movement. Cavendish handled his ship with mastery skill, and whichever way the German turned, she still found her assailant upon her blind side, pounding away steadily with that one big gun. The Furst Moltke had no torpedo-tubes, and those on the Sachsen had long been out of action. They had to depend on their guns.

One broadside from those tremendous 11-inch batteries—much more powerful than the Dreadnought's, though of slightly smaller bore—would have pierced Cavendish's light armour and blown him out of the water, and he knew it. The Sachsen found she could not catch him napping, and every turn she made delayed her and allowed the pursuing battleships under Lord Howard to come up. The latter had now ceased firing, friend and foe being too close together. The other two cruisers, unable to keep up, had fallen out, and the forces stopped to watch the last great duel between the German High Admiral's flagship and a vessel captured out of his own fleet.

"Gosh! Isn't this terrific?" muttered Stephen, as the conning-tower vibrated under the hail of small shells. "Aren't they gettin' mad aboard her? Can we stop her after all?"

The answer came swiftly. The Sachsen, as if infuriated by the dogged attack of a foe so much smaller, turned upon the cruiser and made a desperate attempt to ram her.

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The huge bulk of the German bore straight down upon the Furst Moltke.

As well might a bull attempt to catch a terrier. Cavendish went ahead with one propeller and astern with the other, twisting his vessel round like a dinghy, and his long gun sent its shell into the Sachsen's citadel yet once again.

This time the armour was fairly riven, and the shot went home. Deep into the vitals of the great battleship it sped, and the shock made her quiver from stem to stern. Twenty seconds later another shell followed the first.

There was a fearful, devastating explosion in the Sachsen's hull. Her citadel was blown bodily out in a blast of white flame and smoke and torn steel fragments. She heeled slowly to one side, her engines stopped, and she lay an inert mass upon the water, with columns of fire spouting high amidships.

Helpless under the rattling fire of the Furst Moltke's 6-inch guns, and entirely at her mercy, the Sachsen hoisted the white flag and yielded herself, a shattered wreck, to the young commander. Far over the waters rang the distant cheer from the British Fleet as they saw the token of surrender, and the signal flew from the Lord High Admiral's foremast:

"Well done, Furst Moltke!"

The German Navy was a thing of the past. Britain, once more Queen of the Seas, regained the position she had held for ages.

She had swept her enemy from the ocean's face.

Homeward Bound.

"It's over!" muttered Sam. "Thank Heaven for that! I—I feel done up, somehow." He staggered, and leaned up against the split steel wall of the conning-tower, half fainting.

Both the brothers were in something very like a collapse. The fearful strain of the battle, the noise, the bursting shells, the awful sights, had tried them more than they knew. The excitement had kept them going, but now it was at an end, there came the reaction. Cavendish himself, though pale and badly shaken, had had a long naval training, and stood it better.

"Pull yourselves together, old chaps," he said; "you'll feel better soon. It's the greatest day for Britain that's dawned since the war began. Come out into the open air."

The wreckage of the Furst Moltke was terrible. Her vitals above were protected by the armour—elsewhere she looked like a scrap-heap. The bridge, from which the navigation of the ship was directed in ordinary times, was swept clean away save only the middle part, but it was still possible to use it, and thither Cavendish went. The fresh air revived Sam and his brother, after the acrid fumes in the conning-tower, and presently they followed him.

Far and wide over the sea, a host of torpedo craft were busily picking up the survivors who were still afloat of the ships that had gone down. The ironclads themselves took no part in the rescue—they were too busy with their own wounded, and had no boats. Luckily, there were plenty of the smaller craft to do all that might be done.

"Lord Howard's signalling for the fleet to close," said Cavendish. "We'll get back to 'em as quick as we can. Hallo, Mac!"

The redoubtable Scots engineer came up from below, for the first time able to leave his post. As calm as ever, he rolled a piece of cotton-waste between his hands and looked round at the mast-trunks of the sunken ships, which at long intervals could be seen above the surface.

"You'll be the German fleet, I'm thinkin'," he remarked. "You've got it, Mac. Three cruisers got away. The rest are beached."

