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by
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THE LEADER OF THE NEW HOUSE.

A Splendid, Long, Complete
School Tale of
TOM MERRY & CO.

BY

MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.

A Question of Celebrating.

"PEWWAPS—"
"We shall want you four chaps," said Tom Merry thoughtfully.
"Pewwaps—"
"With Lowther, Manners, and myself, that will make seven—"
"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"
"Then Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn, of the New House make ten."
"Weally—"
"Dry up a minute, Gussy. The question is, who's to be the eleventh chap," said Tom Merry, knitting his brows.
"We want the strongest side we can get to play Greyfriars."
"What-ho!" said Blake.
"Weally—"
"Kangaroo is a jolly good bat, and Clifton Dane a good bowler, and young Reilly is first chop in the field," said Tom Merry. "We can really only tell which chap we want after putting the side through some more practice."
"Exactly."
"Pewwaps—"
"It's a curious thing," remarked Tom Merry, of the Shell, looking round the Fourth Form Study, No. 6, into which he had stepped to discuss cricket matters with the chums of the Fourth—it's a very curious thing, kids, that one can't discuss anything, without Gussy always coming in as a sort of chorus."
"Ha, ha, ha!"
"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"
"If ever you start a subscription in the School House to y Gussy a gag, you can put me down for twopence," said m Merry.
"Hear, hear!"
Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of the Fourth Form,

familiarly known as Gussy, adjusted a gold-rimmed monocle, and gave the hero of the Shell a scornful glance through it.

D'Arcy's look started at Tom Merry's feet, and slowly progressed upwards to his head, till it reached the curly hair that never would obey the brush.

Then it descended again to Tom Merry's feet with equal slowness and deliberation.

Tom Merry certainly ought to have been utterly crushed by that deadly stare, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy certainly expected it.

But the hero of the Shell never turned a hair.

He grinned at the swell of St. Jim's in the most self-possessed way in the world.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—" said D'Arcy, at last.

"Now, look here, Gussy—"

"I wegard you as an ass."

"Yes?"

"And a wottah!"

"Go hon!"

"And a wank outsiders!"

"Hear, hear!"

"And a feahful boundah!"

"Hurray!"

Arthur Augustus got it up. There was evidently no getting through the equanimity of the hero of the Shell.

"And now Gussy has finished his display of politeness to a guest, we'll get on with the washing," said Tom Merry cheerfully.

Arthur Augustus started.

He had forgotten for the moment that Tom Merry was a guest in Study No. 6.

"Bai Jove!" he ejaculated.

"No, don't begin again, Gussy," said Blake.

"Weally, Blake—"

"When the match comes off—" began Tom Merry, who,

A DOUBLE-LENGTH TALE OF TOM MERRY NEXT THURSDAY.

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"Groo!" gasped Jack Blake. "Ooooooh!"

of celebrating his birthday, of course, the School House will have to celebrate it too, and on a bigger scale," said Blake positively. "That's a dead cert."

"I should wathah think so."

"We wouldn't let the New House score over us, if it was a question of celebrating the birthday of Mrs. Mimms's tabby cat," said Blake.

"Hear, hear!"

"Well, that's all right," said Tom Merry, with a nod. "Of course, a chap in my Form can't take much interest in Fourth Form matters."

"A chap in your Form will jolly soon take a thick ear from a Fourth Form fist, if he doesn't cheese it," said Blake warmly.

"Yaas, wathah! I suggest givin' Tom Mewwy a feahful thwashin' for his cheek."

"But is the news correct?" asked Digby dubiously. "How does Gussy know that the New House bounders are going to celebrate Lathom's birthday?"

"Yes, how do you know, Gussy?"

"It takes a fellow of tact and judgment to ascertain these things," said Arthur Augustus loftily. "It's wathah fortunate for the School House that I'm lookin' aftah the honah of the House, while you chaps are chattewin' about a cwicket match that won't come off till next week."

"Get on with the washing, ass!"

"I wefuse to be called an ass."

"How do you know Figgins is celebrating Lathom's birthday, you frabjous ass?" shrieked Blake.

"I wefuse—"

"Bump him!"

"Hold on, deah boys. I shall be vevy pleased to explain. I had it from Mellish."

"Mellish," said Blake, with a sniff. No one in Study No. 6 liked the cad of the Fourth Form. "How did Mellish know?"

"Well, you know Mellish does genewally know things, you know."

"He's a spying, listening beast!"

"Yaas, but you know he usually does know, you know."

"He may have been rotting."

"He would hardly venture to wot me," said D'Arcy, with dignity. "I should give him a feahful thwashin'. Besides, he told me he knew the New House boundahs had a wheeze on, and offahed to tell me for a shillin'. I gave him a shillin', and if the news wasn't twue, Mellish would be a swindlah. Therefore—"

"Therefore the news is true," said Blake solemnly.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Good! There can't be any doubt on the subject," said Blake. "Still, to make assurance doubly sure, we'll get at Mellish and bump the facts out of him."

"Good egg!" said Tom Merry.

"If the New House is getting up any show, we're going

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to muck it up, of course," said Blake. "That goes without saying. We can't have the New House pretending to be cock-house at St. Jim's."

"Wathah not."

"Besides, there can be only one celebration, and that's going to be a School House celebration," said Blake. "Moreover, Lathom is really a School House chap, as he has his study in the School House."

"Of course."

"It's like the cheek of those New House bounders to celebrate our Form-master's birthday," said Blake, growing warm.

"Well, he's their Form-master, too," remarked Tom Merry.

"What on earth's that got to do with it?"

"Well, you see—"

"If you're going to stand up for those cheeky New House wasters, Tom Merry—"

"I'm not," said Tom Merry, laughing. "I'm with you in putting down the New House, anyway. We'll find out exactly what Figgins & Co. are going to do—"

"And squash it."

"Exactly! Then we'll get up a rival show that would knock the New House sky-high, anyway—"

"Good! I suppose you Shell fellows will back us up, for the honour of the House?" said Jack Blake.

"Yes, rather! Look here," said Tom Merry. "It's got to be kept dark—Figgins & Co. are keeping their wheeze dark. You fellows come to my study to tea, and we'll all be there and talk it over, and settle what form the celebration is to take."

"Good!"

"Jollay good, deah boy."

"And first we'll find Mellish, and bump out the exact facts," said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"About the cricket—"

"Oh, blow the cricket!" said Blake. "There's lots of time for that. We can settle about the cricket after we've settled the New House."

"Oh, all right!" said Tom Merry, laughing. "Come on!"

And the juniors left the study in search of Mellish.

CHAPTER 3.

The Cricketers.

"WELL bowled!"

"Bravo, Wynn!"

Afternoon school was over, and a crowd of the juniors of the New House were at practice at the nets.

Figgins & Co.—Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn—were hard at work, with a dozen other Fourth-Formers belonging to the New House.

For though, when the junior school eleven was formed to play other schools, New House and School House joined together loyally; at other times they were generally at war, and nowhere more keenly than on the playing-fields.

Whether the School House was really top at cricket, as the School House claimed, or whether the New House was top, as the New House claimed, was a point that had never been decided, and probably never would be decided.

Certain it was that each House claimed to be cock-house at St. Jim's, and laughed to scorn the claim of its rival.

Whereby the fellows played harder, and sometimes fought harder, than they would otherwise have done, and the keen House rivalry made for better form on both sides. And if a few hard knocks were exchanged occasionally, what did that matter? The St. Jim's fellows were not "soft." And there never was any real ill-feeling at the bottom of their endless disputes; as was shown by the loyal way they would back one another up against the Grammar School at Rylcombe, or any other outside foe.

But to take a rise out of the fellows of the other House was the ambition of nearly every junior at St. Jim's, and that generally made things lively.

For the sake of scoring over the other House the juniors would, as Blake had said, have celebrated the birthday of the House-dame's tabby cat.

But the School House really felt that they had more claim to celebrate Mr. Lathom's birthday than the rival House had.

For two-thirds, or nearly, of the Fourth Form boarded in the School House, and the Form-master himself had his residence in that House, where the accommodation was much more extensive.

Hence, according to Blake & Co., Mr. Lathom was really a School House master; a claim that Figgins & Co. would have laughed to scorn.

Figgins & Co. were playing cricket now to get themselves THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 119.

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into form for the match with Greyfriars that was coming off the following week, and also for a House match that was looming ahead, when they hoped to knock the School House juniors into the middle of the next century, or thereabouts.

And their doings on the cricket-pitch showed that a long spell of football had not unfitted them for the great summer game.

Fatty Wynn, the champion junior bowler of St. Jim's, was in great form.

He had just taken Pratt's wicket, and so neatly that the fellows standing round the field burst into a cheer.

"Hurray! Well bowled!"

"Bravo, Fatty!" said Figgins enthusiastically. "You're as dead as ever. Blessed if I don't stand you a ginger-pop for that!"

"Come on, then," said Wynn.

"After the play, though," grinned Figgins.

"Oh!"

"Here come the School House rotters," remarked Kerr.

"Play up, kids, and show 'em what they've got to expect when the House match comes off."

"What-ho!" grinned the New House juniors.

And Fatty Wynn bowled again.

Tom Merry & Co. had come down to the cricket ground in search of Mellish. The cad of the Fourth was not to be found in the School House.

He was not likely to be playing cricket, certainly; but he was just the kind of fellow to be smoking cheap cigarettes behind the pavilion.

"Let's look at the kids playing," said Jack Blake, in a patronising tone, loud enough for the New House cricketers to hear.

"Yes, it's amusing," said Tom Merry.

"Funny!" remarked Monty Lowther.

"Odd!" said Manners

"I wegard it as funny, deah boys."

"Yes, it's as good as a circus."

"They call this cricket, you know," said Herries. "I could teach my bulldog to play cricket like that."

"I should think so," remarked Digby. "Good joke—eh?"

"Unconscious humour," said Kangaroo, otherwise Harry Noble. "That's what I've always noticed in New House cricket—unconscious humour."

The New House players heard every word, and their ears burned.

"Go it, Fatty!" said Figgins, making a great effort to appear perfectly unconscious of the caustic remarks of the School House fellows.

Kerr was at the wicket now, and Fatty Wynn bowled to him.

Kerr was a very good batsman, but Fatty Wynn was a first-class bowler, and Figgins often said proudly that he would make a good many county batsmen look sick, if he got a chance on a county ground some day.

Kerr had no chance against the ball Fatty Wynn sent down. Fatty meant to show what he could do to make the School House lookers-on sing smaller.

Crash!

The balls flew far and wide, and Kerr grinned comically at his wrecked wicket.

"How's that?" grinned Figgins.

And he gave a triumphant glance at the group of School House fellows.

But if Figgins, in the innocence of his heart, expected them to be silenced by that fine bowling, he was woefully mistaken.

The School House juniors chose to consider it a display of bad batting, instead of fine bowling.

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as captain of the junior eleven, placed cricket matters before all other matters whatsoever. "When——"

"Pway allow me to speak."

"Chorus again!" groaned Blake.

"Pway dwy up, Blake. I owe Tom Mewwy an apology,"

said Arthur Augustus, in his most stately way. "I had allowed the fact to escape my recollection for a moment that he was a visitah in this studay. Therefore, I owe him an apology for havin' uttahn my opinion of him in that weckless way."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I can see no cause whatevah for wibald laughtah, Hewwies."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Pway shut up, Dig. Tom Mewwy, I withdwaw the oppwobious epithets I applied to you, as you are a visitah to this studay, on the distinct undahstandin that if you were not a visitah to this studay, I should not withdwaw them."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Go hon!"

"I wegard this mewwiment as in the worst of taste. I will now wesume the mattah I was speakin' of when Tom Mewwy intewwupted me with his silly cwicket. Pewwaps——"

"Cheese it, Gussy!"

"Pewwaps——"

"My only hat!" ejaculated Blake. "Isn't he like a giddy gramophone? Why don't you change the record, Gussy?"

"Weally, you ass——"

"The Greyfriars match is next week," Tom Merry remarked. "We shall have to get up a good deal of practice at the nets. You see——"

"Pewwaps——"

"Shut up!" roared Blake, Herries, and Digby together.

Arthur Augustus calmly turned his monocle upon them.

"Weally, deah boys——"

"Order!"

"I wefuse to ordah—I mean——"

"Ring off!"

"I decline to wing off. I have somethin' to say——"

"Rats!"

"I have somethin'——!"

"Rubbish!"

"To say——"

"Bosh!"

"Of great importance——"

"Order!"

"And I am bound to say it, you know."

"We're all going out in a few minutes," said Blake severely. "You'll have the study to yourself then, and you can say what you like."

"Weally, Blake——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Pewwaps——"

"There he is, perhaps again!" exclaimed Digby, exasperated. "Isn't he like the giddy little brook—he goes on for ever?"

"Yaas, you see——"

"Shut up!"

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort. Pewwaps——"

"If he says perhaps again, collar him and bump him," exclaimed Blake.

"Pewwaps——"

"There he goes! Collar him!"

"Ow! Hands off! I wefuse to be collahed! Yah!"

D'Arcy refused to be collared, but his refusal did not count for very much, for the exasperated chums of Study No. 6 collared him all the same.

He was whirled over, and Blake gave the word to bump him.

"Bump him—hard!"

"What ho!"

"Go it!" said Tom Merry.

"Ow! Bai Jove!"

"Another!"

"I wefuse to be bumped! Ow!"

"Once more!"

"Oh!"

"Now will you ring off, you frabjous gramophone?"

"Certainly not."

"Once more! All together!"

"Ow!"

"Now, then, Gussy——"

"By the way," exclaimed Tom Merry, struck by a sudden new idea, "it's barely possible, you know, that he may have something sensible to say. Suppose we let him say it instead of bumping him?"

"By Jove!" said Blake. "I didn't think of that."

"Ow!"

"We can give him a time-limit of two minutes," said Tom Merry, taking out his watch. "Now, then, Gussy, say away."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"You've got only two minutes."

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus staggered to his feet.

He was feeling very rumpled, and very dusty, and very breathless. He groped for his eyeglass, and found it, and jammed it into his right eye, and gave the chums of the Fourth a withering glare.

"I wegard you as a set of wottahs," he said.

"Go hon!"

"Yaas, wotten wascally boundahs!"

"Hear, hear!"

"I wegard you——"

"One minute's gone," said Tom Merry.

"Weally, you know——"

"And ten seconds."

"Tom Mewwy——"

"And twenty seconds——"

"I wefuse to huwvy——"

"Half a minute left."

"Oh, vevy well! Pewwaps——"

"Good. He's got to perhaps again," said Blake. "Now he's at the starting-point."

"Pewwaps——"

"We've had that," said Digby.

"Pewwaps——"

"My only hat! Isn't he like a giddy parrot?"

"Pewwaps——"

"Time's up!" said Tom Merry, putting his watch back in his pocket. "And I'm blessed if I can see anything important in your standing there like a silly ass and repeating the word perhaps ad lib."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, I have not finished——"

"Your mistake; you have."

"I have not weally begun——"

"The perhapses were only a prelude, I suppose," said Blake.

"You were intewwuptin' me all the time," said Arthur Augustus indignantly. "I——"

"Order!"

"I insist——"

"Ring off!"

"Oh, vevy well, if you pwefer the New House to score on this occasion, I will go ovah the way and tell Figgins & Co. my ideah!" said D'Arcy crushingly.

"What?" said Tom Merry.

"Eh?" said Blake. "What's that?"

"Pewwaps——"

"Stop it!" shrieked Blake.

"Pewwaps——"

"Cheese it!"

"Pewwaps you fellows have forgotten that it is our Form-master's birthday to-morrow," said D'Arcy victoriously, "and that we ought to get up some celebration. I know the New House chaps are goin' to—and my ideah is that the School House ought to put them in the shade, you know."

"Oh!" said Blake.

"Pewwaps——"

"Stop!"

"Pewwaps you will admit now that it is a mattah of great importance," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with chilling dignity.

CHAPTER 2.

For the Honour of the House.

TOM MERRY grinned. As he was in the Shell, the next Form above the Fourth, the birthday of a Fourth Form-master was not a matter of great importance to him. It was not really of the first importance to the Fourth-Formers themselves, but things had been quiet lately, and they were in a humour to celebrate something. Besides, they all liked little Mr. Lathom; he was a popular master.

"Blessed if I can see the importance," said Tom Merry, with a yawn. "Now, if it were the birthday of the master of the Shell——"

"Rats!" said three voices; and a fourth added: "Wats!"

"You see, there would be some sense in celebrating that, but as for a Fourth Form-master——"

"If you want to go out of the study on your neck, Tom Merry, you may as well say so at once," said Blake darkly.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Of course, Lathom has had birthdays before, and no comets were seen," Blake remarked. "But he's a jolly little chap. I've always believed in backing up Lathom."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"My idea is that if a master behaves himself, and plays the game, fellows ought to back him up," said D'Arcy generously.

"Hear, hear!"

"And if Figgins & Co. of the New House are thinking

"My hat!" said Blake, looking round. "That's what they call batting."

"Oh, no, Kerr was being funny," said Digby.

"Yes, he was—but he didn't mean to, did you, Kerr?"

Kerr snorted.

"More unconscious humour," grinned Kangaroo.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You School House rotters!" roared Figgins, growing scarlet. "Come and see if you could stand up against Wynn's bowling, that's all."

"My dear chap—"

"Yah! You couldn't."

"You're all gas!" snorted Kerr. "Come and face the bowling."

"Oh, all right," said Blake. "Blessed if I don't show them how to bat. Lend me your gloves and a bat."

"Here you are!"

And Blake went to the wicket.

Whereat Figgins & Co. grinned. Blake was a fine junior batsman, but the New House had the fullest confidence in the powers of Fatty Wynn.

So had Fatty Wynn.

He smiled sweetly as he grasped the ball, and prepared to send down a regular scorcher.

Jack Blake winked at his friends, who responded with encouraging grins.

"Play!"

Down came the ball!

Blake swiped at it—or, rather, at the place where he thought it was, but the gleaming willow swept only the empty air.

Crash!

And the wicket was down.

Blake swung round and gazed at his ruined wicket with a curious expression on his face. Figgins burst into a roar.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"My hat!" murmured Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the New House juniors.

And Tom Merry & Co. laughed, too. After the way Blake had gone to the wicket, it was rather comic to see the expression on his face.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, rats!" said Blake, coming off the ground. "Take the bat yourself, Tom Merry, and you won't have anything to snigger at."

"Yes, take it!" grinned Figgins.

"Oh, all right!"

Tom Merry stood up at the wicket. Fatty Wynn sent down a ball with a wonderful twist on it, and Tom Merry stopped it by the skin of his teeth, so to speak.

"Good!" said Figgins sarcastically. "Give him another, Fatty."

"What-ho!"

The second ball from Fatty wiped out Tom Merry's middle stump, and the hero of the Shell retired from the wicket, amid the chuckles of the New House.