Mac tossed the cotton-waste over the side. "I'm glad ye've hammered the beggars," he said. "I must get back to yon engines of mine. Man, it made me nigh weep to feel them rock in the bed-plates when those big shells hit us."

"How are we doing below?"

"I canna' tell ye yet. The starboard engines are sound. But we're makin' a lot of watter, an' it sticks in my mind that the Furst Moltke will never be o' much account again at sea," he added as he went below.

Cavendish whistled.

"I didn't know we were as badly smashed as that," he said. "Mac must have done wonders to keep her speed up for that run after the Sachsen. Well, the ship's served her turn, poor old lass. There is Howard calling a consultation. By gum, we're to go, too!"

From the High Admiral's flagship the signals streamed out, bidding Admiral Houghton, of the battleship squadron, and Vice-Admiral Sir Francis Frobisher, of the Fearless, to join him on board the flagship, together with two post-captains from other of the larger vessels. And on the heels

of this signal came the call, "Commander Cavendish and his two attaches of the land forces, also."

"My wig," said Stephen, his strained face relaxing into a grin, "we're blessed attaches now! The Old Man must be pulling our leg!"

"He's too busy for that. But I'll bet they're all pretty curious to hear how this captured creak of a German has been done," said Cavendish, "and what sort of a scratch crew we are. As for you chaps, everybody's a bit interested in you. They've been askin' about you a lot in the fleet."

"I don't feel much in trim for visitin' admirals," said Sam, looking down at his war-worn riding clothes.

"Nobody's in parade kit just now. The Berthon's in the water. Hurry up, you two lobsters."

One of the folding boats had quickly been hoisted up from below, put together, and launched. In a few minutes Cavendish and the brothers were being pulled away at a smart pace towards the flagship, the Furst Moltke being hove to near by.

Just before they started, Cavendish exchanged a few words with MacBrayne, who had come up again from his engine-room. The young commander looked grave.

"Mac says she's pretty near done for, an' can't do much more than scramble into port," said Cavendish. "It can't be helped. Hope Lord Howard won't keep us long."

The boats from the other ships had already reached the flagship. A hearty greeting awaited Cavendish and his companions from her staff of officers, but they were kept waiting while the more important visitors conferred with the High Admiral.

In a little while the three were sent for. They were escorted into the stern cabin, where Lord Howard, a splendid upstanding old sailor of sixty, a blood-stained lint bandage about his head, received them. Cavendish saluted, and the High Admiral, breaking through the formalities of naval discipline, shook him by the hand.

"I wish to thank you formally, Commander Cavendish, for the remarkable way in which you have made a captured prize fit to take its place in the British fleet," he said, "and the pluck and smartness with which you have handled her. We owe it to you that the German admiral's flagship is in our hands."

Cavendish saluted, and his face flushed with pleasure. Lord Howard had Sam and Stephen presented to him, and all in the room looked at the boys with keen interest. "Frankie" Frobisher's eyes twinkled as he nodded to the brothers.

"I have heard a good deal of the exploits of you young gentlemen ashore," said Lord Howard, "and also as pilots with our torpedo craft. You will return to your work on land now, I presume?"

"We hope so, sir," said Sam.

"We have cleared the enemy from the sea. It rests now with the Army—or, rather, with the whole British nation—to lower his colours ashore. They will have a harder task than we have met with, I think," said the admiral. "And now I must take leave of you, gentlemen. Mr. Cavendish, in what condition is your ship?"

"Bad, sir, I fear. The engineer tells me she can barely get home, for she is crippled. But if you have further service for me, sir, I will try—"

"No, no. No need to risk your crew on a lame vessel. Get her to Sheerness, if possible. She is now detached from the fleet, and I leave the disposition of her entirely in your hands. I'll send a brace of torpedo-boats with you as escort, in case you founder. You have done splendidly."

Cavendish saluted and withdrew. In a quarter of an hour they were all three back on the Furst Moltke, and, dipping her ensign to the flagship in passing, the cruiser steamed away south along the coast, every ship of the battle squadron cheering her as she went by.

Now that she was fairly on the way, it became plain how badly Cavendish's vessel had suffered. Mac, in response to his commander's call, had in the last spurt after the flying Sachsen made the cruiser put forth what was really her dying effort. He did it with wonderful skill, for none but he really knew how badly stricken she was. She kept nearly her full speed up to the last.

Now, however, her port engines could be relied on no farther, and her starboard were in a bad way, too. She was leaking so fast that the steam-pumps could scarcely keep the water under, and the last shots of the Sachsen had damaged her steering-gear. So, almost shot to pieces, but covered with honour, she crept slowly southward on her homeward journey as night fell.

Cavendish said little for the next few hours, but he did not seem greatly downcast at the condition of his ship. She had done splendidly, and no more could be asked of her. A meal, which was badly needed, set the three comrades to rights again, and after it Sam and Stephen fell fast asleep.

How long they slept neither of them knew. The dawn was rising when they were awakened by the roar of the cable as the anchor was let go, and they went on deck.

"Sheerness?" said Stephen, rubbing his eyes.
 "No," said Cavendish, with a frown. "We shall never see Sheerness, I fear—at least, the ship won't. We've broken down, and I've had to anchor while Mac repairs, or else the tide'll drive us north. We've drifted through Goldmer Gat inside the Gunfleet Sands, as it is. That's Walton-on-the-Naze to starboard."

"So it is!" exclaimed Sam. "But what's wrong? Can't she float?"

"She won't last a couple of hours, and it'll take half an hour to start the engines again. Not enough to take us to the Thames, I'm afraid."

Cavendish waited philosophically, hoping against hope that the ship could be got to dock in time. He did not want to beach her if he could help it. But the repairs in the engine-room took time, and the hope departed.

"We shall be a jolly tight fit aboard those torpedo-boats, all of us," he said, with a shrug. "I could wish the old tub had gone down fighting rather than like this, except for the wounded. Hallo, here's a smack putting off!"

A swift fishing-yawl came out from the land, and Sam and Stephen scanned her eagerly. She hove-to close by, and inquired the cruiser's name.

"You've got the young Villiers scouts with you, haven't ye?" hailed a big man in the bows of the yawl. "We've got news for 'em from Mulholland."

"By gum, have you!" exclaimed Sam. "He can come aboard, can't he, Bob? Mulholland's the chap who's raisin' the League of Britons, you know."

"Of course. But he must come by himself," said Cavendish, for they were off a German-held coast, and he had had enough of spies.

The big man came aboard, saluted Sam, as though recognising an officer, and made the sign of the league, which the boys knew well.

"We got the news o' the fleet's victory last night," he said, "an' we heard this ship was comin' south, an' that the two Villiers were on her. When we saw you anchor we thought we'd come off an' see if there's any chance o' you givin' 'em a hand at Maldon."

"Giving them a hand at Maldon!" said Cavendish, in surprise.

"Yes, sir. You know, the Germans hold it, an' have done since the first day o' the war. It's one o' their bases, curse 'em! The Kaiser had his quarters there a long while. Well, we've had a report through from our League men in Maldon that they're all ready to rise there, an' that if the German guns on the front, up the river, could only be silenced, there'd be a good chance just now to recapture the town. You know what a mighty score that'd be, sir."

"By Jove, yes!" said Cavendish; and he began to think busily.

"We wondered, sir, if there was any chance o' one of your torpedo-boats givin' us a hand. They carry twelve-pounders, I'm told."

"Torpedo-boats!" cried Cavendish. "By gum, I'll take the Furst Moltke herself there! She'll never reach Sheerness, but she can an' shall go into the Blackwater. I'll lay her bows within gunshot of Maldon, an' she shall fight her last fight there. I've two hundred bluejackets and jollies still fit to go; an' when we've knocked those guns out, we'll land an' pluck Maldon out of the German's hands."

"I can gie ye steam now, Muster Cavendish," came Mac's voice up the tube.

"Up anchor there, for'ard! Head her for the Blackwater!"