"What price New House cricket, now?" grinned Figgins.

"Jolly good," said Tom Merry heartily, "and I'm jolly glad to see Fatty shaping like this. What a giddy rod in pickle for Greyfriars when we meet them."

And Figgins chuckled again.

"Yes, rather!"

And when the New House practice was over, Fatty Wynn was carried off to the school shop by half a dozen admiring chums, and fed up with buns and ginger-beer to an extent that would have made anybody but the New House Falstaff ill for a week.

CHAPTER 4. On the Track.

"MELLISH!"

"Here he is!"

"Hallo, Mellish! We want you!"

"Smoking!"

"The rotter!"

Mellish of the Fourth started to his feet in alarm.

He had chosen a quiet corner behind the pavilion to indulge in the forbidden luxury of a cigarette, and he was startled by a whole crowd of juniors suddenly bursting upon him there.

Tom Merry & Co. had been looking for him for half an hour, and they had found him at last, very much as they had expected to find him.

Mellish started up so suddenly that the cigarette he had snatched from his mouth rolled into his sleeve.

He gave a yelp as it began to burn him, and shook his sleeve frantically to make it fall out. But the cigarette was lodged in the shirt sleeve somehow, and refused to fall out.

"Ow, ow, oh!"

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, putting up

his eyeglass, and surveying the cad of the Fourth in great astonishment. "What is the chap doin' that for?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ow!"

"Is that a new system of gymnastics, Mellish, deah boy?"

"Yow!"

"Pway what's the mattah?"

"Ow! I'm being burned!" gasped the unhappy smoker; and he tore off his jacket frantically.

"Yow! Groo!"

"Bai Jove!"

Mellish hurled his jacket to the ground, and groped in his shirt sleeve for the cigarette, and extracted it.

Then he gasped for breath, very red and flustered.

"Serve you jolly well right," said Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah! You are bweakin' a most important wule of the school, Mellish, deah boy, and I wegard you as a cad."

"Oh, shut up!" growled Mellish. "You never break any rules, of course."

"Not in a caddish way," said Blake angrily. "You ought to have a licking."

"Yaas, wathah! Suppose we bump him!"

"Look here—" began Mellish, in alarm.

"We want to ask you a question," said Tom Merry contemptuously. "You told Gussy that Figgins & Co. were getting up some celebration for Mr. Lathom's birthday to-morrow."

"Yes," said Mellish suddenly.

"How do you know?"

"I happened to find out."

"We want to know exactly how you happened to find out," said Tom Merry. "Go ahead!"

Mellish looked sulky.

"I don't see why I should tell you," he said.

"I'll explain. If you don't, we shall bump you till we get at the facts," Tom Merry said. "You savvy?"

Mellish made a movement as if to run, but the juniors were round him in a moment. They did not touch him, but surrounded him so that his escape was cut off.

Mellish looked round in growing alarm.

He was the most unpopular fellow in the School House, even more unpopular than Knox, the prefect, and he began to anticipate a ragging.

"Look here, let me alone—" he began.

"Oh, don't be afraid! You're not going to be hurt, if you tell the truth," said Tom Merry scornfully. "We just want to be sure that you've given it straight to Gussy, that's all."

"Well, I—I was standing outside the window of the gym., and I happened to hear Figgins and Kerr talking!" stammered Mellish.

"You happen to hear a lot of things, don't you," said Blake, with a curling lip.

"Well, you see—"

"And what sort of a celebration are they going to make?" asked Lowther.

"Something in the amateur theatrical line, I believe—some sort of a show they're going to give, and ask Lathom to it."

"Bai Jove!"

"Well, we can easily beat them there," said Digby.

"When it comes to giving theatrical shows, we're ahead of the New House."

"Same as in everything else," said Blake.

"Especially cricket!" grinned Kangaroo.

And Blake blushed.

"We'll jolly well give a bigger show, and knock them sky-high," said Lowther. "We—"

He broke off as Tom Merry made a sign of silence.

Mellish had pricked up his ears to listen. The cad of the Fourth had little House loyalty, and he was quite capable of giving the game away to Figgins & Co. if he felt so inclined, or if the New House fellows made it worth his while.

"Come on!" said Tom Merry abruptly.

And the chums walked away.

They stopped at the end of the pavilion, Mellish not venturing to follow them, though he looked after them with eyes that scintillated with spite.

"There's no telling whether Mellish is lying or not," said Tom Merry. "I think he's telling the truth in this case, but we can't be sure."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We shall have to do some scouting, and find out."

"Bai Jove!"

"Don't interrupt, Gussy. We—"

"Bai Jove!"

"Shut up, ass! I—"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Cheese it!" exclaimed Blake. "We've got to discuss this, and settle something. We can't listen to you talking all day, Gussy."

"Weally, Blake——"
 "Now to come to bizney——"
 "I was twyin' to point out——"
 "Dry up!"
 "That Kerr and Figgins——"
 "Eh?"
 "Have just gone by towards the gates," said D'Arcy, "and Kerr was cawwiny' a big bag. It looks to me as if there is something on."
 "You ass! Why didn't you say so before?" exclaimed Blake, somewhat unreasonably.
 "Why, I was twyin' to——"
 "Oh, rats! Where are they?"
 "They have disapeahed now."
 "Br-r-r! Sure you didn't dream it?" asked Kangaroo.
 D'Arcy jammed his monocle into his eye, and surveyed the Cornstalk scornfully.
 "Weally, Kangawoo——"
 "If they've gone out, we'd better scout after them," said Tom Merry decidedly, "as I'm the best scout in the party——"
 "Weally, Tom Mewwy——"
 "I'll go——"
 "What is wequird for scoutin' is a fellow of tact and judgment. I had bettah go——"
 "Oh, go and eat coke!"
 "It's really a Fourth-Form matter, so I'll go," said Blake.
 "You can come, Tom Merry, and as Gussy spotted the bounders, perhaps we ought to let him in."
 "I should wefuse——"

"You other chaps spot the rest of the bounders, if they follow," said Blake. "I shouldn't wonder if it was a rehearsal, and in that case we come out strong."
 "Yaas, watah!"
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 And Tom Merry and Blake and D'Arcy hurried off towards the gates. They had nearly reached them when D'Arcy suddenly halted.

"Bai Jove!" he ejaculated.
 "What's the matter now?"
 "I think it extwemely pwob. that those chaps are makin' for the woods——"
 "Most likely."
 "In that case, as we may have to cweep aftah them in scoutin', it would be bettah for me to go back and change my toppah for a cap."
 "Go back and change it for a gladstone-bag, if you like."
 "Weally, Blake——"
 "Buck up!"

Tom Merry and Blake ran for the gates. D'Arcy hesitated a moment, and then ran after them.
 "I say, deah boys, wait for me."
 "Rats!"
 "I sha'n't keep you waitin' more than ten minutes."
 "Ha, ha!"
 "I think I can see us waiting ten minutes while Gussy changes his topper," Blake remarked, with a chuckle.
 And Tom Merry chuckled, too.

The School House juniors ran out into the lane, and there, sure enough, were Figgins and Kerr, striding down in the direction of the village of Rylcombe.

As the School House fellows caught sight of them they disappeared into the wood at the side of the lane.

"Come on!" exclaimed Tom Merry.
 He ran after the disappearing couple, and Blake ran after him. D'Arcy ran after them, and a gust of wind caught his silk hat and whirled it off his head.

"Pway stop a minute, deah boys!" he called out.
 The dear boys did not stop.
 They dashed into the wood, and D'Arcy ran back after his topper. He was three or four minutes catching that topper, and by the time he had caught it and dusted it and brushed it, Tom Merry and Blake had long been out of sight.

"Bai Jove! What awful wotahs!" muttered Arthur Augustus, as he scanned the lane up and down through his eyeglass for the two juniors. "They have actually gone on and left me behind! I weward it as absolutely wotten! Howevah, I will find them."

And D'Arcy climbed over the stile and entered the wood, too.

CHAPTER 5.
 The Rehearsal.

"Q U I E T!" whispered Tom Merry.
 "Eh?"
 "I said quiet."
 "I know you did. What I want to know is what you said it for," said Jack Blake aggressively.
 "Oh, don't rot now!"
 "Look here——"
 "Quiet!"

"If you're looking for a thick ear——"
 There was a rustle in the wood, and Blake stopped short. Tom Merry caught him by the shoulder, and dragged him away into the thickets.
 A minute later a junior came down the footpath through the wood.
 It was French of the Shell, a New House fellow.
 He had a bag in his hand, and he walked on past the thicket where the School House juniors had taken cover without a suspicion that they were there.

Tom Merry and Blake made no sound. Blake did not need telling to be quiet now.
 French passed on and vanished.
 "It's a meeting, you see," murmured Tom Merry. "I——"
 "Quiet!"
 "Eh?"

"Don't make a row!" grinned Blake, in his turn. "Do you want to alarm them——"
 "Look here——"
 "Oh, quiet!"

Tom Merry grinned.
 "Cheese it!" he said. "Let's get on. It's a rendezvous of some kind in the wood, and the New House bounders are all meeting there."
 "I think so."

"I suppose it's a giddy rehearsal. Anyway, we're jolly well going to know what it is."
 "Yes, rather! Come on, and quiet."
 "Oh, rats!"

The School House scouts threaded their way through the wood. Again they had to take cover at the sight of a New House junior. It was Pratt of the Fourth this time, and he was carrying a bag, too.

"Halt!" muttered Tom Merry.
 "Right-ho!"
 The School House scouts stopped. They were on the edge of an open glade in the wood, into which the afternoon May sun warmly fell.

A group of juniors stood in full view in the glade, and it was time for the scouts to stop.

Tom Merry and Blake, deep in cover in the flowering thickets and ferns, looked upon the scene before them with keen interest.

They had tracked down Figgins and Kerr.
 Both of them were in the glade with French and Pratt, and several other New House fellows, who had evidently approached the rendezvous by different paths.

Fatty Wynn was not to be seen.
 "This is the giddy meeting-place," murmured Tom Merry.
 "Yes, rather! Don't make a row."

Tom Merry smiled, and watched in silence. Since he had made that unfortunate remark to Blake about being quiet the Fourth-Former evidently meant never to let the subject rest again.

"We're all here, I think?"
 It was Figgins's voice.
 "Wynn hasn't turned up," said Kerr.

Figgins uttered an impatient exclamation.
 "The fat duffer! I suppose he's stopped at the tuckshop."
 "Most likely."

"I oughtn't to have lost sight of him. Well, we shall have to get on without him, that's all," said Figgins.
 "We can do that," said Pratt.

"We can't possibly lose time, as the performance comes off to-morrow," said Figgins anxiously. "We've got to get through a dress rehearsal now."
 "Yes, rather!"

"It was my idea to have it out here in the wood, where there's no danger of being interrupted by those School House bounders," said Figgins, "but I wish I'd kept an eye on Fatty Wynn. How are we to play 'Julius Cæsar' without Julius?"
 "It's all right," said Kerr. "I've got all the cues in my head."

"Well, we've got to dress first, anyway," said Pratt.
 "Yes; get out the things."

Tom Merry and Blake exchanged glances and grins.
 They were crouching in the thickets on the very edge of the glade, not a dozen paces from the New House juniors, who did not suspect their presence for a moment.

Half a dozen bags had been dumped down in the grass within six yards of Tom Merry, and these the New House juniors now proceeded to open.

The two School House fellows hardly dared to breathe while they were so near.

Figgins was grinning serenely. He was evidently well satisfied with his scheme for stealing a march on the School House.
 The glade in the wood was a very solitary spot, and the rehearsal there was not likely to be discovered or interrupted, Figgins thought.



"If you please, sir," said Blake, "many happy returns of the day."

"Thank you!" said Mr. Lathom. "I did not know you were aware that it was my birthday, my dear boys,"

At St. Jim's it would be liable to interruption from the enemy, and in any case could hardly be kept a secret.

The School House fellows would discover that there was "something on," and would set themselves to discover what it was and baffle it.

On a famous occasion previously, when Figgins & Co. had planned to give a great concert, the School House fellows had got wind of it, and had actually bagged the programme and given the concert themselves beforehand, completely knocking the New House plans into a cocked hat.

Figgins was determined that nothing of that sort should ever happen again.

And, indeed, but for the chance that had put the School House scouts on the track, Figgins would have carried out his plans without raising a single suspicion "over the way."

Tom Merry and Blake watched, and enjoyed the situation. From the crammed bags the make-up and costumes of the New House Amateur Dramatic Society were turned out in a heap on the grass.

Figgins & Co. had provided themselves well. Besides their own "properties," there was a quantity of stage "props," hired from the costumier in Rylcombe, for the special purpose of playing "Julius Caesar."

"Well, that's all right, and no mistake!" remarked French.

"What-ho!" said Jimson emphatically.

"When is that fat duffer coming—"

"Hallo, Figgy!"

"Oh, here you are, are you?" exclaimed Figgins, turning to greet his fat chum far from graciously. "Where have you been?"

"I've been—been coming, you know."

Fatty Wynn had a shiny complexion and a smear of jam on his face. Figgins snorted.

"You've been in the tuckshop."

"Well, you see—"

"I told you to buck up."

"I did buck up," said Fatty Wynn. "I only stayed for a pork pie and a half-dozen buns, and a few tarts—"

"Oh, rats!"

"And a few cream puffs, and some meringues, and—"

"Dry up!"

"And some biscuits and apples."

"Go hon!" said Kerr. "You must be awfully hungry now."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I'm rather peckish. If any of you fellows has any toffee in his pocket—"

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By
MARTIN CLIFFORD.

NEXT
THURSDAY:

"THE TERRIBLE THREE'S COMMITTEE."

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Or any chocolate—chocolate's very filling—"
 "Shut up, Fatty! Get into your things."
 "But—"
 "Shut up!" roared Figgins.
 And Fatty Wynn subsided into silence, with an injured expression on his plump face. He felt that he had not had the reception he deserved after the way he had exercised moderation at the tuckshop.
 "You're Julius Caesar," said Kerr. "A jolly fat Julius Caesar, too, but that can't be helped. Get off those Etons."
 "Oh, all right!"

The New House juniors stripped off their outer garments and donned those of the characters they were to represent in the dress rehearsal.

Tom Merry and Blake watched in silence. The juniors left their clothes lying by the bags in a little heap, and retired into the middle of the glade for the rehearsal.

Kerr had a book in his hand—Kerr was always prompter in the theatrical rehearsals of the New House juniors.

Kerr was the son of an actor, and an actor himself, and his impersonations had caused a great deal of laughter and amusement at St. Jim's, and sometimes enabled the New House to score over the rival establishment.

What opinion Kerr had of the acting of the other fellows was not known—perhaps he was too polite to let it be known. "Now, then," said Figgins, "you've all got to be jolly careful in this rehearsal. It's the last before the performance. I hope you've all mugged up your parts all right. I've kept you at it, anyway."

"I think I'm pretty strong," said Pratt.
 "So am I," said French.
 "Good! I hope you are. The performance has got to be a big success, or we sha'n't score after all. If we celebrate Lathom's birthday with a giddy entertainment that makes the kids grin the School House will have the laugh of us."
 "We'll make it go all right, Figgy."
 "Well, go ahead!"

And the juniors went ahead. In the thicket on the edge of the glade Tom Merry and Blake watched them as they flourished about in ancient Roman costume and spouted the lines.

A sudden gleam of fun darted into Tom Merry's eyes. He grasped Blake's arm.
 The Fourth-Former looked round at him.
 "Quiet!" he whispered.
 Tom Merry chuckled softly.
 "I say, Blake—"
 "Hold your row!"
 "But I say—"
 "Cheese it!"
 "I've got an idea, you ass—a screaming wheeze!"
 "Oh—go ahead, then!"

Tom Merry made a gesture towards the heap of clothes within a few feet of them. Blake stared for a moment, then, as the idea penetrated his mind, he gave a suppressed gurgle, and rolled over in the fern in a silent paroxysm of mirth.

CHAPTER 6.
 Tom Merry's Raid.

"H, gorgeous!"
 "Quiet!"
 "Ripping!"
 "Don't make a row!"
 Blake sat up, almost suffocating.
 "Who's making a row?" he grunted. "I'm quiet—but let me smile! Let me gurgle! Oh, how frabjous!"
 Tom Merry grinned.

"Fancy taking away their duds, and leaving 'em to go home as Julius Cæsar & Co.!" chuckled Blake. "Oh, my hat!"

"What-ho!"
 "Fancy the surprise of the cheerful youth of Rylcombe, when they see them in the lane."
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Fancy the faces of the chaps at St. Jim's, when Julius Cæsar & Co. turn up in broad daylight."

"My word!"
 "And fancy Figgins's chivvy when he finds his togs gone, and knows that he'll have to go back to the school in costume!"

"Oh, don't!" moaned Tom Merry. "I shall shriek in a minute!"

Blake rolled in the grass helplessly. From the rehearsers in the glade came the rich, rolling tones of Fatty Wynn, in the character of Julius Cæsar.

"Let me have about me men that are fat!"
 And the other rehearsers giggled. That speech seemed to come rather peculiarly from Fatty Wynn.

Julius Cæsar glared at the company.
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"What are you glaring about?" he demanded.
 "Oh, nothing!" said Pratt. "Get on!"
 "Look here—"
 "Get on!" said Kerr.
 Fatty Wynn snorted and got on.

"Let me have about me men that are fat, Fat-headed men, and such as sleep o' nights—"
 "Hold on!" gasped Kerr.

"What's the matter?"
 "It's not fat-headed men, you frabjous ass! If you bring out a line like that to-morrow you'll muck up the whole show. It's sleek-headed men!"

Fatty Wynn looked doubtful.
 "I remember it as fat-headed men," he remarked, with a shake of the head.

"Ass!"
 "Look here, Kerr—"
 "Make it sleek-headed men!" exclaimed Figgins impatiently. "Kerr is stage-manager, and it's no good bucking against the decisions of the referee. Play the game!"

"Oh, all right!" said Fatty Wynn. "I believe Shakespeare wrote fat-headed men, though—it agrees better with the first line."

"Shut up, and get on!"
 "How's he to get on if he shuts up?" asked French.
 "Don't be funny now, French. Go on, Fatty!"

"Oh, all right! Lemme see—did you say weak-headed or sleek-headed, Kerr? Weak-headed men, such as sleep—"
 "Sleek-headed!" howled the unfortunate stage-manager.

"All right, don't yell, I'm not deaf. Let me have about me men that are fat, sleek-headed men, and such as sleep o' nights," said Fatty Wynn.

"That's right; only put a little more life into it!"
 "Yon Cassius has a lean and hungry look.
 He thinks too much; such men are dangerous."

"Good!"
 "Oh, jolly good!" murmured Blake, sotto voce. "What do you think, Tommy, my son?"