"An' then hurrah for horse an' carbine again!" cried Stephen, flinging up his cap.

The Furst Moltke, gathering her strength, crept slowly on her last voyage towards the mouth of the Maldon River, at whose head lay the town where the German flag had flown ever since the first day of the invasion dawned—that blackest of days for Britain.

How Sam Was Rated as Pilot.

In a moment the whole ship's company were in a ferment of delight. Every sound man aboard her welcomed the chance of having one more slap at the Germans before their vessel ended her career, and the anchor came rattling home as the steam-windlass wound in the cable. The messenger from the fishing-smack was the most overjoyed of all.

"By George, I never thought we'd get such help as this!" he exclaimed, in deep gratitude. "Do you mean you can really do it, sir?"

"We'll do it," said Cavendish, who had pulled a writing-tablet and pencil from his pocket, and was setting down a few sentences rapidly, "by hook or crook, if it can be done.

How soon can you get a message to the League men in Maldon?"

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"In about two hours, sir, with luck. We can telephone half-way, for we've tapped some wires."

"What about getting the news in, in spite of the German guards?"

"Leave that to us, sir. The League's made big strides here, an' can do a lot."

"Right! Then get that message spread among the Maldon inhabitants, if it can be done, and bid them clear out of the way while our shells drop into the town, if we have to bombard it. I may not be able to help it."

"Nobody cares, sir, as long as the Germans get blazes."

"There's one thing, are you dead sure this warning won't fall into the enemy's hands?"

"Impossible! It'll be sent in our cipher, sir, and they could make nothing of it."

"Good! Then get it off with all speed. Your boat's alongside. Clear away the gangway, there!"

The Furst Moltke was already forging ahead as the visitor went down the gangway to his dinghy. He saluted Cavendish as he jumped in, and, casting his painter off, bobbed away astern in the little cock-boat in a lather of foam. He waved his hat to the brothers.

"How's the League going?" cried Stephen, running to the side and looking after him.

"Spreadin' through the country like yeast," was the reply.

"Every man an' lad that can carry a gun or a knife'll soon be ready to rise."

"And in London?"

"It's growin' there like a snowball. They're just bidin' the signal."

"What do the Germans think of it?" cried Sam.

"They laugh at it. By gosh, they'll learn better soon!"

Mulholland's raised the fightin' blood in every man that can stand. He wants you two young 'uns back to stiffen 'em; they all believe in your luck. We've been wonderin' whether you were goin' to stay at sea for ever."

"My word, I was beginnin' to wonder myself!" said Sam, as the dinghy, now out of earshot, regained the yawl, which skimmed away towards the shore. "We've been neglectin' business for pleasure, it seems to me."

"The League's half hatched, then," said Stephen. "We shall see how it works at Maldon. Only there's so few able-bodied men left there."

"Plenty of Germans," said Cavendish grimly.

The cruiser was passing up the Walled Channel, between the Gunfleet Sand and the Essex coast, and the low shores of the Blackwater's mouth were already visible ahead. The Furst Moltke was a good deal down by the stern, and her engines, instead of the steady, swift beat the boys knew so well, were working like a man with a weak heart, amid much fluttering and thumping. But still she held on her way.

"This looks like being a gorgeous wind-up for the poor old girl!" said Stephen. "But, I say, Bob, can you really get this ship into a shallow estuary like the Blackwater?"

"Yes, with luck. She only draws twelve feet."

"Twelve feet! A cruiser this size!" exclaimed Sam, who had not yet learned the Furst Moltke's draught. He thought it would be eighteen feet or more.

"The Germans build these ships with light draught to navigate the Baltic, an' other shallow waters thereabouts. See? She's down by the stern now with all this water over her, an' draws fourteen feet aft; but she won't get much worse till she founders altogether. Inside three hours she'll do it."

"I didn't know you knew the Blackwater."

"I know the bar an' entrance, of course. There'll be sixteen feet abreast the Knowl Buoy. Once inside the river, of course, we can't go far. It's over a mile wide, but very shallow."

"Oh!" said Sam. "Well, Bob, may one ask what your plan is?"

"Certainly. We must go as far up as we can, say half way, an' then shove the poor old Furst Moltke on the muffs for good and all. There'll be two islands in the way, but we might manage to lob a long shot or two over 'em into Maldon. After that I propose to land all our bluejackets an' Marines on the nearest bank, march on the town, and storm it as best we can, with the help of the League. The torpedo-boats'll be sent on up the river to pepper the town meanwhile, if they can get as far."

"It sounds all right, but I'm afraid you'd get pipped," said Sam abruptly. "The land on both sides of the estuary is all marsh, cut about by hundreds of dykes. There are big creeks running miles inland from the river as well, to big to ford, an' they'll be guarded with German Maxim guns too. You'd never reach the town with a quarter of your men."

"We've got to do it somehow," said Cavendish, rather sharply. "Have you got a better way, since you don't like mine?"

"Don't get in a bait, old chap! We've seen what you

an do at sea, an' I will say that I don't believe Howard himself could have done better. We've only been lookers-on," said Sam, "Steve and I. But we're at home again here. There isn't an inch of the Blackwater I don't know."

"By gum, I forgot that!" said Cavendish. "Sorry, old chap! What would you do?"

"You say the Furst Moltke can't be saved?"

"She's bound to go down before the sun sets."

"Then run her ashore slap in front of Maldon itself. Pound the German batteries to pieces, an' then chuck our crew straight into the town an' do the rest."

"By the holy poker," exclaimed Cavendish, "do you mean it? You must be off your chump, Sam! Run an iron-lad up that ditch, where even the fishing-boats can hardly float!"

"My boy, this is the very top of the spring tides. It's high water at one o'clock, an' with this wind blowin' there'll be fifteen feet in Collier's Reach, below Maldon. The fifteen-foot channel's a ditch, as you say, windin' through acres of shallower water. But I know every turn in the fairway, an' I'll engage to run the Furst Moltke through clear of Northey Island, so her guns'll bear on Maldon."

"Sam can do it, an' so could I," broke in Stephen, "if we're there in time."

"My only aunt, but I'm glad I brought you fellows with me!" said Cavendish eagerly. "You shall pilot us. What you did with No. 66 in the Swale will be nothing to it."

"There's no room to make mistakes, with a ship like this," said Sam. "One error, an' she'll be stuck in the mud out of range. But we'll lay her through."

"Won't the giddy Dutchmen gape when they see us opposite 'em!" cried Stephen. "There's the mouth of the old river opening now. I say, Bob, when we were here last they'd fairly sown the place with mines."

"Whew! I'll bet they have!" said Cavendish. "Thanks, Steve! Mr. Elcombe, signal the torpedo-boats to go ahead and sweep a clear passage."

Away went the two vessels on their errand. They were powerful craft of the ocean-going type, nearly as big as destroyers. The deep channel leading between the shoals which nearly block the Blackwater's mouth is very narrow, though for miles the shallower water extends on every side. The torpedo-boats dragged the fairway for miles, and with some difficulty cleared away no less than six. They were all mines intended to be fired by a ship striking them, and not by electric current from the shore. Then the torpedo-boats went ahead into the river itself, here nearly two miles wide. In half an hour they signalled that the passage was fairly clear as far as Mersea Island.

The Furst Moltke, which had been waiting with some anxiety outside the bar, now entered. Her leaks were gaining on her, and the strain of the half-crippled engines made her condition worse all the time. It was plain that her end was not far off. But she passed into the great estuary and teamed steadily on past Mersea.

"There's the place where we slammed the German transport steamer into the old ironclad at anchor," said Sam, as the well-remembered spot was passed again.

"What a night that was!" chuckled Stephen. "It seems toly yesterday we fired Ned's punt-gun into the powder-ship off Northey Island yonder, an' nearly got blown out of the water. It ain't so long ago, either."

"You chaps seem to have made hay round here," said Cavendish. "Sam, will you take charge of the steerin' now? I don't know where I am any longer."

The Last of the Furst Moltke.