"Gorgeous!" murmured Tom Merry.
 "Pity to spoil the show, really, when they're going to give us such a ripping laugh to-morrow. Fancy playing Julius Cæsar as a comedy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "How are we going to get the togs?" whispered Blake.
 "We can't dodge out into the open without being spotted."

"That's all right. One of us can creep round through the trees to the other side of the glade, and draw their attention in that direction, while the other nips out and collars the duds!"

"Good!"
 "Will you go, or—?"
 "Oh, I'll go, as I'm a better scout."

"Mind you don't get collared by the New House cads when you get the togs, Tom Merry, that's all!"
 "Trust me!"

Blake crept away through the underwood. Tom Merry remained in cover, watching the New House rehearsal through the foliage, and stifling his chuckles.

The rehearsal was proceeding merrily.
 The play had been considerably cut down by Kerr, to bring it within the compass of the time that could be allowed, and within the numbers of the Amateur Dramatic Society of the New House.

The rehearsal got over the ground quickly.
 Tom Merry waited for a signal from Blake, and meanwhile, he listened to the lines delivered by the amateur actors.

Kerr was the only one who had his part perfectly. He was playing the role of Mark Antony.

But most of the others were pretty good, and all of them had their heart in the work. What kind of a success they would make of a public performance of "Julius Cæsar" was a question; but there was no doubt that they were all bucking up to do their best.

"So are they all, all honourable men," Kerr was saying, when suddenly Figgins whirled round and stared towards the end of the glade, where the trees grew thickly.

Kerr broke off in his speech.
 "What's the matter, Figgins?"

"I—I believe there's somebody looking at us from that tree," said Figgins.

"By George!"
 "Spotted, by Jove!"
 "Done in!"

"I can't see anybody," said Kerr, staring in the direction pointed out by Figgins. The others did the same, and necessarily turned their backs upon the spot where Tom Merry was in cover, as that was at the other end of the glade.

Figgins wrinkled his brows.
 "I saw a cap there," he said.
 "I can't see it."

"One of the School House rotters tracking us out," said Pratt.

"I don't see how they could know——"

"A chap from the Grammar School, perhaps," said Fatty Wynn.

Figgins nodded.

"Yes; anyway, I'm going to see. Look—there it is!"

A school cap showed for a moment among the fern. It disappeared so quickly that the juniors could not even note whether it was a St. Jim's cap or not.

"There's somebody there, at all events!" exclaimed Kerr.

"We'll have him out!"

"Yes, rather! Come on!"

And the New House Dramatic Society dashed in the direction of the cap. And as they did so, Tom Merry darted out of the bushes far behind them.

Not one of the juniors thought for a moment of looking back over his shoulder.

Tom Merry was rapid.

He collected up the heap of garments in his arms, and dashed into the thicket again with them, and was out of sight once more in a few seconds.

In the cover of the thicket, with the captured clothes in his arms, he stopped for a moment to gasp with suppressed laughter.

He had succeeded.

Blake had drawn off the attention of the New House party, as arranged, and Tom Merry had made the raid on the clothes.

It had been cleverly carried out, in a manner worthy of the two most skillful of the Boy Scouts of St. Jim's.

Tom Merry paused only to chuckle, and to shove the clothes together in a more manageable parcel. There was no time to waste. Then, with his prize in his arms, he scuttled through the wood to find Blake.

CHAPTER 7.

D'Arcy Has Two Ideas.

FIGGINS and CO. ran into the trees and looked up and down and round about for the owner of the cap that had caught their eyes.

But they found him not.

If they had been watched, the watcher had certainly scuttled off before they had an opportunity of getting to close quarters with him.

For full five minutes the New House juniors searched the thickets, getting their Roman robes and togas considerably rumpled in the process, and then they gave it up and returned to the glade.

"It must have been a Grammar chap," said Kerr.

Figgins nodded, with a sigh of relief.

"I think so," he assented. "If it had been a School House rotter, he'd have given us a yell, at least, to let us know he'd bowled us out, I should think."

"Yes, rather!"

"Let's get on with the rehearsal!"

And the rehearsal went on.

Figgins & Co. were too deeply interested in the drama to even glance towards the spot where they had left their clothes on donning the Roman costume.

They had not the slightest suspicion of the raid.

Tom Merry staggered away with his burden of captured clothes, and almost staggered over a junior who lay in the grass gasping with mirth.

"Oh, my hat!" gurgled Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's too jolly good!"

"I've got the duds!"

"I see you have! Did you leave any behind?"

"Not a rag!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Let's get back to St. Jim's," grinned Tom Merry. "We want to tell the fellows, and to shove these things into Figgy's study ready for him."

Blake shrieked.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You can carry some of them, too; the lot weighs something."

"Right you are; hand 'em over!"

And the two juniors, equally dividing the burden, tramped along the footpath towards Rylcombe Lane.

"Bai Jove! Heah you are!"

It was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

He stopped in the middle of the footpath, and jammed his monocle into his eye, and surveyed the School House scouts wrathfully.

"Yes, here we are," said Blake affably. "As large as life, and twice as natural."

"You did not wait for me."

"Go hon!"

"I wegard it as wathah wotten."

"Never mind; take some of these togs, and that will make it all right," said Blake, dumping down his load upon the swell of the Fourth.

Arthur Augustus staggered back under a load of waistcoats and jackets and trousers.

"Bai Jove, Blake——"

"You can carry them."

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort. I am not an old clothes merchant," exclaimed Arthur Augustus indignantly.

"Ha, ha! These ain't old clothes; they're the New House best."

"Gweat Scott!"

"We've raided Figgins & Co.'s togs, you see."

"Bai Jove! Have they gone swimmin'?"

"Ha, ha! No; they've gone rehearsing, and they're going to return to St. Jim's as Julius Cæsar, Mark Antony, Brutus & Co.," explained Blake.

A grin dawned upon the aristocratic visage of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Bai Jove! Ha, ha! I wegard that as funnay."

"Carry the clothes, kid."

"Sowwy! I will cawwy some of the jackets, if you like. I think it would look vewy ungewaceful to walk along the wood cawwyin' twousahs and waistcoats."

Blake laughed, and bestowed jackets galore upon the swell of St. Jim's. The three juniors walked along towards the school at a good pace. They did not want to run any risk of being overtaken by Figgins & Co. when the latter discovered their loss. If that should happen, the joke would turn very much against the School House chums.

"By the way," remarked Arthur Augustus, "I wanted to tell you chaps an idea."

"Whose?"

"Mine, you silly ass. It's a jolly wippin' ideah, for givin' a show to-morrow night and beatin' the New House hollow. As a mattah of fact, I have two weally good ideahs, but one of them, I feah, will be wathah above your intellect."

"Well, of all the cheek——"

"I will tell you that one first. I was thinkin' of givin' a song wecital, and singin', say, fifteen or sixteen terah solos. We could get Rushden, of the Sixth, to accompany; he's a good pianist."

"But he's not deaf," said Blake.

"Deaf!"

"Yes. You'd have to get a deaf chap to stand you singin' fifteen or sixteen tenor solos."

"Weally, Blake——"

"Besides, if we give an entertainment, we want Mr. Lathom and an audience to come to it," said Tom Merry.

"Of course, we should ask Mr. Lathom and the fellows," Tom Merry shook his head.

"Can't be did, Gussy."

"Why not, pway?"

"The S.P.C.A. might interfere."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"Besides," said Blake, "Lathom isn't a strong man, and he might perish. If he perished we might get a worse Form-master. I fear there may a worse come in his place, as those asses have just been spouting. So I suggest that Lathom should be spared."

"Weally, you ass——"

"That wheeze being barred, what's the other?" asked Blake cheerfully.

"Well, the othah ideah is not so good."

"By George, it must be a rotten one."

"It is not so good, but it is jollay good," said Arthur Augustus, with a great deal of dignity. "I dare say you chaps have heard of Pwofessah Bulgab, who has been givin' conjuin' entahtainments in Wayland. He has come to Wylcombe."

"Might go and see him," said Tom Merry. "I've heard he gives a pretty good show. But what has that to do——"

"That's the ideah! I think it's wathah good. Instead of gettin' up a wotten amateur entahtainment, why not hire the pwofessah to come to St. Jim's and give a weally good pwofessional show?" said the swell of St. Jim's. "We could waise his fees between us, and it would be a jollay good evenin' entahtainment. And of course the New House wottahs wouldn't be allowed to make any wow on such an occasion."

"By Jove, there's something in that," said Tom Merry thoughtfully. "I wonder how much Professor Bulger would charge for an evening?"

"We could go and see him in Wylcombe, deah boy, and find out."

"By Jove, Gussy's full of good ideas to-day!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said the swell of St. Jim's modestly. "You can genewally depend upon me for a good ideah, you know."

"We'll turn Professor Bulger over in our minds," Blake remarked.

"Yaas, wathah!"
 "I dare say I shall be able to think of a better idea—"
 "Wats!"
 "If I don't, we'll have the giddy conjuror."
 "And if he can't come—," said Tom Merry.
 "In that case, deah boy, I will give a song wecital."
 "That you jolly well won't."
 "Weally, Blake—"
 "Here we are at St. Jim's."
 And the juniors went in, and the fellows who saw them come in laden with clothes gathered round to stare.

CHAPTER 8.

Julius Cæsar & Co.

"THIS was the noblest Roman of them all," said Kerr, as Figgins, in the costume of Brutus, lay extended upon the green sward.

The rehearsal was over.
 Brutus lay very still while Mark Antony made that remark, and Pratt, forgetting that he was Octavius Cæsar, said "Hear, hear!"

The dead Roman sat up.
 "Shut up, Pratt, you ass!" he said.
 "Sorry, Brutus—I mean Figgy—I forgot."

"If you forget when we're giving the show to-morrow evening, there will be wigs on the green," said Figgins. And he rose to his feet. Upon the whole, Figgins was satisfied with the rehearsal, and even the critical Kerr was not dissatisfied.

"We shall knock them," said Figgins.
 "Well, I think it's better than the School House could give, anyway," said Kerr. "The chap I'd really like to have in it is Gordon Gay, from the Grammar School. He'd do rippingly. But of course we couldn't own up that to the Grammarians."

"Of course not."
 "We shall make the School House squirm, anyway; and that's enough."

"Yes, rather! I think it will go. What do you think, Fatty?"

"I think that ham will be better, as—"
 "Eh?"
 "Ham will be better than bacon, as we sha'n't feel inclined to stop for any cooking when we get in."

"What's he raving about?" asked Kerr.
 "Eh?" said Fatty Wynn. "I was thinking about tea when we get in. It's no good taking in bacon and eggs and having to cook them before we can have any grub. Better get ham and cold beef, I think."

"He'll bring out something like that on the stage to-morrow," said French, with a sniff.

"Well, I don't see why there shouldn't be a feed scene introduced into Julius Cæsar," said Fatty Wynn. "I could write up the part—"

"Oh, come on, and let's get changed," said Figgins. "If we get in early, I was thinking of asking Monteith for a pass to go down and see Professor Bulger's show. I hear it's good."

"Good egg!"
 "Let's change, then. Hallo! My hat!"

"What's the matter?"
 "Have you moved the clothes?"

"Moved the clothes! No."
 "They're gone."

"Oh, rats!"
 "Look, then."

The New House juniors stared at the spot where the clothes had been.

The bags were still there, and some odd boots and socks. But the clothes were gone—vanished.

The juniors looked round the glade in the deepening sunset.

Where were the clothes?
 "One of you chaps must have moved them," said Figgins at last.

"I didn't," said Kerr.

"They were here when we started rehearsing, and we've all been together since then," said Pratt. "Somebody has sneaked along and taken them."

"But we should have seen—"

"My hat!" Figgins smote his chest. "You remember that chap we sighted over there? The beast must have sneaked the duds while we were looking for him, you know."

"Then there must have been two of them."
 Figgins looked dazed.

"Blessed if I understand it!" he exclaimed. "What—"

"It's a Grammar School jape, I suppose."
 "I believe that was a Grammarian we saw in the thicket."

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"Well, the clothes are gone, anyway."
 "They may be hidden among the bushes here," said Fatty Wynn, not very hopefully, however.

"Let's look," said Figgins briefly.

The juniors hunted among the bushes.

It was possible that some practical joker had hidden them for a jape, and that they would be able to find them again.

They hunted round about the glade, and up and down, but without success. After ten minutes of it they gathered in the open again.

Their faces were very grim. The clothes were not to be found. It was evident that they had been taken quite away.

The juniors were under no apprehension as to the safety of their clothes, and of the contents of their pockets. It was clearly enough a jape—either of the Grammarians or of the School House juniors.

The clothes were safe enough, and would be restored; but in the meantime how were they to get back to St. Jim's?

They stared at one another in blank dismay.

"My only hat!" said Kerr at last. "We're done this time. We—we can't go back to St. Jim's without the clothes."

"We can't go in this rig," said Jimson.
 "Rather not!"

"But the clothes are gone."
 "And they won't come back."

"It's a rotten jape!" said Figgins, clenching his fists.
 "I wish I knew where the blessed japers were."

"Well, what's to be done?"
 "Blessed if I know!"

"Who's leader of this party?" asked French unpleasantly.
 "I'm waiting to know what's to be done, Figgy."

"We can't go home in these togs," grinned Pratt,
 "and I don't see how we can march into St. Jim's as Julius Cæsar & Co."

Figgins started.

"We shall have to," he said. "That's the jape, of course. The bounders want to make us go back to St. Jim's in these togs."

"We can't!"
 "Impossible!"

Figgins shrugged his shoulders.
 "We can't stay here all night," he said.

And there was a silence of dismay.

What was to be done?

There was no possibility of obtaining other clothes—without going to the village to hire some; and there the unlucky actors would have to run the gauntlet of a more intolerable ordeal than at St. Jim's.

There was nothing for it but to return to St. Jim's—as they were!

"We must go," said Figgins, at last. "There's no help for it. We've got to get back to calling-over at dusk."

"And I'm awfully hungry," said Fatty Wynn pathetically.

"Oh, cheese it!"

"I tell you I'm famished. I don't see why we can't slip into St. Jim's, and dodge into the New House, without being noticed—"

"Much chance of that, if this is a School House jape," growled Kerr. "Tom Merry & Co. will be waiting for us at the gates. But it can't be helped."

"Of course it can't," said Figgins desperately, "and staying here jawing it over won't make it any the easier. Let's get off."

"We shall look awful guys!" growled Pratt.

"Got any suggestion to make, then?" demanded Figgins.

"Oh, I'm not leader!"

"Shut up, then, or you'll get a thick ear to wear along with your togs," growled Figgins. "It can't be helped. Come on."

And the band of Roman warriors and statesmen and senators followed Brutus down the footpath towards Rylcombe Lane.

They met a woodman on the footpath, and he stopped, with his mouth wide open, and stared at them blankly.

"Lummy!" he gasped.

The New House juniors marched on with their cheeks burning under the grease paint. The man stared after them till they were out of sight, with the same expression of blank amazement on his face. He had never met any Roman senators in Rylcombe Wood before.

The juniors reached the stile, and climbed over it into the lane, not without difficulty in their Roman garb. Mark Antony, who was in battle array, caught his helmet in the low branch of a tree, and hung there a prisoner till Figgins released him.

"You can take that blessed pot off, and put it in the bag," said Figgins. "Hallo! Here are the blessed japers!"

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Figgins staggered in his astonishment as he looked in the glass. It was the face of Professor Bulger that was looking out at him. "My only hat!" he gasped.

Five youths in Grammar School caps were coming up the lane.

They were Gordon Gay, Jack Wootton, Frank Monk, Lane, and Carboy, all of the Fourth Form at Rylcombe Grammar School.

They caught sight of the noble Romans, and stopped, staring with wide eyes.

"My only chapeau!" ejaculated Gordon Gay.

"What on earth are they?" exclaimed Jack Wootton.

"Lunatic asylum broken loose, I suppose."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Frank Monk. "It's the St. Jim's kids!"

"Phew!"

"What are they doing—busking?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins & Co. glared at the Grammarians.

"Go for the rotters!" muttered Figgins desperately.

"We'll teach 'em to jape us, and then stand giggling at us like a lot of Cheshire cats!"

"What-ho!"

And Figgins & Co. charged at the yelling Grammarians.

CHAPTER 9.

The Return of the Rehearsers.

GORDON GAY & CO. left off laughing, and lined-up to receive the charge. But the odds were against them, and they were rushed off their feet.

Down they went, and the Romans sprawled over them, with much rattling and clinking of stage accoutrements.

"Ow!" gasped Gordon Gay.

"Pommel the beasts!"

"Hurrah! Lick them!"

"Punch the rotters!"

"Hold on! Pax!"

"Rats!"

"What's the row? We—we haven't—"

"You've collared our clothes!" roared Figgins, rubbing Jack Wootton's head industriously in the mud. "Where are they?"

"Yow!"

"Where are the duds?"

"Ooch!"

"What have you done with them?"

"Grouch!"

"Hold on!" panted Gordon Gay. "We haven't seen your blessed clothes, haven't touched 'em. Honour bright." Honour bright from Gordon Gay was indubitable. Figgins jumped up.

"Oh! Why didn't you say so before, then?"

"You didn't give us much chance," grinned Gordon Gay, staggering up. "Oh, you asses! I've got an ache in every bone."

"Serve you jolly well right!"

"Ha, ha, ha! You look a treat; I must say that. Have you been giving a giddy open-air performance, or busking outside the pubs in Rylcombe?"

"We've been rehearsing, and some rotter has taken away our clothes," growled Figgins.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, stop cackling, do!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'll jolly well——"

The Grammarians hastily retreated. They didn't want to come to close quarters with the exasperated Romans any more. They wanted to laugh.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Lane. "Hear us smile!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You silly chumps——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You frabjous duffers——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins & Co. glared at the hilarious Grammarians. But it was useless to go for them again. In fact, the stage costumes had already suffered considerably in the first encounter.

"Come on!" muttered Figgins.

And the Romans marched on. Gordon Gay & Co. stared after them, holding their sides, and shrieking with laughter. "These are the noblest Romans of them all!" roared Gordon Gay.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Let me have about me chaps that are fatheaded!" roared Gay.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Fatheaded chaps, and such as get their duds pinched!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You Fatty Wynn hath an awfully hungry look."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He eats too much——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The St. Jim's juniors, with burning faces, quickened their pace, and the yells of the Grammarian juniors died away behind.

"This is very nice—I don't think!" Kerr remarked.

"Ripping!" said French. "Still nicer when we get to the school."

"Oh, don't growl! Come on!"

"It wasn't the Grammarians played that trick on us, either," said Pratt. "It must have been the School House rotters."

"Looks like it."

"And in that case they're on to the wheeze, and know we mean to give Julius Cæsar——"

"They'd know it when they see us like this, anyway."

"Then we're done——"

"Oh, shut up, you cheerful ass!" said Figgins irritably. "Don't rub in it. For goodness' sake don't jaw. It's bad enough, anyway."

The New House juniors tramped on.

As luck would have it, the lane was unusually full of pedestrians. They passed fellows from the village, and more fellows from the Grammar School, and the vicar in his gig, and Sir Hilton Popper in his dogcart.

All stared blankly at the unfortunate Romans.

Figgins & Co. kept doggedly on.

That the jape was known at St. Jim's, and that they were expected there, was soon very evident. As soon as they saw the school gateway, they saw that it was crowded with fellows waiting.

Fatty Wynn gave a grunt.

"My hat! There's the whole blessed school turning out to meet us."

"Can't be helped: come on."

"Hallo!" roared Kangaroo. "No buskers allowed here."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Who are they?"

"Strolling players, I should think."

"Barn-stormers."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"They're the noblest Romans of them all," said Jack Blake, nearly weeping. "Look at Cassius's legs! Look at Brutus's shanks! Fat, ain't they?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins coloured. His slim calves showed up to great advantage, and he was quite aware of it.

"Come on!" he muttered. "Shove through."

Julius Cæsar & Co. shoved on.

The crowd allowed them to pass through and get into the quadrangle, greeting them with a hail of laughter and chipping.

"This way for the buskers!" roared Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Give a performance in the quad., Figgy?"

"In front of the School House, please."

"I'll go round with the hat, Figgy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins & Co., gasping with rage, tramped on. They had never felt—or looked—so utterly absurd in their lives. The Roman costume might have been imposing in the streets of Rome or on the battlefield of Philippi; but in the quadrangle at St. Jim's, in the midst of a crowd of Eton jackets and white flannels, silk hats and cricket caps, it looked inexpressibly absurd.

The whole school was yelling.

Even New House juniors, who had come to see what the row was about, and recognised their Dramatic Society, joined in the laughter. They could not help it. They yelled as loudly as any fellow in the School House.

Tom Merry wiped his eyes.

"Oh, my only hat!" he gasped. "This is gorgeous!"

"It's su-suff-suffocating!" panted Blake, with tears of merriment streaming down his cheeks. "Look at Brutus's chivvy! Isn't it enough to make a cat cackle?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hallo!" exclaimed Digby suddenly. "Look out!"

Here's Lathom!"

"Lathom! Phew!"

"Cave, Figgy!"

But there was no chance for Figgins & Co. to avoid the meeting.

Mr. Lathom, the little master of the Fourth Form, was coming directly towards them, and he was already blinking through his spectacles at the strange sight.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mr. Lathom. "What ever does this mean?"

And Julius Cæsar & Co. stopped, and the little Form-master blinked at them in blank astonishment.

CHAPTER 10.

With Tom Merry and Co.'s Compliments.

MR. LATHOM stared at Julius Cæsar & Co., and Julius Cæsar & Co. stared at Mr. Lathom. The little Form-master was absolutely astounded.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed. "This is—is absurd—unheard-of! My good fellows, you cannot give a performance here!"

A joyous chuckle ran through the crowd.

The Fourth Form-master evidently did not recognise the juniors in the least, but imagined that a company of strolling players had visited St. Jim's for the purpose of giving a performance in the quad.

The idea quite excited the Form-master.

He pointed to the gates.

"You must go away at once!" he exclaimed.

"If you please, sir——"

"It is quite impossible for anything of the sort to be allowed. You should apply, in the first place, to the Head-master, and obtain his permission; but, in any case, an open-air performance could not be given."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you please——"

"I must ask you to quit these precincts immediately!" said Mr. Lathom, in a stately way. "Come! Go at once!"

Blake fell into Digby's arms.

"Hold me!" he murmured. "I have a pain, and I shall bust something if I laugh any more! Oh, why were we born japers?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Go at once!" repeated Mr. Lathom, pointing majestically to the gates. "Come! You are wasting my time!"

"If you please, Mr. Lathom, I'm Figgins!" gasped the unhappy New House leader.

The Fourth Form-master jumped almost clear of the ground.

"What—what! Figgins!"

"Yes, sir. I——"

"Figgins—of my Form! Impossible!"

"Yes, sir. You see, sir——"

"Dear me! What does this—this extraordinary masquerade mean, Figgins?" exclaimed Mr. Lathom, blinking at the unhappy Brutus.

"We—we've been having a rehearsal, sir!" stammered Figgins.

"Oh, I see! But—but surely you have not had the astounding impertinence to rehearse in costume in the quadrangle, Figgins?"

"Oh, no, sir; we—we rehearsed in the wood, sir, for the sake of keeping away from rotten, mean interruptions, sir, and some howling cad stole our clothes, sir—some rotten, silly ass, sir, without as much brains as you could put on a threepenny-bit, thought it would be funny to collar our clothes, sir, so—"

"Dear me!"

"It's the fault of that worm, sir—that beastly outsider, sir!"

"Bai Jove! You're gettin' a good chawactah, Blake, I must say!"

"Shut up, ass!"

"I wefuse to be called an ass!"

"So, you see, sir, that rotten worm having taken our clothes—"

"Who was it, Figgins?"

"I—I didn't see him, sir!"

"Well, as you have been the victim of a joke, you may go," said Mr. Lathom mildly. "Go into your House at once, and take off these absurd things!"

"Ye-es, sir."

"And I should recommend you in future to do your rehearsing indoors, Figgins."

"Yes, sir."

And Mr. Lathom walked on towards the gates, with a smile lurking on his face, and Figgins & Co. went to their House, followed to the very door by a large and admiring crowd, who passed all sorts of personal remarks.

Figgins & Co. disappeared at last within the portals of the New House, followed in by a roar of laughter.

Tom Merry wiped his eyes as he turned away.

"Oh, it was gorgeous!" he murmured. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yaas, wathah! I wegard it as vewy funnany!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I don't think the New House Amateur Dramatic Society will give that giddy dramatic performance to-morrow night, now!" said Lowther, with a sob.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"They would be laughed off the boards!"

"I should say so!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Figgins wouldn't have the nerve after this show-up!"

And the School House chums wept, and walked away, fully satisfied that they had achieved two important things—worked off a jape that would furnish them with laughter for a week or more, and knocked on the head the New House celebration of Mr. Lathom's birthday.

Meanwhile, Figgins & Co., covered with confusion and dismay, had escaped into their own House, and glad enough they were to get into the shelter of it.

They were safe from School House chipping here, at all events; but the whole New House was one ripple of mirth from end to end.

Monteith, the head-prefect of the House, met the returned rehearsers in the hall, with several of the Sixth—Baker and Dodds and Harris.

They stared at Figgins & Co. and laughed.

"You haven't been out in that state, Figgins, surely?" exclaimed Monteith, recognising the chief of the New House juniors.

"We've been rehearsing—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And some beast has collared our clothes!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Baker. "That accounts. Tom Merry brought a big bundle in here for you some time ago; he asked leave to take it up to your study. He said it contained some clothes you had mislaid."

"Oh!"

"You'll find it there! Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins & Co. tramped upstairs.

Mr. Ratcliff put his head out of his study door, and asked what was the matter. He asked the question in a snappish tone, but he forgot to snap when he caught sight of Figgins & Co. in their peculiar garb.

"Goodness gracious!" he exclaimed.

"It's all right, sir!" said Monteith, grinning. "Some of the juniors have been rehearsing, sir, and someone appears to have taken their clothes away."

Mr. Ratcliff was not supposed to be blessed with a sense of humour, but the sight of Figgins & Co. was too much even for him. He broke into a kind of rusty chuckle, and closed the door of his study.

The unfortunate actors went upstairs. In the upper passage they halted, and Pratt glared at Brutus.

"You unspeakable ass!" he exclaimed.

Figgins clenched his fists.

"What's that?" he demanded.

"Oh, you can punch my head if you like!" exclaimed Pratt savagely. "I say you're an ass, and I don't care! Nice go this is!"

"I don't think!" said Jimson.

"Pretty go, and no mistake!" French remarked. "I repeat what Pratt says—you're a howling, frabjous, burbling ass, Figgins!"

"Hang it all!" growled Figgins, rather taken aback by this general attack. "What could I do? How could I help it?"

"Who proposed rehearsing in the wood?"

"Figgins!"

"Who made us leave the clothes just where we left them?"

"Figgins!"

"Who's supposed to be leader, and to look after things?"

"Figgins!"

"Who's got us into this muck?"

"Figgins!"

"Who's a silly ass?"

"Figgins!"

"Who's a howling burbler?"

"Figgins!"

The juniors were asking the questions and answering them in a sort of chant. Figgins stamped away into his study, followed by Kerr and Wynn.

"Who's a frabjous idiot?" came a howl from the passage.

"Figgins!"

"Who's going to get the order of the boot?"

"Figgins!"

Figgins slammed the door.

"Nice!" he said heatedly. "Blessed if I'm going to buy junior House captain any more. This is how one gets treated when things go wrong."

"Oh, they'll get over it!" said Kerr.

"I don't care whether they do or not! I'm jolly well going to resign!"

Kerr shook his head.

"You can't, Figg!"

"Can't!" said Figgins warmly. "Why can't I?"

"Because we've got to get our own back on the School House bouncers, and you've got to show us how to do it!" said Kerr.

Kerr's words poured oil on the troubled waters. Whatever the rest of the House might say and do, Figgins had unswerving loyalty here.

"Well, that's all right!" he said. "I hope I can. We'll make them sit up, somehow!"

"We will, rather!"

"We'll make 'em wriggle!" said Fatty Wynn. "I only wish we could raid a feed or something. That's what I—"

"Oh, cheese it!" said Kerr. "Here's the clothes! We may as well change!"

There was an enormous bundle of clothes on the table. On top of it was pinned a sheet of paper, bearing the inscription in sprawling letters:

"WITH TOM MERRY & CO.'S COMPLIMENTS!"

Figgins read it, and snorted.

"Well, we've been done!" he said. "They caught on to our dodge of celebrating Lathom's birthday, somehow, and they've dished us!"

"We'll dish them yet!"

The juniors sorted out the clothes. Pratt put his head in at the door.

"I say, you burblers, I want my clothes!"

"Here you are!" said Kerr.

"Ow!"

Pratt reeled back into the passage under a shower of articles of clothing. The other noble Romans were waiting for their things, and Figgins & Co. pelted the clothes at them, and then slammed the door of the study.

There was a tap at the window, and a pebble clinked back into the quad. Figgins went to the window and looked out.

A party of School House juniors had stopped there. They were dressed for going out, and there were nearly a dozen of them.

"Hallo!" called up Blake. "Found the clothes?"

"Go and eat coke!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins made a rush for the grate to get out the ashan, but the School House party did not linger under the window. They strode off, and Figgins, returning, glared after them in vain. They were out of the reach of vengeance.

CHAPTER 11.

The Conjuror.

TOM MERRY & CO. chuckled as they went down to the gates.

They had scored over the New House without limit, and they felt that they had clearly proved, for once at least, that the School House was cock-house at St. Jim's.

And they were feeling very satisfied with themselves on that account. But that was not all.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's idea of employing the professor from Rylcombe to give a conjuring entertainment the following evening had caught on.

Private theatricals were all very well, but a real live professional conjuror was something out of the common, and was bound to take the wind out of the sails of the New House.

The professor had been giving shows at Wayland and other towns round about, and was now at Rylcombe, and many of the fellows at St. Jim's had expressed an intention of going to see him.

If they could get the show for nothing at St. Jim's, there was no doubt that they would crowd to see it.

New House fellows as well as School House would come, and if Figgins & Co. stayed away, they would probably stay away alone.

The School House would score all along the line; and Mr. Lathom could hardly help being flattered by such a great deal of trouble being taken on his account, for the purpose of celebrating his birthday.

That the juniors had the defeat of the New House more in view than anything else was a detail which it was unnecessary to explain to him.

Tom Merry & Co. were going down to the village now to see the professor's show, having obtained passes from Kildare, the captain of the school, out of gates.

If the show was all right—as they expected from the accounts they had heard—Tom Merry meant to interview the professor afterwards, and ascertain what his fee would be for a private entertainment, and arrange if possible for him to give a show the next evening at St. Jim's.

The School House juniors burst into chuckles at frequent intervals as they went down the lane in the summer dusk.

They reached Rylcombe, and found the door of the town-hall, where the professor was giving his entertainment, not yet open, and besieged by a good-sized crowd.

The juniors took up their station as near to the door as they could get, and waited for it to be open. D'Arcy had suggested five-shilling seats, to which Kangaroo had replied by a counter-suggestion that he should stand them for the whole party.

And a very simple arithmetical calculation having demonstrated that eleven five-shilling seats could not be obtained for twenty-five shillings, which was all D'Arcy had with him, the swell of the School House dropped the suggestion.

"Bob seats are good enough," said Jack Blake cheerfully.

"Weally, Blake—"

"And if Gussy don't like a bob seat, he can go into the giddy stalls all on his lonesome," Clifton Dane remarked.

"Weally, Dane—"

"Cheese it, Gussy. Don't be a snob," said Herricks.

"Weally, Hewwies—"

"Look here, Gussy—"

"What I object to is callin' it a bob seat. I wergard it as a vulgah expression. I should pwefer to call them shillin' seats."

"Ass!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Hallo! Door's open!"

And the juniors of St. Jim's pressed in with the crowd. They got pretty good seats, too; and as the hall was not large, they had a very excellent view of the stage.

The hall was about half full, but that was a pretty good audience for a place like Rylcombe, where life was not taken too gaily.

Professor Bulger came on the stage bowing and smiling. He was a man of middle size, but very slim, and so looked taller than he was, and his spare limbs looked sparer than ever in evening clothes.

He had a great expanse of shirt-front and smile, like most public entertainers in his line of business, and he bowed with much grace to an imaginary ovation as he entered.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy turned his eyeglass upon the professor, and watched him with curiosity. D'Arcy had confided to Blake that he "wathah" fancied himself as a conjuror, a remark which Blake had received with scoffing. D'Arcy was curious to see how it was done, and he was prepared to take a great interest in the conjuring performance.

The professor, after some remarks to the audience, got to business.

He started with some simple tricks, getting yards of ribbon out of an empty eggshell, and so forth; but the Rylcombe folk were not at all blase, and they greeted the simplest trick with great appreciation.

More people were dropping in every few minutes, and presently Blake, glaring round, uttered a slight exclamation.

"My hat! Figgy!"

"Bai Jove!"

The School House party looked round.

Figgins & Co. had just come in. They grinned at the School House fellows. Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn were late for the start of the conjuring entertainment, owing to the curious circumstances under which they had returned to St. Jim's after the rehearsal in Rylcombe Wood.

But they had turned up after all. They had to be satisfied with back seats, however, and Figgins breathed hard through his nose as he caught the School House grins from the front.

"Look at those beasts in the second row," he exclaimed.

"And we're in the eleventh," remarked Kerr.

"Never mind," said Fatty Wynn. "We had a jolly good tea."

"We could have been here earlier if Fatty had hurried—"

"How could I hurry after eight eggs, a pound of ham, half a pound of cold beef, seven jam tarts, and a plum-pudding?" demanded Fatty Wynn.

"How could you walk at all—that's the miracle," agreed Kerr.

"I've a jolly good mind to go and bump them out of those blessed seats," grumbled Figgins, with a wrathful glance towards the front.

"Can't make a row here, Figgy."

"Well, but—"

"Besides, there are eleven of them, and only three of us," said Kerr grinning. "We might be the chaps who got the bumping."

And even Figgins had to admit that that was very likely.

"Shut up!" said Fatty Wynn. "The professor's going to do the hat trick now—that old familiar hat trick. It brings back such pleasant associations of old times, you know—there's a smack of the Middle Ages about it. Shut up!"

And the New House chums chuckled and watched.

Professor Bulger had come to the front of the stage. He made a slim silhouette as he stood there, in his black clothes and white shirt-front, with his dyed black moustache and dyed pointed beard, and the dyed hair which he wore somewhat long over his ears.

"Will any gentleman oblige me with a hat?" he asked suavely.

No gentleman seemed in a hurry to make himself conspicuous.

"I assure the owner that the hat will not be in the least injured," said the professor gently. "It will be returned intact, after I have made fire come out of it. Will any gentleman oblige me with a hat?"

"Will a straw do, sir?" asked Tom Merry.

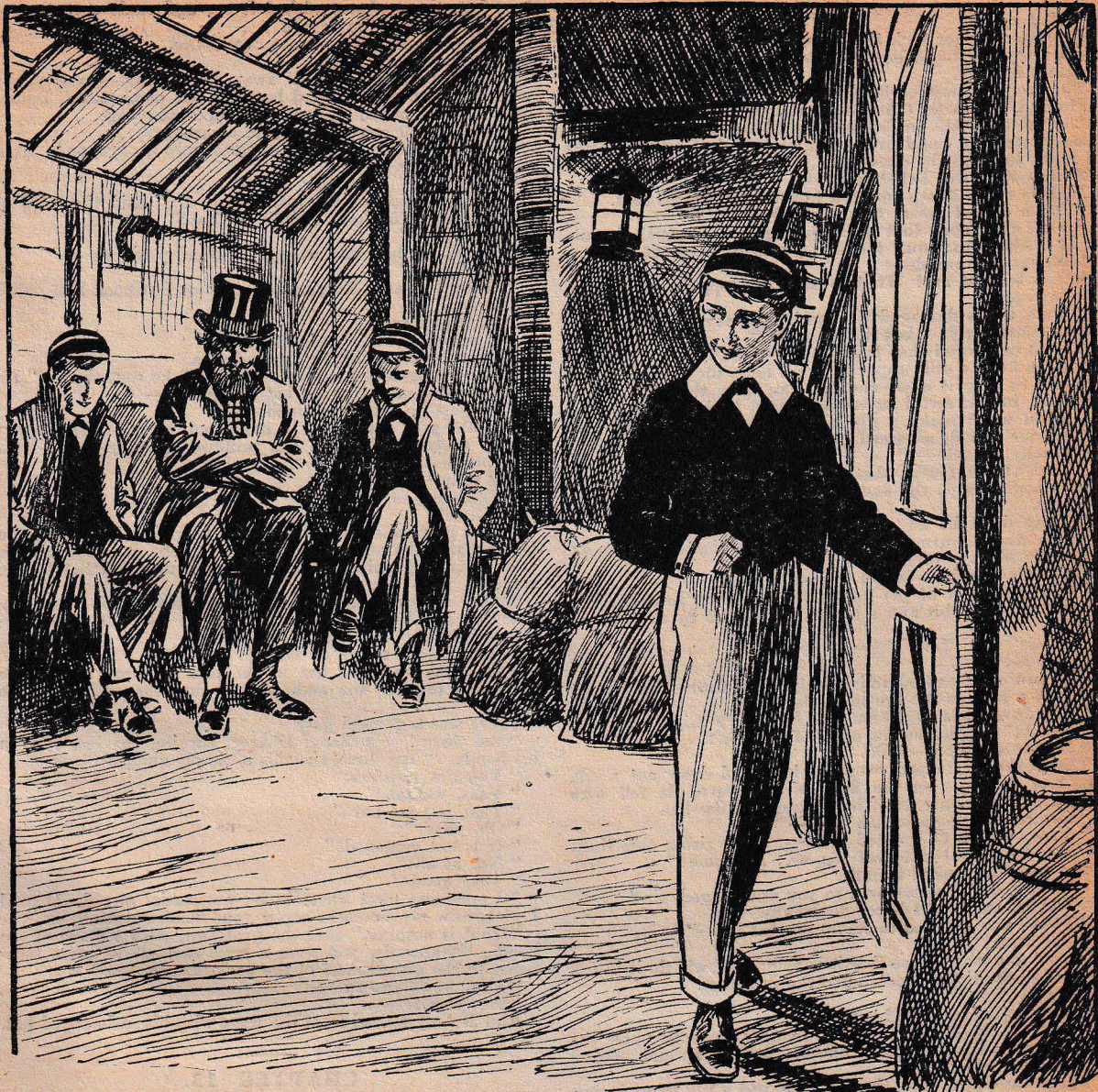
"H'm! I should prefer a silk hat."