Sam took his place by the steam steering-gear. It was a strange sight to see a cruiser of the Furst Moltke's size pouring up the narrowing waters of the Maldon River. And from the enemy came no sign.

"They used to have some torpedo-craft in here," said Stephen, "an' several cruisers guardin' the bar."

but "They've none now, or they'd have come out to meet us," said Cavendish. "Every fightin' vessel from all parts was scuttled out for the big battle, unless—no, by George, I can see a gunboat comin' down from beyond the island!"

The masts of a big, shallow-draught river gunboat were seen above Northey, and beyond, yet partly screened as yet, was the grey old town of Maldon, with its church and shipyards. Placed conspicuously at the highest part was the ancient turreted tower of St. Peter's, which for many years had been a town library.

"Keep your eye on that," said Sam. "They use it as a signalling station, an' they can communicate all over the country from it, an' send warnings."

"Right!" said Cavendish, whose glasses were fixed on the tower. "They probably aren't sure yet that we're an enemy—much more likely to take us for a German ship runnin' in for refuge after the fight."

Neither friend nor foe would have easily recognised the Furst Moltke in her present condition. The crippled, battered cruiser threaded her way as quickly as she could through the shoals, guided with the utmost care by Sam. The channel was getting much narrower now, and Collier's Reach, running round Northey Island, was just ahead.

"Can she really go through that gutter?" murmured Cavendish anxiously. "Ready, there, at the guns!"

The German gunboat, which had advanced slowly, making urgent signals, now saw what was wrong. She backed frantically, swung, and, firing a gun, tried to fly back towards the town quays.

Instantly the Furst Moltke's long 9.2 spoke, and the big shell sent the gunboat reeling to the bottom. Immediately afterwards the cruiser came round the inner point of Northey Island, and with the naked eye figures could be seen appearing at the top of St. Peter's tower.

Again the long gun boomed, and the tower collapsed in a cloud of dust and shell-fumes.

"It's a pity," said Cavendish. "But it had to be done. Now then, gunners, give them the curry piping hot!"

The Furst Moltke, in all her majestic, battered bulk, swung round Northey in full view of Maldon town. Over the low spit of Herring Point the whole front of the Hythe came into sight. Up from the cruiser's bridge went a couple of rockets, soaring skywards with a hiss and a roar, to explode like maroons when at their greatest height. It was the signal for the League.

Instantly a whole line of guns along the Hythe and from two batteries on higher ground opened fire on the Furst Moltke, and the small field-shells came smacking round her. Her own heavy batteries replied with a roar and a crash that made the very houses tremble. Then came a slow, deliberate voice up the engine-room tube:

"She's going the noo. The watter's got the upper hand, an' we shall have the boilers blowin' up if she goes lower."

"Stand by to give her her last run! Clap on all speed! You've done grandly, Mac!"

The warship's time had come. Through the thick of the firing she forged ahead with one last, noble effort, and Sam turned her great bows ashore. She took the ground with a heave and a gentle swing, just abreast Herring Point and near the sunken gunboat. And there she stopped dead.

Her guns roared and rattled fiercely, all directed at the German batteries. The shells rained upon her thickly, but the field-guns had no power to harm her.

Cavendish had placed his crew in shelter, and the armour protected them. He was saving them for the final assault. The German batteries were smashed up and demolished with amazing rapidity. It was as though some huge steel fortress had suddenly been planted in front of the town, and the stranded hulk was spouting death upon the enemy from every casemate and barbetta that would bear.

The German troops could be seen mustering on the flanks of the town with desperate haste, and the spiked helmets of the artillerymen went down like grass before a fire. The German guns were far more numerous than Cavendish's, but the heavy naval weapons made mincemeat of the Kaiser's field artillery.

"Ropes over the port side! Ready the rope-ladders! Down gangway! Landing-party stand by!" shouted Cavendish.

Two of the German batteries were now no more than heaps of shattered debris. The third was fast melting away under the devastating shells of the 4.7 guns and the 6 inches. Some rifle-fire was now beginning to concentrate on the ship, but a company of Prussian Jagers that incautiously showed itself close by Heybridge was caught by a 9.2 shell and annihilated. A horse-battery galloping over the bridge shared the same fate, nor could Cavendish's gunners well miss at such range. The Germans seemed hardly to have realised how completely the cruiser had them by the hip. The possibility of such an attack had never occurred to them. A full battalion of Hanovers came hurrying towards the town to stiffen the defence, and in trying to pass over some open ground was met by a blast of grape-shot from Cavendish's big guns that nearly wiped it off the map of Essex.

"I hope to Heaven I sha'n't have to bombard the town!" muttered Cavendish. "That would be a bitter job. The last battery's silenced. Now for it—before they've time to call up the troops! Landing-party, away there!"

Out poured the blue-jackets, and swarmed over the side. Sam had stranded the ship so that her bow surged into the shallow water, and she lay right athwart the channel. The landing-party slid down the ropes and plunged in. Over their heads they soused, but two or three strokes brought

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ANSWERS

"MISS PRISCILLA'S PERIL" Is the Title of the Story which Mr. Martin Clifford has written for next Thursday's Number of The "Gem Library."

them to a footing, and nobody cared how he got ashore, provided he did it.

Stephen was the first to set foot on the shingle, and waved his carbine over his head with a shout. A full two hundred bluejackets and Marines were ashore in less than a minute, and with Cavendish and the brothers at their head—Sam foremost of all—they dashed off towards the town with a ringing cheer.

On the Furst Moltke were left only a dozen men and the gunners. These covered the landing-party with their fire, and the town was soon reached. A sharp musketry-fire met the attackers in the last hundred yards, but they dashed through the gates of the Hythe, which had been blown out by a shell, and into the road beyond.

There they were met by a company of Hanover riflemen, hurrying pell-mell to the spot, with bayonets fixed, and loud shouts of "Hoch!" They were answered by a fierce cheer, and the opposing forces met in a hurdling struggle. It scarcely lasted a minute. The bluejackets and Marines cut their way through and swarmed over their foes, stamping them under and rushing up the hill beyond with hardly a check.

The High Street was reached with the loss of less than twenty men, a sharp rifle-fire greeting them just before they gained the top. They were only just in time, for two Maxims were being wheeled into position with all speed, and to have advanced against those would have meant terrible losses. But the Furst Moltke's crew dashed into the Prussian company that had brought the pair of guns, and in two minutes the sailors had cut up and scattered the Prussians, and had the Maxims in their own possession.

Stephen was knocked flying by a big German who was raging round him with a broken rifle that had already clubbed three men, but the next instant Cavendish's sword was through the German, and Sam, with six sailors, sprang to the captured guns. Unluckily, they could not use them. Somebody had already contrived to fish away the breech-pins.

German soldiers came swarming in from every side, and a pestilence of bullets began to sweep the street. Cavendish's men began to drop fast, and he at once split his force and led half against a Prussian company that had taken him in the rear, while Sam and Stephen led the rest in a charge upon some Jagers who poured out from beyond the church.

The situation looked very critical for the Furst Moltke's men, as a fresh battalion of Germans came up from the Felbridge, and, kneeling, began to sweep the High Street with rifle-fire.

"Where's the League?" gasped Stephen. "If they don't help us soon—"

A crackle of shots and the sound of fierce strife in all directions interrupted him. From the windows of many houses came sharp rifle-firing. The German battalion, in considerable confusion, turned to do battle with some smaller foe behind it. A dull, fierce roar rose throughout the town.

Maldon had risen. The League of Britons were striking their first blow.

How they had kept their secret, and in what manner they had provided themselves with weapons, in that German-ridden town, and remained quiet till the time came, there was no telling. But now they were afoot. They poured out from the houses, and seemed to rise from the very ground itself. Some had rifles, some only knives, or ruder weapons still. On all sides the Germans suddenly found themselves beset by an unexpected peril.

With a fresh cheer, the gallant little landing-party dashed into the fray again, and cut a lane through the disordered Prussian riflemen.