"Go it, Gussy!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

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"I hope you'll be comfy, sir," said Kerr. "Mind, when you hear the half-past nine from the village clock, French, hand over the guinea, and let the gentleman go!"

"Lend him your topper."

"I should be vevy pleased to oblige the pwofessah, but I am afraid of some injuwy to my hat, you know."

"The hat will not be in the slightest degree injured," said Professor Bulger, overhearing the words. "In case of injury, a wholly brand-new hat will be exchanged for the old one; but injury is impossible."

"That's all vevy well, deah boy; but a new hat purchased in the countwy would be no use to me. I have to considah the latest fashion in bwims," said D'Arcy. "Howevah, I will accept your assurance that the toppah will not be damaged."

"Not in the least."

And Arthur Augustus handed over his topper.

But in spite of the professor's assurance, and his own knowledge that the trick about to be performed was as old as the hills, Arthur Augustus could not help a shade of anxiety creeping into his glance as he watched the conjuror.

CHAPTER 12.

The Hat Trick.

PROFESSOR BULGER took the hat, and looked at it, and then carried it to his little table. Then he stuck it on the back of his head while he proceeded to get his materials together. This raised a laugh; the audience were prepared to laugh; that was what they had paid their money for, as well as the conjuring. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy half-rose in his seat.

"Bai Jove, Blake—"

Jack caught him by the arm and jammed him down again.

"Sit down, Gussy!"

"But my hat—"

"Your hat's all right!"

"He has put it on his head, and—and I am sure he uses hair-oil," said D'Arcy, in a tone of great distress. "The linin' will be stained with howwid hair-oil."

"Never mind—"

"You uttah ass! I shall nevah be able to weah the hat again!"

"Then there's no need to bother now."

"But—"

"Shut up!"

Professor Bulger took the hat off again, and proceeded to cram materials for a bonfire into it. D'Arcy watched him in great anxiety.

The conjurer was certainly very skilful.

He had, of course, taken the usual measures to ensure the safety of the hat, but he had acted so skilfully that the keenest watcher could not detect him, and it really looked as if the hat must be damaged.

Arthur Augustus half-rose again.

Blake's ready grasp jammed him down into his seat.

"Down dog—I mean, keep quiet!"

"I am convinced that he is damagin' my toppah," muttered Arthur Augustus, trembling with excitement.

"Well, never mind—"

"You feahful ass! That is my best toppah, except the Sunday one."

"Well, if it's damaged it's too late to save it now," said Blake consolingly; "but it's all right."

"I am convinced that it is not all wight."

"Well, keep a stiff upper lip, and hope for the best. It's too late to save it now—and you can show the stuff you're made of, in this awful extremity," said Blake gravely. "I hope you won't make a display of vulgar excitement, and make your friends ashamed of you."

"Weally, Blake—"

"I am afraid, Gussy, that your manners have not that repose which stamps the caste of Beer de Beer," said Blake severely.

"Pway don't be an ass, Blake!"

There was a murmur from the unsophisticated audience; the professor was fairly going at last.

Flames and smoke issued from the hat.

From the midst of the flames the professor proceeded to draw a white rabbit and a kitten, not singed by so much as a hair.

"Good!" said Tom Merry.

"Bwavo!"

The professor smiled indulgently. He threw the hat at last into a box, as the fire in it died out.

"Bai Jove, he's forgotten that the hat's mine, and he's wuined it!" murmured the swell of St. Jim's.

"Bai Jove! Look—look!"

The professor stooped over the box, and drew out a silk hat, and threw it on the floor of the stove. It fell with a thud that certainly must have damaged the hat.

"Gentlemen, you see that hat—"

"Yaas, wathah!" shouted D'Arcy, quite rising this time. "Pway, be careful with that toppah. It's mine!"

The professor smiled blandly.

"Your hat will be restored to you undamaged, sir."

"I twust so," said D'Arcy doubtfully.

"I shall now proceed to stamp on that hat—"

"Bai Jove!"

"That you may all see that it is genuine, I will do it in full view of the audience," continued the professor.

"Gweat Scott!"

Professor Bulger kept his word.

He raised his right foot, and brought it down upon the topper with a terrific crash. The hat buckled up and cracked under it immediately.

There was a gasp from the audience, and a yell from Arthur Augustus. If the professor restored the hat to its original shape after that, he would be a wonder-worker indeed; but D'Arcy did not believe for a moment that he could do it.

"The ass! The uttah ass—"

"Sit down there, in front!" roared Figgins from the rear.

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort! I—"

"Sit down!" yelled Kerr.

The cry was taken up by the audience.

"Sit down! Sit down!"

Blake and Lowther dragged Arthur Augustus down into his seat again. They held him there so that he could not rise. D'Arcy's eyeglass dropped from his eye in his excitement, and he groped for it blindly.

"Bai Jove! Gweat Scott! Leggo!"

"Quiet, ass!"

"I wefuse to be called an ass. I—"

"Shut up!"

"He's wuined my hat!"

"Well, take it calnly!" said Tom Merry.

D'Arcy jammed the monocle into his eye, and gasped. The professor was walking round the hat, stamping on it at every step. It was evidently useless for the swell of St. Jim's to interfere now. The hat was a shapeless wreck.

D'Arcy sat watching with fixed eyes.

If the professor did not restore to him his silk hat in all its pristine glory he intended that the professor should hear of it. And it seemed pretty certain now that the professor would be able to do nothing of the sort.

The hat having been stamped almost out of all semblance

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to a hat, the professor picked it up, and made a motion of tossing it into the box again.

Then he faced the audience once more.

"Gentlemen—"

D'Arcy wrenched himself away from Lowther and Blake with a sudden wrench, and bounded out of his seat. Before he could be grabbed he had leaped upon the stage.

The professor stared at him in amazement.

D'Arcy jammed his monocle tighter into his eye, and glared at the professor.

"Really—" began Mr. Bulger.

"I weward you as a wank wottah, sir," said the swell of St. Jim's. "You have wuined my hat!"

"Really—"

"It was my best one, except the Sunday toppah—"

"Really—"

"Order!" roared Figgins. "Sit down! Chuck him out!"

"Order!"

"Kick him out!"

"I wefuse to be kicked out. I—"

The professor smiled to the audience.

"Our young friend is a little excited," he remarked. "He evidently imagines that his hat is injured—"

"It must be uttably wuined—"

"Nothing of the sort. I undertook to restore it to you totally undamaged," said the professor suavely. "I shall now proceed to do so."

"Weally—"

"There is your hat, sir!"

"Where?"

"You may take it from the box yourself. Pray turn the box towards the audience, so that everyone can see that the trick is quite genuine, and that there is no other hat on the stage!"

Arthur Augustus, looking astounded, stepped obediently to the box, and lifted a hat out of it—his own silk topper, as elegant and shiny as ever!

There was not a sign of damage upon it.

There was no other hat in the box. D'Arcy turned the open box towards the audience, so that they all could see into it.

There was a general gasp.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated D'Arcy, turning the hat over in his hands. "Bai Jove, sir, this is simply amazin'!"

"You are satisfied?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"That is your hat?"

"Oh, yaas!"

"It is not damaged?"

"Not at all!"

"Very good!"

"I apologise most sincerely for expressin' any doubt, and I withdwaw my remarks about your bein' a wottah, sir."

"That is nothing," said the professor, with a wave of the hand. "Naturally, you were a little excited—it was a testimony to the genuineness of the performance, too."

"I am vewy sowwy—"

"Not at all!"

And D'Arcy retired from the stage with his undamaged hat.

CHAPTER 13.

Securing the Professor's Services:

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS was very subdued during the remainder of the performance. He felt that he had been rather excited, and that, as Blake put it, his manners lacked that repose which stamps the caste of Vere de Vere. And so he was very quiet; save when the time came to applaud, which he did most heartily.

When the performance was over, the boys crowded out of the hall with the rest, and Tom Merry looked out for Figgins & Co. A hand from somewhere in the crowd knocked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's hat over his eyes, and there was a chuckle.

"Bai Jove!"

"New House cads!"

"Collar them!"

But Figgins & Co. were gone.

Arthur Augustus grabbed his hat with one hand, and jammed his monocle into his eye again with the other, and glared round for the enemy.

"Bai Jove! I suppose that was Figgins!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I do not weward it as a laughin' mattah, Blake. I have been tweated with gwoss diswpect."

"Go hon!"

"I am goin' to thwash Figgins—"

"He's gone. This way for the professor!"

"I will go and look for him. I—"

"Oh, all right, if you want a foot-race!" said Blake.

"We'll see you at St. Jim's."

"Upon the whole, I think I will thwash Figgins

to-morrow as it is necessary for me to be present at the interview with the professor."

"Not at all. You can buzz off if you like," said Monty Lowther. "There are still ten of us, and we can manage it by putting our heads together."

"Not at all, Lowthah. What is required in an interview of this sort is a fellow of tact and judgment."

"The professor will come out this way," said Tom Merry. "The chap at the door told me so. We'll nobble him as he comes out."

And the juniors waited.

It was about half an hour before Professor Bulger emerged, and the juniors were beginning to wonder whether their passes from Kildare were good for so long as they would evidently have to delay.

The professor came out at last, in a silk hat and overcoat, and the juniors stepped into his way. He stopped.

"If you please, professor—" began Tom Merry.

"Pewwaps you had better leave it to me, Tom Mewwy."

"Shut up!"

"I wefuse to shut up. I—"

"The fact is—"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"You see—"

"Undah the circs.—"

"Do you want to speak to me?" said Professor Bulger, peering at them in the gloom. "I think I saw you in the hall. Ah, yes; this is the young gentleman who imagined that his hat was damaged!"

"I am sowwy, sir—"

"Yes, sir; we saw the performance, and we thought it a jolly good one," said Tom Merry. "We want to ask something of you, professor, if you have a few minutes to spare."

"Certainly!" said the professor wonderingly. "Walk with me down the street. I am putting up at the Red Lion."

"You had better—"

"Keep your lunatic quiet, Blake!"

"Certainly!" said Blake, slipping an arm through D'Arcy's. "Take his other arm, Dig. If he makes a row, bash his hat down, Herries!"

"Right-ho!"

"Weally, deah boys—"

"Shut up!"

Tom Merry chuckled, and walked along beside the professor. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was forcibly excluded from the discussion.

"We're thinking of giving an entertainment to-morrow evening at the school, sir," said Tom Merry, in explanation.

"We belong to St. Jim's, the school near here. We came to see your show, and if it was good, we meant to ask you if you could come and give a conjuring performance at the school. Well, it was good—"

"Thank you!" said the professor, with a smile. "I may say that the name of Professor Bulger is known all over the civilised world. When I was in France—"

"Yes, sir," said Tom Merry hurriedly. "We thought it was ripping, especially the hat trick. Now, if you could come over to the school to-morrow evening, it would be ripping. Of course, if you've another engagement—"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I have several," said the professor thoughtfully. "But I have no doubt I could make it convenient to come."

Tom Merry had no doubt that he could, either. It depended on the fee, as the hero of the Shell very well knew.

"Then what would your fee be, sir?" asked Tom Merry bluntly.

"Let me see. Have you been sent by a master?"

"Oh, no; it's quite on our own! We shall raise the tin out of our own pockets, if it isn't too heavy for us."

"H'm! I suppose five guineas would be too heavy—eh?" Tom Merry whistled softly.

"I—I'm afraid so, sir. We couldn't stand a figure like that!"

"Still, I could do it at a reduction for youths, and for the purpose of doing in a—a celebration," said the professor, a little hastily. "As a matter of fact, I could make a reduction to four guineas to you."

Tom Merry was silent.

He had his doubts as to whether the professor had cleared four guineas, after paying the expenses of the hall that evening. And he had not the slightest doubt that there were many evenings when the professor made little, or nothing, and sometimes when there was a loss.

But it was for the professor to fix his price, and for the juniors to pay it if they could. In that case, they couldn't.

Professor Bulger looked down at the boy. He was a couple of inches taller than Tom Merry, but not so well filled out by any means.

"Well, my lad," he said, "does that suit you? It is an unusual reduction for me to make. When I was in Germany—"

"I'm afraid we couldn't stand it, sir," said Tom Merry,

ruefully. "Sorry to have wasted your time, sir. Good-night!"

"Don't be in a hurry, my young friend. Tell me exactly what fee you are prepared to pay, and I will consider it."

"I suppose we could raise three pounds, sir."

The professor smiled genially.

"Absurd! I must remark, absurd! When I was in America—"

"Well, never mind, sir, thank you! Good—"

"Stay a moment. As a sportsman, I am inclined to accept your offer," said the professor hurriedly. "Upon the whole, I think I could accept it."

"Bai Jove, that's vewy genevous of you, sir," said D'Arcy.

"Not at all."

"You think you can fix it?" asked Tom Merry.

"Yes, I think so."

"Then we'd better arrange the details. We can have the lecture-hall at eight o'clock. Will it suit you to be there then?"

"Quite."

"Better come a little early, in case of accidents," said Manners. "We could stand you some grub, too, sir, if you cared for it before the entertainment."

"Thank you! That is a very good idea."

"Then it's settled," said Tom Merry.

"Certainly! In a case like this I generally have half the fee in advance."

"Certainly! We have as much as that with us. Shell out, you chaps!"

The chaps shelled out.

Thirty shillings were collected, mostly from Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, and duly paid over to the professor.

He clinked them into his pocket with a smile of satisfaction he could not wholly conceal. Monty Lowther, who was watching him, felt that it was very probable that this was as much as he had made that evening already.

"Then we're to expect you at something before eight, sir?" said Tom Merry.

"Yes, I will be there."

"Can we get anything ready for you?"

"Only the stage. I bring all my traps with me."

"Good! Then all's settled. Ask the porter to show you to the School House when you come, and then ask for Tom Merry. That's me."

"Very good."

"Good-night, professor."

"Good-night, boys!"

And they parted.

Tom Merry & Co. walked home with a great deal of satisfaction. They had secured the professor for the performance, and things were going without a hitch.

"Bai Jove, this will be a regulah triumph!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy remarked.

And the others agreed with him.

CHAPTER 14.

Mr. Lathom's Birthday.

TOM MERRY & Co. flourished their pass triumphantly in the face of Taggles, the porter, as they passed through the gates, which Taggles had to open

specially for them. And Taggles grunted. He would have minded opening the gates if he could have reported the juniors; but now there was nothing to report. He grunted discontentedly as the party tramped on towards the School House.

"Figgins & Co. have gone to bed," remarked Blake, with a glance in the direction of the dark windows of the New House. "Aha! They little know—as the villain says in the six-shilling novel."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It will be a great supwise for Figgay!" Arthur Augustus remarked. "Upon the whole, as we are lickin' the New House all along the line, deah boys, I shall let Figgins off that thwashin'."

"Go hon!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Here we are! Don't make a row, Gussy," said Tom Merry, as they entered the School House.

"I am not makin' a row."

"Well, don't, then. Buck up, you Fourth Form kids. It's time youngsters were in bed."

If the hour had not been so late, the Fourth-Formers would have rushed upon Tom Merry there and then; but they did not want to bring an angry prefect out to inquire into the cause of the disturbance.

"You cheeky Shell-fish!" breathed Blake.

"Good-night, kiddies!"

And the Shell fellows marched off to their dormitory, grinning.

"Bai Jove! The cheeky wottahs—"

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"Come on, Gussy!"

"Pewwaps I ought to go aftah Tom Mewwy, and give him a thwashin'."

"Poof!"

And Arthur Augustus was dragged away to the Fourth-Form dormitory.

The juniors were soon asleep, and Blake woke up once or twice chuckling over a dream of the astounded and defeated looks of Figgins & Co., when the conjuring entertainment came off.

The next morning there was much satisfaction among the School House juniors.

It was very carefully arranged that the whole matter was to be kept secret from Figgins & Co. until the last possible moment, in case the New House trio should attempt to "muck up" the scheme in any way, which they were certain to do if they heard a whisper about it, of course.

But most of the School House fellows were taken into the secret, and more and more as the day advanced.

Nothing was said to McKish, of course; but it was very probable that the sneak of the Fourth contrived to keep himself informed of what was going on.

Tom Merry had asked permission to use the lecture-hall, which he knew was not required for anything else that night, and Mr. Railton, the House-master, had easily obtained the required permission for him.

He only asked what kind of an entertainment was to be given, having some rather dubious recollections of dramatic entertainments given by the juniors.

"It's a conjuring show, sir," said Tom Merry. "A really ripping—er—I mean a first-class show, sir."

"Ahem! Who is the conjurer?"

"We've got a professional, sir."

"Oh," said Mr. Railton.

"Yes, sir. Professor Bulger, who's been giving entertainments in Wayland and Rylcombe. He's jolly good, sir. We saw his show last night."

"You must find it very expensive, surely, Merry, to engage a professional conjurer for an entertainment here," said School House-master, in surprise.

"We've raised the fee between us, sir."

"But why is the show to be given? Surely it would be cheaper to visit the professor at his own show?"

"It's a celebration, sir."

Mr. Railton looked puzzled.

"Is to-day an anniversary?" he asked. "I do not recall if it is. It is certainly not Founder's Day, or—"

"It's Mr. Lathom's birthday, sir."

"Oh!"

"As he's a Form-master in the Fourth, sir, the Fourth thought they ought to have a celebration, so we're fixing the matter in hand to help them."

"Oh, I see! I am sure Mr. Lathom will be very flattered."

"We want Mr. Lathom to come to the show, sir, and you especially. It will give the thing a—a tone if you come, sir."