All Maldon was seething like a nest of angry hornets. In every street there was fierce hand-to-hand fighting as the stalwart Essex men rose to take their long-awaited revenge. The Germans were overpowered on every hand.

The work that the Furst Moltke's guns had so far finished by the League, and so swiftly that they had lost the day almost before they realised it. No quarter was given or taken. The Kaiser's men had made it a rule to shoot every civilian taken with arms up to him. Now it was the civilians' turn to pay that grim tax back in the same coin. The Germans, wherever found, were annihilated. In many places the League men were slain down in scores, but by sheer numbers, and being utterly careless of their own lives, they bore down the foe. Every street was thickly strewn with dead.

The Furst Moltke's crew, guided by Sam, made their way with all speed to the west side of the town, where many German guns were in position to defend Maldon on the landward side. Taking these in the rear, the bluejackets made short work of the Prussian artillerymen in charge of the batteries, many of whom fled as that fierce crew was sweeping down upon them. The guns were seized, and stores and ammunition with them.

Maldon was once more in the hands of its own people, and such Germans who remained were flying for their lives. Stephen, running to the tall flagstaff by the artillery static, hauled down the Kaiser's standard hand over hand, and the cheers of the Furst Moltke's men. He crammed it in the muzzle of a twelve-pounder gun, thrust a cartridge in the breech, and, pulling the lanyard, he blew the German colours away across the plain in a thousand fragments; the gun spoke.

To London Again.

"It's been a gorgeous bit of fightin'!" said Cavendish with a sigh of relief, as the company assembled once more in the High Street two-hours later, after a square meal—German service provisions—at the Town Hall. "I'm exactly myself on dry land, but what's a fellow to do when he's got no ship?"

"Good old Furst Moltke! She's done her work," said Stephen; "so have you. What's your next move, Bob?"

"No more. I'm goin' to sit on my tail here an' hold Maldon till all's blue, with my chaps. I've sent the torpedo-boats on to Chatham with the news. There's nothing to fear from the seaward side, Germany havin' no longer a navy, so I'm goin' to take the poor old wreck's big gun out of her, an' mount 'em round the west an' south side. What are you fellows goin' to do?"

"We ought to go on to London as quickly as we can. An' if the torpedo-boats are gone, we must go by land, said Sam.

"My aunt, I didn't know you wanted to clear out, or I'd have left one back."

"We must go, old chap; we've stayed up here too long an' there's work to do yonder. Don't worry about us; we'll find our way through. So you're goin' to hold Maldon. The Germans 'll have a try to recapture it; it's uncommonly important to them."

"Rather! And it depends on you chaps to get through an' raise the League somewhere else, so as to keep the sausage-catin' enemy too busy to pay all their attention to me," said Cavendish. "So fire away an' keep 'em on the jump."

"London's where the business will be, an' jolly quick, too," said Stephen. "They won't be able to spare any men to worry places like this when it happens. Only it'll be very different thing from tacklin' Maldon."

"When d'you mean to go, then?"

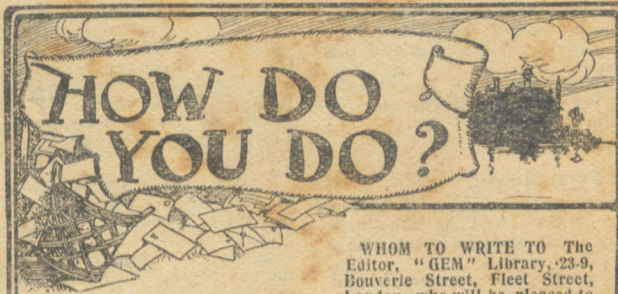
"At once. As soon as I gets a shade darker."

"The Germans are thick between here an' London."

"I don't think we've much to learn about Essex—eh, Steve?" said Sam.

"We'll worry through somehow. Give us some emergency rations, an' we'll start."

(Another long instalment of the thrilling serial next week.)



HOW DO YOU DO?

WHOM TO WRITE TO The Editor, "GEM" Library, 23-9, Bouverie Street, Fleet Street, London, who will be pleased to hear from you.

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The Editor