Mr. Railton laughed heartily.

"Then I shall certainly contrive to look in, Merry."

"Thank you, sir. We'll reserve all the front row seats for the masters. It's at eight o'clock, sir, but you can come in any time you like, of course."

"Thank you very much, Merry!"

And Tom Merry scuttled off to spread the good news that the lecture-hall could be had, and that Mr. Railton had promised to turn up. And the news was received with a general chuckle of satisfaction by the juniors.

"Figgins & Co. will want to kick up a row when they hear," said Blake, with a grin. "But with a House-master and a Form-master present, they'll have to keep the peace."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"They'll be done all along the line."

"Clean done!"

"Dished and diddled! Ha, ha!"

"We'd better go and ask Lathom," Monty Lowther remarked.

D'Arcy turned his eyeglass upon Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"The sooner the quicker!" agreed Manners. "He might have another engagement."

"Very likely," said Tom Merry. "We'll tackle him at once."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Come on!"

"Weally, deah boys, I insist that that is left to us," said D'Arcy. "As Lathom has the honah to be our Form-mastah, you must leave him to us."

"What-ho!" said Blake emphatically.

"Oh, stuff!" said Lowther. "You kids will make a muck of it."

Fourth-Formers, but Tom Merry pushed between in time, with a graceful wave of the hand.

"It's all right," he said. "Let the kids see Lathom. We've got plenty to do. Mind you, put it to him tactfully, kids."

"Weally, you know—"

Blake and D'Arcy, Digby and Herries and Reilly presented themselves at Mr. Lathom's study. The Form-master of the Fourth had gone in there after morning lessons, and he was reading a paper when the juniors knocked. He laid down the paper, and adjusted his spectacles in his deliberate way, and told them to enter.

They entered.

Mr. Lathom looked somewhat surprised at the invasion. The juniors half filled his study. He blinked at them through his spectacles.

"If you please, sir," said Blake, "many happy returns of the day."

"Yaas, wathah! Many happy weturns, sir."

"Thank you!" said Mr. Lathom, looking pleased. "I did not know you were—er—aware that it was my birthday, my dear boys. Thank you very much!"

"Oh, yes, sir, we knew," said Digby, "and we—"

"Pewwaps you had bettah leave it to me, Dig—"

"Shut up, Gussy."

"Weally, Hewwies—"

"This is how it is, sir," said Blake. "We've got up a bit of a celebration, sir, to—celebrate your birthday, sir."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Dear me!" said Mr. Lathom, looking very much surprised.

"Yes, sir. We—we've a professional entertainer chap coming over to give a show, and it's coming off in the lecture-hall at eight o'clock this evening, sir. We should all feel very much honoured if you would be present, sir."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Dear me!"

"Mr. Railton has promised to come, sir," said Blake.

"We are reserving the front row of seats for the masters, sir. It will be a good show; Professor Bulger is the top of his profession; I've heard him say so."

"I will come with pleasure," said Mr. Lathom. "I must say it is—er—very—er—gratifying to me, to see you take this—this notice of my—er—birthday. I had—er—almost forgotten it myself. I will certainly come, my dear boys."

"Thank you, sir!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

And the juniors retired, feeling very well satisfied with themselves and their Form-master.

"Lathom's a brick," Blake remarked. "He may be a bit of an owl in some things, but he's a jolly good sport, and I stick to that."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Lathom's coming," said Blake, as he rejoined Tom Merry. "And now everything in the garden is lovely!"

CHAPTER 15.

The Traitor!

THEY'RE up to something!"

Kerr made the remark, as he stopped with Figgins & Co. in the quadrangle at St. Jim's, and glanced towards the School House. The Terrible Three were lounging on the house steps, talking and laughing over something. Afternoon school was over, and crowds of the St. Jim's fellows were on the cricket-field, but Tom Merry & Co. were conspicuous by their absence there. Neither were Figgins & Co. thinking of cricket. They had other things to think of just now.

"They're up to something," repeated Kerr, thrusting his hands deep down into his trousers-pockets, and frowning. "I can guess what—in a way."

"What is it, then?"

"They've got the dodge from us of celebrating Lathom's birthday," said Kerr. "How they caught on to us I don't know—but they did. They knew what we were up to when they tracked us down over the rehearsal. Now we can't give Julius Caesar—"

Figgins shook his head.

"No; it would be impossible now. The fellows would kill themselves laughing when we came on the stage, after the show they made of us yesterday."

"And those bounders know it," said Kerr. "They've mucked up our play—and my belief is that they've borrowed the dodge, and they're getting up some celebration instead."

"That will be hard cheese."

"Yes; it will be about the final knock to our prestige. The whole House is simmering over what happened yesterday," said Kerr glumly. "It's rotten. It's no good our howling out that the School House isn't cock-house, if they lick us all along the line."

"It's not too late to get up a show," said Fatty Wynn. "I don't see why we can't stick it out."

"Rats! The fellows would laugh any dramatic show off the stage."

"Well, we needn't stick to the dramatic idea. There are others."

"Thinking of starting as an acrobat?" asked Kerr, with a sarcastic glance at Fatty Wynn's exceedingly plump figure. "Or do you fancy yourself as a tight-rope walker?"

"I was thinking of a feed," said the fat Fourth-Former simply. "A feed is the thing to get all Tom Merry's audience away from him, anyway. Fellows will come to a feed, whatever House they belong to."

"Trust Fatty to think of a feed!" said Figgins.

"Well, isn't it a good idea?"

"No, it's rotten. We haven't tin enough to stand a feed to the whole school, for one thing; and, besides, Tom Merry will keep his fellows up to the scratch. In a House contest they wouldn't desert him even for a feed."

"Oh, I don't know—say jam-tarts, ham-patties, plum-cake—"

"Oh, rats!"

"And cream-puffs, and meringues, and—"

"They're not all Fatty Wynn's!" grinned Kerr. "Shut up, Fatty! Besides, we haven't the tin. It's a rotten idea, as anybody would see who wasn't a born cannibal. If we could only find out what they're up to, and circumvent them—"

"Well, that's a good word, anyway," said Figgins. "Where did you pick it up?"

"I read it in a novel," confessed Kerr, blushing. "The villain was circumvented. It means diddling him, you know, in English. Now, if we could diddle them—"

"We'll jolly well find out what the game is!"

"They're all agog over something," said Kerr. "And they were late in last night. They didn't come straight in after the show. What did that mean?"

"Laying in a feed, perhaps," suggested Fatty Wynn. "Oh, for goodness' sake, get off the subject of feeding, Fatty! You'll make me ill."

"Well, I was only suggesting—"

"Don't, then. I— Well, what do you want?"

That question was addressed to Mellish of the Fourth, who came up with a sidling gait and an ingratiating smile. The New House juniors greeted him with a cold stare. They did not like Mellish, any more than his own House-fellows did.

"Heard the news?" asked Mellish.

"News! No! Anything going on?"

"Oh, I thought you knew, of course."

The New House chums exchanged an eager glance. Was it possible that the cad of the School House was going to let out Tom Merry's secret?

"What is it?" asked Figgins.

Mellish appeared to reflect.

"About Lathom's birthday," he said.

"Well, we know it's his birthday, if that's what you mean."

"But about the—ahem! Perhaps I'd better hold my tongue, as they don't seem to be letting New House chaps into it."

"Well, if it's anything about Lathom, we're entitled to know, as Fourth-Formers," said Kerr persuasively.

"H'm! Perhaps so. I—I wonder if any of you chaps could lend me half-a-crown?" said Mellish blandly.

There was a short silence.

Figgins & Co. tried not to look the disgust they felt. Mellish was putting it as cunningly as he could, but his meaning was plain enough. If they wanted to know the School House secret they had to pay for it.

Figgins felt in his pocket.

"I dare say I could manage it," he said at last.

"Right you are! I'm awfully hard up just now," said Mellish. "One good turn deserves another, of course. If you oblige me, I think I ought to oblige you."

Figgins silently handed over two shillings and a sixpence.

"Thank you!" said Mellish, slipping the coins into his pocket, and grinning. "I suppose it's all right for me to tell you, as you're in the Fourth. I don't hold with this idea of keeping secrets. It's caddish!"

"Well, you ought to know what's caddish, if anybody does," said Fatty Wynn contemptuously.

Mellish coloured.

"Oh, if you're going to put it like that, I won't tell you anything!"

"You will," said Figgins grimly.

"I shall suit myself, Figgins."

"You'll tell us, or you'll hand back that two-and-six, and take a jolly good hiding into the bargain," said Figgins.

"Of course, I meant to tell you," said Mellish uneasily.

"I—I think you ought to know, of course. There's a celebration on in the School House—the New House chaps are going to be invited at the last moment—"

"Oh, I see! What kind of a celebration?"

"A conjuring entertainment."

"Phew!"

"But those School House kids can't do any conjuring!" exclaimed Kerr. "It will be a fizzle."

"That's all you know," said Mellish. "They've got a professional—Professor Bulger, the chap who's been giving shows round here."

Figgins & Co. simply jumped.

"My only hat!" ejaculated Figgins.

"Are you sure?" asked Kerr.

"Yes, rather! They're paying him three pounds, and they've paid half in advance," said Mellish, with a grin.

"He's to arrive here from Rylcombe a quarter or so before eight to-night, as the show commences at eight. It's going to be a jolly good show—"

"We'll—we'll wreck it," muttered Fatty Wynn.

Mellish chuckled.

"You can't! Mr. Railton and Mr. Lathom have promised to be there, and they think that Kildare and Darrel and some more of the prefects are coming. You see, it'll be a real professional show, and the fellows will be glad to come—it's not as if it were a rotten amateur theatrical entertainment!"

Figgins & Co. allowed the sneer in the last remark to pass unnoticed. The sneers of the cad of the Fourth were nothing to them.

"They've got ahead of us this time," said Figgins.

"Perhaps the beast's lying, though," suggested Fatty Wynn.

Mellish gave him an evil look. Kerr shook his head.

"It's true enough. That's why they stayed behind in the village last night; they were making arrangements with the professor, of course."

"We ought to have guessed it," growled Figgins.

"Well, I don't see how we could. We know it now, though."

"Yes—and in time."

"Of course, you couldn't do anything to muck the show up, or I shouldn't have told you," said Mellish. "Tom Merry can't be dished, unless something happened to the professor; his cab might get turned over in the lane, or the horse frightened into bolting, or something of that sort. I don't suppose it's likely to happen, though. So—long!"

And Mellish walked away.

Figgins & Co. stared hard at one another.

"It's true enough," said Kerr. "We can easily make sure, though—we'll find out if Tom Merry has got the hall for a show, and we can speak to the professor, too. I could cut down to the village on my bike, and take some spoof message to him; of course, he doesn't know anything about House rows here, and he'd think I came from Tom Merry."

"That's a good dodge."

"Shall I buzz off, Figg?"

"Yes, rather! And get back as quick as you can," said Figgins. "We've got to tackle this; and if it's the truth, we've got to dish Tom Merry somehow."

And in five minutes Kerr was pedalling away towards Rylcombe; and Figgins was pacing his study in the New House, his hands deep in his pockets, and a heavy frown upon his brow, trying to think out some scheme for "dishing" Tom Merry, but without success.

CHAPTER 16.

Kerr Has It!

KERR dashed up to the gates of St. Jim's on his bicycle, and jumped down. He pushed the machine over to Pratt, who was standing in the gateway with his hands in his pockets.

"Shove that in the shed, Pratt," he said. "I'm in a hurry!"

And he ran towards the New House, leaving the astonished Pratt to wheel the bicycle away.

Kerr ran into the New House, and up the stairs, and burst into Figgins's study. The great Figgins was still pacing the room with a clouded brow, and Fatty Wynn was thoughtfully cleaning out the last traces of a beefsteak-pie from a dish.

Kerr came in panting, and dropped into a chair.

"You've been quick," said Figgins, stopping his tramp to and fro, and staring at his breathless chum.

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MARTIN BELFORD.

ANSWERS

"I've bucked up," said Kerr. "It came to me all of a sudden, and I simply flew."

"Eh!"

"It was after I saw the professor!" gasped Kerr.

"What was?"

"That I thought of it."

"Thought of what?"

"The wheeze."

"Oh!"

Fatty Wynn looked up from the pie-dish, which was almost as clean as a new pin, and laid down his fork.

"What's that, a wheeze?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Go ahead," said Figgins, with great relief. Figgins was always the first to admit the sagacity of his Scottish chum, and he made no secret of the fact that he always looked to Kerr to think of a way out of a difficulty.

Kerr panted for breath. His face was flaming red, and beaded with perspiration. It was evident that he had scorched wildly.

"You've seen the professor?" asked Figgins.

Kerr nodded.

"It's all straight, what we had from Mellish?"

"Yes."

"Good."

"I said I'd looked in to see if everything was arranged," said Kerr, with a breathless chuckle. "That was the exact truth, you know."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The professor never suspected, of course, that I didn't come from Tom Merry. He knew I was a St. Jim's chap. It's all cut and dried. The professor is to arrive here soon before eight, and Taggles will show him to the School House. He's coming in the Rylcombe cab, and brings his box of tricks with him."

"You said you had a wheeze?"

"It flashed into my mind after I left him," said Kerr.

"It's a bit risky."

"Never mind the risk."

"But it's stunning."

"Go ahead, kid."

"Suppose," said Kerr, after a glance at the door to make sure that it was closed—"suppose somehow the professor was stopped from coming—"

"I don't see what good that would do," said Figgins.

"Besides, they'd go and look for him, and—"

"Fathead! That's not all."

"Oh! Go on, then."

"We were going to give a giddy dramatic show," said Kerr. "Well, we can impersonate a professor with dyed whiskers, quite as well as we can impersonate Julius Cæsar and Brutus—or better—what?"

"My hat!"

"Suppose the professor were safely disposed of, and another chap, made up exactly like the professor, came up to the School House, eh?"

"Phew!"

"What price that?" demanded Kerr.

"My only hat!" ejaculated Figgins, lost in wonder. "You are the chap for ideas, Kerr. I've always said so, and I say it again."

Kerr chuckled.

"It flashed into my mind all of a sudden, and I scorched back to tell you," he said. "I think it's ripping, myself. Why, that chap Bulger was born to be impersonated. He wears false hair, and dyes his whiskers and moustache, so any make-up about him wouldn't attract any more attention than usual."

"Right you are! I've noticed his dyed whiskers."

"Then do you see how gorgeous it would be?" grinned Kerr. "One of us goes in to the School House as the professor to do conjuring tricks!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"D'Arcy's topper will go through a second experience, not quite as scathless as through the first. We'll play Old Harry with everything under the cover of conjuring. We'll make the whole School House wriggle."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And afterwards—when all's serene—we'll let 'em know the facts."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You see, we score doubly. We shall muck up the School House show, and we shall be giving a dramatic entertainment, after all—at least, an impersonating one."

"Splendid."

"Ripping!"

Kerr grinned. He was evidently proud of his idea.

"But who's to do the giddy impersonating?" said Fatty Wynn doubtfully. "That's the rub."

"Oh, Kerr!" said Figgins heartily. "Kerr's the best actor in the House. I never met a chap who was a patch on

him, except that chap, Gordon Gay, at the Grammar School Kerr's the man."

"Right-ho, it's Kerr!"

But the Scottish junior shook his head.

"Hang it all," said Figgins anxiously. "You can do it, Kerr. You know you can. I've seen you impersonate Lathom, and Skimpole, and a dozen others."

"They were about my height, though," said Kerr. "The professor is two or three inches the better of me."

"Oh, I forgot that!"

"You're the chap, Figgy."

Figgins started.

"But I'm not a patch on you at acting, Kerr, old man."

"I know you're not," said Kerr, with friendly candour. "But you're the man for this job. You see, it isn't acting at all, its just going through the tricks, and wearing ordinary evening-dress, with addition of a wig and dyed whiskers and moustache. I'll coach you in imitating the professor's voice—you'll only have to go a bit deeper, that's all—and remember, too, that the man's a stranger to nearly all the School House."

"That's true."

"Kerr's right," said Fatty Wynn. "Bulger's a long, lanky chap, so the part will suit Figgy splendidly."

"Looking for a thick ear, Fatty?" asked Figgins.

"Eh! What?"

"Then not so much of your long and lanky," growled Figgins. "I noticed myself that the professor was rather tall and slim, so that part will suit me."

Kerr grinned.

"That's right," he said. "You'll make up as the professor beautifully, Figgy. We've got all the things among our props, too. We'll make you up, and leave you here, and you can slip out of the house in the dark while we're dealing with the professor."

"That won't be easy," said Figgins dubiously.

"It will be all right. We'll meet the cab a little way from the gates, and persuade the professor to alight and spend a bit of time in the old barn," grinned Kerr. "I'll take a half-dozen fellows to help persuade him."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The driver is certain to be old Cope, and he'll be blind and deaf for two bob," said Kerr. "Anyway, if necessary, we can capture the driver too, and one of us can put on his hat and coat to drive the cab up."

"Good egg!"

"Well, what do you think of the wheeze?"

Figgins's reply to that question was forcible but not verbal. He rushed upon his chum, clasped him round the neck, and waltzed him round the study.

"Here, hold on!" roared Kerr.

But Figgins was too joyful and excited to hold on.

He waltzed Kerr wildly round till they bumped into the table, and the pie-dish Fatty Wynn had cleaned out so well went with a crash to the floor, and smashed into fifty pieces.

"Look out!" gasped Fatty Wynn.

"Ow! Leggo!"

Figgins let go his astounded chum at last, and Kerr reeled into the armchair, and collapsed there. Figgins staggered against the mantelpiece and gasped.

"You howling ass!" stammered Kerr.

"My dear kid, I'm rejoicing."

"You chump!"

"It's all right—we're going to lick the School House—we're going to make Tom Merry's hair curl—we're going to make Blake sit up—we're going to make Kangaroo jump!" chattered Figgins. "Hurray for us!"

And after that ebullition, Figgins & Co. went seriously to work.

CHAPTER 17.

The Notice.

TOM MERRY raised his head from the paper he had been writing in his study in the School House, and chuckled softly.

"There! I think that's all right," he remarked.

"Let's have a look at it," said Monty Lowther.

Tom Merry held up the paper, and the chums of the Shell read it out.

It ran as follows:

"NOTICE.

"This being the anniversary of the birthday of the respected master of the Fourth Form, a celebration has been arranged by his respectful pupils.

"The services of a distinguished professional man have been secured to provide a first-class entertainment, free to all St. Jim's.

"There will be no charge for admission, and both Houses are cordially invited to roll up in their thousands; but New House fellows will be expected to put on clean collars, and



"The third man from the head," bellowed Sergeant-major Benians, "draw back them feet!"
 "I-I can't, sir!" faltered Jimmy Preston, "they-they're not mine!"

(An amusing incident in the splendid, long complete school tale of Gordon Gay & Co., entitled "The Rylcombe Cadet Corps," in "The Empire Library." Now on sale. Price One Halfpenny.)

wash their faces, and generally make themselves look decent for once. After the entertainment, they may go back to their normal state as quickly as they please.

"The entertainment will take place in the lecture-hall of St. Jim's, kindly lent by the authorities for the purpose.

"Commence at eight o'clock precisely.

"Front row seats reserved for masters and prefects. Other seats free, and apportioned in order of arrival.

"Signed,

"T. MERRY, for the Celebration Committee."

"How's that for high?" demanded Tom Merry.

"Ripping!" said Lowther. "Splendid! It hits off the New House bouncers beautifully, and says all there is to be said. I couldn't have done it better myself."

Tom Merry laughed.

"I'll take it and show it to the kids in No. 6 Study," he remarked. "They may want to have a hand in drawing up the notice. There's no end to the cheek of these Fourth Form kids."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And Tom Merry blotted the notice, and walked away to Study No. 6 with it.

There was a sound of excited voices as he drew near to that famous apartment.

"Undah the circs., Blake—?"

"Rats!"

"I tell you—?"

"Bosh!"

"Weally, Blake—?"

"Poof!"

"I insist upon dwawin' up the notice. What is required for dwawin' up a notice of this sort is a fellow of tact and judgment—"

"And I'm the chap!"

"Pway, don't be ridiculous, deah boy. I—"

"Hallo," said Tom Merry affably, looking in. "Are you kids bothering about the notice for the entertainment?"

"Yaas, wathah."

"You needn't trouble—"

"I insist upon twoublin'. As the only fellow here with anythin' like tact and judgment, I insist upon dwawin' up the notice."

"Rats!" said Blake. "Why—?"

"If you say wats to me—"

"Well, I do!"

"Order!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "It's no good bothering over drawing up the notice, that's done!"

The chums of the Fourth stared at him.

"Done!" said Blake.

"Yes, here it is."

Blake pointed to the fire.

"Shove it on!" he said.

"Eh? Why?"

"That's the proper place for it. If you like you can sit down and listen while we discuss the subject. Now——"

"Here's the notice——"

"If you think that a Shell duffer can draw up a notice of a Fourth-Form affair——"

"Yaas, wathah! I wegard Tom Mewwy as displayin' a feafhul cheek."

"What-ho!" said Digby and Herries together.

Tom Merry laughed.

"Gentlemen of the Fourth Form, I beg to have the honour of submitting this notice to your august approval," he said.

"Well, if you put it in that way perhaps we'll look at it," said Blake, mollified.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Tom Merry laid the notice on the table.

"There you are!" he said.

The Fourth-Formers read through the notice, and chuckled at the reference to the New House in it. Blake nodded approval.

"I think that will do all right," he remarked. "I'll just go over it and knock it into shape a little, and write it out in a more decipherable hand, and then it will be O.K."

"Go ahead!" said Tom Merry, laughing. "Pin it up on the notice-board when you've done. I'm going down to the lecture-room now to see that all's ready."

"We'll follow you when the notice is up."

Tom Merry quitted the study, and Blake looked over the notice again. He drew out a fresh sheet of manuscript, and dipped his pen in the ink, and then paused.

"You may as well write this out, Dig," he remarked.

"You write a very plain fist. I'll go down and see how those Shell chumps are getting on in the lecture-room."

"My dear chap, you could write it out better than I could."

"You can do it if you like, Gussy."

"Not at all, deah boy. It would be as twoublesome as witin' out a beastly imposition, you know."

"Look here——"

"Wats!"

Blake glanced at the notice again thoughtfully.

"I don't really see that it actually needs re-writing," he remarked. "Those who can't understand the writing can go without. Anyway, it will do."

"Weally, Blake, I think that a Fourth-Form notice ought to be written out by a Fourth-Form chap, you know."

"Oh, go and eat coke!"

And Blake picked up the notice and rose from his chair. He was not inclined to undertake unnecessary labour, and, as D'Arcy had said, it would be as much trouble as writing out an impot.

"Weally, Blake——"

"Rats!"

Jack Blake left the study, and the others followed him. In the hall of the School House the notice was promptly pinned up on the public notice-board.

Equally promptly it was surrounded by a crowd of curious readers.

School House fellows who were not yet in the secret read it with surprise and gratified chuckles. New House fellows came to see what it was, too, and they frowned. The news was soon known from one end of the school to the other that at eight o'clock the School House were giving a grand entertainment in the lecture-hall, for which the services of a distinguished professional gentleman had been secured.

Fatty Wynn strolled in to read the notice, and he read it through from beginning to end, and grinned.

"Who's the distinguished professional man?" he asked.

"You'll know when the time comes," said Blake.

The fat Fourth-Former chuckled.

"Are you afraid we shall spirit him off?" he asked.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You're welcome to, if you like," said Digby, grinning.

"Still, if you want to know who it is, you can find out—or turn up in hall for the show, and then you'll see. There's no charge for admission, so it will suit the usual financial condition of you chaps."

"Only you're expected to weah clean collahs, deah boy."

"Oh, we'll come," said Fatty Wynn.

"What-ho!" said Pratt and French and Jimson.

"Mind, no larks," said Blake warningly. "Mr. Railton and Mr. Lathom and half a dozen prefects will be there to keep order. No larks."

"My dear kid, we'll be as quiet as lambs."

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"You'd better, or you'll go out on your necks. Don't forget the clean collar."

"Rats!" said Fatty Wynn cheerfully.

CHAPTER 18.

In Deep Disguise.

"HOW'S it getting on?" asked Figgins.

"Rippingly!"

"It's got a curious feel on the chivvy."

"That's all right."

"This blessed moustache is tickling my nose."

"You'll get used to it."

Figgins & Co. were busy in their study in the New House. The blind was down and the door was locked. Only a faithful few had been admitted to the secret as yet. The bulk of the New House fellows would not know till the entertainment was on, or perhaps over. Figgins meant to run no more risks than were absolutely necessary.

Kerr, who was a master-hand at make-up, was hard at work now. Figgins, under his careful hands, was growing into a twin brother of Professor Bulger.

Fatty Wynn had just come in and reported about the notice on the board. Kerr chuckled in his quiet way.

"Behold the distinguished professional gentleman," he said.

"It's wonderful!" said Fatty Wynn.

And he sat eating dough nuts and watching the operation with wide-open eyes of admiration.

Kerr's touch was masterly.

And from the varied stock belonging to the New House Amateur Dramatic Society he had plenty of materials for the purpose. And the get-up of Professor Bulger seemed to lend itself, too, for the purpose of imitation. For his hair was mostly false, and his beard and moustache evidently dyed. They were consequently unusually easy to imitate.

Figgins's healthy complexion was changed into the somewhat pasty face of the professor, and the dyed beard and moustache added to his face. The wig completed the picture, and a silk hat was added.

Then Kerr stood him before a glass and told him to look.

Figgins staggered in his astonishment.

It was the face of Professor Bulger that was looking out at him.

"My only hat!" he gasped.

"It's ripping!" said Fatty Wynn.

"Now for the clothes," said Kerr.

Figgins was soon stripped and dressed in a suit of black evening clothes, and then the resemblance of form was as great as that of face, for Figgins's somewhat lanky figure was very much like that of the professor.

"Ripping!" said Fatty Wynn again, finishing the last of the dough nuts.

"Blessed if I don't feel as if I were the giddy professor," grinned Figgins.

"It's only the voice now," said Kerr. "You needn't trouble so much to make it like the professor's as unlike your own. I've got his voice to a T, and I'll give you a course. Listen!"

Kerr had a wonderful knack of picking up voices, but Figgins was far less skilful. But after a quarter of an hour's practice Kerr pronounced that he would do.

"Mind, keep on binging in allusions to places you've travelled in," he said. "I noticed that the professor always did that while I was talking to him, and the School House kids must have noticed it, too."

"Right you are!"

"I think we're about done now," said Kerr, looking at his watch. "A quarter-past seven. Better go out on the road now, to make sure of being in time. It would be awful to miss the professor and muck up the jape, after all the trouble we've taken."

"What-ho!"

"How ever am I to get out like this, though?" said Figgins. "It's not dark yet."

"That's all right—you can put on a big ulster to cover up the clothes," said Kerr. "Take the wig off—I can easily shove it on you again in the cab—and the hat, too. No need to move the other things—you can muffle up and hide them. We shall all be round you, you know, so nobody will get a close look."

"All right!"

Figgins put on his ulster and a muffler up to his nose, and his disguise was quite hidden save for the eyebrows and complexion, but a loose cap pulled down over his face hid most of that.

He left the New House in the midst of half a dozen fellows who were in the plot, and they lost no time in getting down to the gates.

There was not much chance of their being observed by the School House fellows. They were too busy just then to think of the New House.

Tom Merry & Co. were making the arrangements in the lecture-room, and the other fellows were already crowding in to bag good seats. So were a crowd of New House fellows, too, for nobody intended to miss the entertainment.

Figgins & Co. passed out of the gates, and felt more easy in their minds as they entered the lane.

"All right here," said Pratt.

"Yes, rather! Now for the professor."

"Where shall we lay for him?" asked French.

"Some way from the school," said Figgins. "It's quite possible Tom Merry or some of his lot may come down to the gates to meet the cab, you know. We want to be out of sight and hearing."

"That's so."

"He'll have to pass the bend in the lane coming from Rylcombe, and that's near the old barn, too, and a good spot to lay for him."

"Come on, then!" said Kerr.

And the New House juniors tramped down the lane.

In a clump of trees where the lane curved they took up their stand, and watched the road from Rylcombe.

Their hearts were beating with excitement now, especially Figgins's. They were fairly embarked upon the biggest jape of the season; but how would it turn out?

That was a question that remained to be answered.

"I'll touch you up now," said Kerr. "We may have a quarter of an hour to wait for the professor, and we sha'n't have much time to waste afterwards."

"Good!"

"Mind, don't you join in a tussle, if there is one; it will muck up the whole show."

Figgins grinned.

"I'll remember."

He whipped off the ulster, and Kerr readjusted the wig upon his head, and added a few artistic touches. Then the tall hat was replaced, and Figgins was Professor Bulger II. again. The juniors looked on in great admiration.

"It's ripping!" said Jimson. "Blessed if I shouldn't think it was the professor himself. I've only seen him once, but I should recognise him again—in Figgins. He'd take in the professor's own mother, if he'd got one."

"By George!" said Kerr suddenly. "There's no need to let the driver know, either. We can work it without that. I've just thought—"

"Hark!" exclaimed Fatty Wynn.

There was a rumble of wheels in the lane.

"That's the cab!"

"I know the rumble of the Rylcombe rattletrap," said French. "That's it. Yes, I can see it now, and old Cope driving."

"Keep in cover, Figgy," whispered Kerr hurriedly. "Don't let the driver see you. We'll stop the cab. Leave it to me."

"Right you are!" said Figgins, who had full faith in his Scottish chum. "Kerr's head cook and bottle-washer now, you chaps."

The cab rumbled slowly along.

It was nearly abreast of the clump of bushes when Kerr made a signal to his comrades, and they sprang out into the road.

Kerr threw up his hand.

"Halt!" he exclaimed.

Cope drew his willing horse to a halt. He stared at the juniors, rather surprised by Kerr's dramatic command. He would not have been surprised if Kerr had said "Stop," but "Halt" had a flavour of the drama about it.

"Anything wrong, Master Kerr?" he asked.

"Oh, no!" said Kerr. "Only we want to speak to Professor Bulger."

"Genelman wants to speak to you, sir."

Kerr signed to Jimson to take the horse's head, in case of accidents—though old Cope's horse was more likely to go to sleep than to bolt—and then he opened the door of the hack.

The professor looked out in surprise.

The New House juniors could hardly help chuckling as they looked at the professor, with his rusty silk hat and dyed moustache, so exactly like the disguised Figgins did he look.

"What's the matter?" asked the professor. "Ah, you are the lad who called on me a couple of hours ago, I think."

"Yes, sir," said Kerr. "Would you mind stepping out of the hack a minute?"

"Why?"

"We want to speak to you, sir. It's about the entertainment, and awfully important."

The professor looked at his watch.

"I haven't any time to waste," he said. "Surely you can say what you want to say without my getting out of the cab."

"We should prefer you to get out, sir."

"Nonsense!" said the professor, beginning to suspect a boyish joke. "I have no time to waste. Drive on, please."

"Keep hold of the horse, Jimmy."

"What-ho!"

"Please step out, sir," said Kerr politely. "I've told you that it's awfully important, and you can't go till the matter's settled."

The professor flushed angrily.

"Come, come, this is more than a joke," he exclaimed.

"Quite so. Will you get out, sir?"

"I certainly will not."

"Then we shall have to help you out, sir," said Kerr, still politely. "We shall be very sorry if you force us to it. You see that there are six of us."

The professor did see it, and he was growing very flustered and alarmed. Clever conjuror as he was, he was no athlete, and any one of the sturdy juniors would probably have been more than a match for him in a tussle.

"I—I will step out, certainly," he said. "I—I do not understand this. You are not the boys who engaged me for this evening's performance."

"It's all right, sir; you won't be hurt, I assure you," said Kerr.

The professor stepped out of the hack.

"This way, sir."

"Why—why?"

"I will explain in a minute."

The professor hesitated, but five juniors were round him. He cast a glance up and down the lonely lane, and then he followed Kerr.

He disappeared into the bushes, out of sight of the astonished driver. Cope looked at Jimson, who was still holding the horse.

"Larks—eh?" he grinned.

"Just so," said Jimson. "Only a game."

The driver stared at the bushes. But he could not see into the thick foliage. He heard the professor utter an exclamation of astonishment, that was all.

Professor Bulger had a right to be astonished.

For as he entered the bushes, in the dusk, he found himself standing face to face with his double!

And the two professors stared at one another—one grinning, and the other dumbfounded!

CHAPTER 19.

The Other Professor.

"D-D-DEAR me!" gasped Professor Bulger.

"W-w-what does this mean? I—I—"

Kerr chuckled.

"It's all right, professor," he said. "It's only a lark. This chap is Figgins, of ours, and he's got up."

"Just so," said Figgins.

"But—but—"

"It's a lark," explained Kerr. "It's a jape up against Tom Merry."

"Merry! That is the lad who engaged me!"

"Exactly. And Figgins is going instead of you to carry out the engagement."

The professor gasped for breath.

"I—I—"

"You see, sir, it's a jape."

"I—I cannot consent. I—"

"You must, professor," said Kerr coolly. "We haven't taken all this trouble for nothing. Figgins is going on in the cab instead of you, and even the driver won't know the difference."

The professor simply snorted.

"I will not allow it."

"We shall be sorry to use violence, sir," said Kerr smoothly. "Don't force us to. You can see you have no chance."

The professor made a movement to rush back to the road. The juniors closed round him grimly.

Mr. Bulger looked extremely flustered.

"It's only a lark, sir," explained Figgins. "It's a jolly good one, and the fellows we're japing will take it like sportsmen, when they know."

"But my fee—"

"Oh, that's all right," said Kerr. "You will receive that in any case. I believe you have thirty shillings still to come?"

"Exactly," said the professor, calming down a little.

"Well, here it is."

Kerr handed over a sovereign and half-sovereign, and the professor's face cleared very much as he received them.

"Thank you," he said. "But—"

"That sees you clear," said Kerr. "But we're going to pay an extra fee of a guinea for the inconvenience we're putting you to."

Professor Bulger smiled.

"Well, I must say that is very fair," he remarked.

"Of course, sir; and it will be a ripping good joke, too, don't you think so?" said Kerr insinuatingly.

The professor chuckled.

The payment of the thirty shillings, and the promise of another guinea, had evidently had the effect of awakening in him an hitherto unsuspected sense of humour.

"Well, it will be funny," he said. "But—"

"We shall have to ask you to spend the next couple of hours in the barn over yonder," said Kerr. "But a couple of these fellows will stay and keep you company, and there's a lantern and some newspapers, if you care to read. At half-past nine you'll be handed the other guinea, and you can go where you like."

"But—"

"And you'll have the satisfaction of having assisted in a ripping jape."

"If I do not consent—"

"Oh, you will, sir."

"But if I don't—"

"Well, in that case we should have to tie you up in the barn, and you wouldn't get the extra fee, sir; but surely—"

"Well, I am in your hands," said the professor. "You will let it be known that I was not to blame for not fulfilling my engagement."

"Of course, sir. We'll tell the whole story. That's what we want."

"Then I consent—under compulsion, of course."

"Good enough," Kerr turned to Figgins. "Go it, Figgy!"

"Right you are!"

Figgins stepped from the bushes, in sight of the driver. Cope looked at him, without the least suspicion that it was not the real professor.

"Ain't 'urt, I 'ope, sir?" he remarked.

"Not at all," said Figgins. "It was only a joke."

And he got into the hack.

"Shall I drive hon, sir?"

"By all means."

Jimson stood away from the horse's head, and the animal was induced to get into motion again.

The hack rolled away towards, St. Jim's.

In the bushes, the juniors were chuckling, and the professor grinning a little nervously. Kerr slipped his arm through the professor's.

"This way, sir," he said.

And Professor Bulger was marched away to the old barn. The lantern was lighted, and the bundle of newspapers produced, and French and Jimson sat down on either side of the professor on an old bench. The two Shell fellows had agreed to remain with the captured professional gentleman to keep watch and ward.

"I hope you'll be comfy, sir," said Kerr. "Mind, when you hear half-past nine from the village clock, French, hand over the guinea, and let the gentleman go."

"I'll do it."

"You don't mind staying here a bit, professor?"

The professor laughed a little ruefully.

"I don't seem to have much choice," he remarked.

"Still, I must say I've never earned a guinea so easily before."

"Good-night, sir!"

"Good-night!" grinned Mr. Bulger.

And the juniors went out and closed the door.

They chuckled as they hurried back to the school, eager to get into good places in the lecture-hall for that conjuring entertainment—which was likely to be the most remarkable one ever witnessed by the juniors of St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 20.

The Professor Arrives.

TOM MERRY started as three-quarters rang out from the clock tower of St. Jim's.

"Time the professor was here!" he exclaimed.

"Let's go down to the gate and meet him," said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

And half a dozen of the juniors trooped out of the School House.

It was quite dark now, but Taggles had been directed to leave the gates open till the cab from Rylcombe entered. As the juniors reached the gateway, they heard a rumble of wheels on the road.

"That's the cab, deah boy!" said D'Arcy.

And the cab rolled into the gateway.

A face with a dyed moustache looked out.

"Good-evening, professor!" sang out the juniors.

"Good-evening, boys!"

"Drive on to the School House, Cope."

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"Yes, Master Merry."

And the juniors walked with the hack to the School House. There the professor alighted, with a black bag in his hand.

"Here you are, sir!" said Tom Merry cheerily. "This way!"

Professor Bulger the Second followed the juniors into the House.

They passed the door of the lecture-room, and a heavy buzz of voices proceeded from it.

Tom Merry passed on with the professor, while the other fellows went into the hall.

"That is the room, sir," explained Tom Merry; "but you enter at the other end on the stage."

"Very good!"

And the professor followed the hero of the Shell into a small room which opened off the upper end of the lecture-hall.

"Booked to begin in ten minutes, sir," said Tom Merry, glancing at his watch. "We've got some sandwiches here, and tea ready to make, sir, if you feel peckish."

"Thank you, I'd like a cup of tea," said the professor.

"Right-ho!"

The fire was burning in the room, and a kettle was singing on the hob. A laid tray was on the table. Tom Merry made the tea quickly enough, and the professor sat down to tea and ham sandwiches.

He sat with his back to the light, but it was not necessary. Tom Merry had not the slightest suspicion in his mind.

He looked after the professor hospitably.

Mr. Bulger II. demolished three sandwiches and two cups of tea, and then declared himself satisfied, and rose from the table, and opened his bag.

"I shall be on in a minute now," he remarked.

"Nothing more I can do, sir?"

"No, thanks; I need no assistance! When I was in France—"

"Then I'll get into my place, sir," said Tom Merry.

"I don't want to miss any of the show."

"Certainly! When I was in Japan—"

"Quite so, sir!"

And Tom Merry made his escape before the professor could relate any of the happenings he had experienced in Japan.

The hall was very full when Tom Merry entered it.

For the lecture it was designed for, or for the Greek play the seniors sometimes gave there, it was certainly never half so well filled.

School House and New House had rolled up, if not in thousands, at least in strong force. Seniors were as well represented as juniors.

For the show was not an amateur performance, but a real professional one, which many of them would have paid money to see in Rylcombe, so they naturally rolled up to see it for nothing.

The masters, too, were there in force. Mr. Lathom, blushing a little—for he was a quiet and unassuming gentleman, not much accustomed to figuring in the public eye—sat in the place of honour in the front row, and on either side of him were other masters—Mr. Raiton, Mr. Solby, of the Third, Mr. Tutt, of the Second, the mathematics-master, and the German-master; and on the next row sat a goodly array of prefects. Kildare, the captain of the school, was there, with Darrel and Rushden and Knox, School House prefects; and with them sat Monteith and Baker and Dodd, New House prefects.

There were rows of other Sixth-Formers, too, and every seat was taken; and at the back of the hall were crowded the fags of the Third, Second, and First Forms, most of them standing.

Tom Merry's eye gleamed with pride as he glanced over the audience. It was safe to say there never had been an audience so crammed before at St. Jim's, not even on Speech Day.

"They have wolloped up, haven't they?" asked D'Arcy, as Tom Merry dropped into a seat beside him.

"Yes, rather; it's jolly good!"

"Well, they're going to get a really ripping show for nothing!" said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Got your hat ready, Gussy? The professor will want it for the hat trick."

"Yaas; here it is, undah the seat, deah boy!"

"That trick will go like anything," said Blake. "Blessed if I see how he did it, though! He must be awfully clever. I couldn't see through him."

Monty Lowther grinned.

"I spotted it. He had a second hat in the box, and it was the second hat that he took out and stamped on. After stamping on it, he only pretended to throw it back into the box. He really hid it under his coat. It was squashed up so small that he could shove it out of sight."

"I wegard Lowthah's theoway as quite pwob."
 "It isn't a theory, ass; it's a fact. I was watching him."
 "I wufuse to be called an ass!"
 "Order!"
 "Hallo! Here are some more coming in!" said Blake, turning his head, as there was a scuffle of feet at the door.
 "New House bounders, too!"
 "Kerr and Wynn and Pratt! Where's Figgins?"
 "Can't see him!"
 "Here, let the bounders have a front seat!" said Tom Merry generously. "They've been beaten hollow, and done all along the line, and we may as well let them have a good show!"

"Yaas, wathah!"
 Tom Merry signed to Fatty Wynn and Kerr to come up the hall. The New House chums came up grinning.
 "Any room here?" asked Kerr. "We're late; we've been detained!"
 "We're going to squeeze up and make room," said Tom Merry. "Shove along there!"
 "Wight you are!"
 "Where's Figgins? We can make room for three."
 "He's not here yet," said Kerr, with a side glance at the empty stage. "You'll see him soon, though!"
 "Yes, rather!" said Fatty Wynn.
 "Well, we'll make room for him when he comes."
 And Kerr and Fatty Wynn took their seats, the juniors being a little crowded in the row, but they did not mind that. Then the professor came on to the stage.

CHAPTER 21.

No Deception.

PROFESSOR BULGER made his bow to the audience, and they greeted him with a general murmur of applause. "Always cheer when you go in on the nod" is an old professional maxim, and the St. Jim's fellows, without having heard of it, lived up to it. The professor had a most flattering reception, and he bowed again.

"Will any gentleman present oblige me by lending me his hat?" he asked, as soon as he had his arrangements made for the trick.

Up jumped Arthur Augustus at once. There wasn't any hesitation about the swell of the School House this time. His topper had been safely through the ordeal once, why not again?

He handed a really resplendent topper to the professor. "Thank you very much!" said the professor, taking it. "I suppose you are quite willing to trust this hat in my hands?"

"Yaas, wathah, sir!"
 "You are willing to take the risks?" asked the professor, with a smile.

"I'm willin' to take all the wisks, sir," said D'Arcy, cheerfully.
 "Very good!"

Arthur Augustus resumed his place, and the professor, with the hat in his hands, faced the audience.

"Some of the young gentlemen present saw my performance last evening," he remarked. "They saw me perform the hat trick. I shall now proceed to do so without the aid of the box."

"Bai Jove!"
 "Everything that is done will be done in full view of the audience," said the professor blandly.

"What about your theoway now, Lowthah?"
 "Rats!" said Lowther. "He can't do it. Unless the hat goes out of sight, he can't change it for another. You can't carry a silk hat in your waistcoat-pocket."

"Well, he says—"
 "I say he can't do it!"
 "Wats!"

D'Arcy, full of faith, watched the professor. Certainly it looked as if the topper was doomed this time. The professor proceeded to light a fire in it, as he had done the previous evening, but in a slightly different way.

The juniors knew that when a fire was lighted in a hat, some sort of a skin had to be skillfully inserted first to guard it from injury, but there was evidently no illusion about what Mr. Bulger was now doing.

He called up a member of the audience to examine the hat, to ascertain that it was not protected in any way, and Lefevre, of the Fifth, performed the duty.

"There is nothing in the hat?" asked the professor.
 "Nothing, sir," said Lefevre. "That's what I say; nothing at all!"

"Regardez," said the professor.
 He proceeded to pour paraffin into the hat.
 When the lining was soaked with it, he placed the hat upon its crown on the table, and applied a match.

There was a soaring flame at once.

"My only hat!" gasped Lefevre. "No deception about that! The blessed hat's aight!"
 And he returned to his seat, lost in wonder.
 The professor allowed the hat to flame up for several moments, and then splashed water into it and extinguished the flame.

A slight shade of anxiety was growing upon Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's aristocratic brow by this time.

It really seemed as if there were no illusion, and the professor had really set the silk topper on fire.

"Bai Jove!" murmured D'Arcy.
 "Looks like business!" said Manners.
 "But he is an awfully clevah conjuwah, you know."

"The topper's done for," said Lowther obstinately.
 "Wats!" said D'Arcy, but with less conviction than before.
 "Gentlemen, you have seen me set fire to the hat," said the professor. "Now you will see me stamp upon it."

"Bai Jove!"
 Professor Bulger set the hat upon the floor, and lifted his right foot. It came down on the hat with a powerful stamp.

At once D'Arcy's topper was changed into an open hat.
 "Gweat Scott!" gasped D'Arcy.
 "My word!" muttered Digby. "He'll have to be a joll clever conjuror to get that hat back into shape again."

But the professor was not yet satisfied. He stamped upon the hat again and again, till it had lost all semblance of its shape of a hat.
 Then he picked up the wreck, and, with a sweep of his arm, tossed it off the stage into the wings.

"Now, gentlemen, I will proceed with the paint trick—"
 D'Arcy rose to his feet, somewhat excited.

"But you haven't westered my toppah yet, pwofessah," he exclaimed.
 "Please do not interrupt—"

"You have not weturnd my toppah—"
 "I shall return your hat in good time, Master D'Arcy. I prefer to get through the tricks in a series, and then—"

"But my hat—"
 "I will return it to your hands later."
 "But—"

"Sit down!" roared a dozen voices.
 "Weally, you know—"
 "Sit down in front!"

Blake dragged D'Arcy into his seat.
 "Shut up, you ass!" he muttered. "What do you mean by interrupting our own show?"

D'Arcy looked excited.
 "I feel that he has blundahed with the hat, deah boy!"

"Well, if he has, you don't want to give our own conjuwah away before the New House eads, do you?" said Blake scathingly.

"Bai Jove, you know, I nevah thought of that!"
 "Then think of it now, and shut up!"

"But my toppah—"
 "Oh, your topper's all right!"

"Don't think much of your conjuror, Blake," said Kerr with a superior smile. "I'll bet he's ruined Gussy's hat!"

"Rats!" said Blake warmly. "The hat's all right!"
 "Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy, changing his tone at once as soon as there was a suggestion of New House criticism.
 "The hat's all wight!"

"You weren't so sure about that a minute ago!" grinned Kerr.
 "Oh, wats!"

"Order there! Shut up!" said Tom Merry.
 "Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Order! The professor's speaking!"
 "I shall be obliged if any gentleman who wishes to assist me will step upon the stage," said Professor Bulger.

"Go it, Blake!"
 "Oh, all right!"
 Jack Blake stepped on the stage. The professor had tube of colour and a hard brush in his hands.

"This is my famous paint trick," he announced. "I paint the face of this gentleman—"

"Oh, do you?" exclaimed Blake, backing away hastily. And there was a laugh from the audience.

"I paint his face—"
 "Go it, Blake!"
 "Buck up, kid!"

"Of course, it is only a trick, Mr. Blake," said the professor, with an indulgent smile. "It appears to the audience, as well as to yourself, that I really paint your face. As a matter of fact, it is a trick."

"Oh, I see!" said Blake, only half reassured.
 "Stand still, please!"

The professor squeezed colour out of the tube upon the brush, and proceeded to paint Jack Blake's face a bright scarlet.

In a couple of minutes the junior presented a really startling appearance, and the audience were grinning hugely.

He shifted uncomfortably under the infliction, and heered how the paint was coming off again. It seemed to him as certainly as to the audience, that his face was being painted.

"I—I say," he muttered. "This stuff will come off, I suppose. Ow! Ooooh!"

There was a delighted giggle from the audience as Blake uttered. Either accidentally or not, the professor had oiled the brush into his mouth as he spoke.

"Groo!" gasped Blake. "Ooch!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I—I say— Ooooh!"

Blake did not try to speak again. The professor was too clumsy with the brush, and the paint did not taste at all.

"There," said the professor at last, "that is the Celebrated Paint Trick, gentlemen, as performed before all the owned heads of Europe. You all see that the youth has been painted."

"What ho!"

"You are satisfied that there is no deception?"

"Oh, yes; rather!"

"Very good. When the paint is quite dry, I shall perform the second part of the trick. Pray sit down, my lad, for a time."

"But—"

"The paint must dry before I remove it."

"But—"

"Here is a chair."

The professor pushed Blake into a chair on the stage, and the junior sat down, his face glowing scarlet, and his limbs too deep for words.

CHAPTER 22.

Something Like a Jape.

"NOW, gentlemen," said the professor, turning blandly to the audience, "the next trick is the Famous Knot Trick. I will tie up two persons together with this rope, in a way that will make it impossible for them to get apart. The second part of the trick is, to make the rope fall asunder by a wave of my magic wand."

"Bai Jove, that sounds vevy good!"

"Yes, rather!"

"I require the assistance of two members of the audience," said the professor. "Will you oblige me, Messrs. Merry and the Noble?"

Tom Merry and Kangaroo looked at one another. They did not refuse, and they rose from their places and went to the stage.

The professor placed two chairs back to back, and told them to sit down. They obeyed, and he uncoiled several lengths of thin and strong rope.

"Blessed if I half like this," Kangaroo whispered to Tom Merry.

"Just what I was thinking."

"I don't see how he's to get that colour off Blake's livvy, even if he makes Gussy's topper all right again."

"Same here."

"I—I suppose he isn't a fraud," muttered Kangaroo easily.

"Well, you saw his show last night, didn't you?"

"Yes, he did everything he undertook."

"Anyway, we couldn't give him away now, even if he is a fraud," said Tom Merry, in a whisper. "It would be a rotten come-down, and spoil everything."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"I will now proceed to tie up these two youths," said the professor.

And he did, the audience watching him keenly.

He bound their legs to the legs of the chairs, and then he arched his arms to their sides, and then tied the two chairs together, and wound up by winding a rope round both of them, so that they were bound to one another.

There was certainly no deception about it.

The two juniors were fastened up as fast as could be. They could not move a limb.

"There," said the professor; "now try to get loose."

Tom Merry and Kangaroo tried hard enough. But there was no loosening the grip of the ropes.

"You cannot get loose?"

"No," gasped Tom Merry.

"Very good. Gentlemen, are you satisfied?"

"Yes!" shouted the audience.

"Very good. I will now proceed with the Circle Trick—"

"Here, finish this blessed trick first," shouted Kangaroo.

"My dear lad—"

"Let us out!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

The professor shook his head.

"I am going to finish up all the tricks together," he said.

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reprovingly. "I trust you will not interfere with the proper sequence of my tricks."

"But—but this is jolly uncomfortable."

"Never mind," said Kangaroo, "we can stick it. We're not so much in the pickle as Blake, anyway."

"Very good," said the professor blandly, "I will now proceed with the Famous Circle Trick, as performed before all the crowned heads of Europe with marked success. I shall require twelve persons to take part in this trick, which will be the greatest one of the evening. Who offers?"

There was a stony silence in the hall.

After what had happened to D'Arcy's topper, to Jack Blake, to Tom Merry and Kangaroo, no one was eager to offer his services.

The professor gazed at an unresponsive audience.

"I should be glad of the assistance of a dozen youths," he said. "I will call them by name, as they are too modest to volunteer. Digby, Herries, D'Arcy, Reilly—"

"My hat!" murmured Digby. "He's got all our names off pat enough."

"Lowther, Manners, Glyn, Dane—"

The boys rose as he called their names. They were surprised enough to see how well the professor seemed to be acquainted with them.

"Skimpole, Hancock, Kerruish, D'Arcy minor."

"My only Aunt Jane!" murmured Wally, as he came up the hall from the ranks of the Third-Formers. "I'm in this with you, Gussy."

"Weally, Wally—"

"Come on, cocky," said D'Arcy minor.

And the dozen lads stepped upon the stage.

The audience looked on very curiously.

"Please stand in a circle," said the professor, arranging the boys. "Each must have his back to the fellow behind him. Stand as if you were going to march round in a circle."

"Yaas, wathah, sir!"

"Now put each his right hand on the head of the fellow in front of him."

"Yes, sir."

"And hold out the left arm at right angles to the body." It was done.

"Now hold up the right leg bent at the knee, resting the sole of the foot upon the left knee."

And that was done.

The professor surveyed the circle of juniors with much satisfaction. The attitude they were now in was so utterly ridiculous that the whole audience shrieked.

The juniors were looking almost as scarlet as Blake, as he sat in the chair waiting for the paint to dry. The professor stepped into the wings, and returned with a large sheet of cardboard, which he stood at the back of the stage, showing a blank side to the audience.

"Gentlemen," said the professor, "kindly look at these youths."

The audience were looking enough; and rocking with laughter.

"Remain in that exact position till I return," said the professor. "When that card is turned round to the audience, the whole trick is explained." And he disappeared into the wings.

In their very uncomfortable position the juniors waited.

A minute passed—then another! The professor did not return. Another minute—and the circle grew very restive.

The audience ceased to laugh, and sat surprised.

Where was the professor?

Why did he not return?

Five minutes!

The circle of juniors were aching all over now, and D'Arcy suddenly lowered his right leg, and let his left arm fall.

"Bai Jove, I've had enough of this!" he exclaimed.

"We'll have a west, deah boys, and get into posish again when the pwofessah weturns."

"Faith, and ye're right!" gasped Reilly.

"Yes, rather!"

And the juniors stood at ease.

Still the professor did not return. In the hall, the New House juniors were emitting giggles and chuckles galore; but the School House fellows sat astounded.

Where on earth was the professor?

The juniors looked at one another, and at the sheet of cardboard standing at the back of the stage. What was on the other side of it? Was it some announcement from Professor Bulger to them—or to the audience?

What did it all mean, anyhow?

Ten minutes!

"Hang it all!" said Tom Merry. "We can't wait any longer. The masters are getting up to go. Go and look for the fellow, some of you. I wonder what those New House asses are chuckling about?"

"I wonder what's on that blessed card," said Monty Lowther.

"Turn it round!"

"Right."

Monty Lowther swung the sheet of cardboard round.

Then there was a gasp through the hall, and a fresh frenzied yell from the New House juniors.

For the sheet bore the following inscription, in large letters:

"GOOD-BYE!

With kind regards from Figgins, alias Professor Bulger."

"My only hat!"

"My word!"

"Great Scott!"

"Done!"

"Spoofer!"

With these wild ejaculations, and many others of the like kind, the School House fellows stared at the card.

Slowly they realised it.

That was why Figgins wasn't in the audience; that was why only the first half of each trick had been performed. The second half never was to be performed. Blake jumped up and rubbed furiously at his painted face. D'Arcy dashed into the wings for his topper, and brought it back—a wreck. Tom Merry and Kangaroo wrenched at the ropes that bound them to the chairs, and yelled for help.

"Cut us loose!" howled Tom Merry. "Go after him! Collar him! Bump him! Squash him!"

"He's far enough away by this time," grunted Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the New House.

Blake kicked the tell-tale card across the stage. The audience shrieked. Even the School House part of it could not help yelling. Seniors and juniors yelled in concert.

The Form-masters tried to remain grave, but they could not; the merriment was irresistible. Mr. Railton laughed heartily, and Mr. Selby, who seldom laughed, was shrieking now. Mr. Lathom almost wept with mirth, and he had to take off his spectacles and wipe them, and he was shaking so much with laughter that he could not put them on straight again.

Some of the juniors tore at Tom Merry's bonds; others rushed in esarch of the bogus professor.

But he was not to be found.

The redoubtable Figgins was not likely to linger.

He was gone.

The conjuring entertainment was at an end. The audience were almost in convulsions.

Tom Merry & Co. were furious, and the entertainment would probably have ended in a battle royal but for the presence of the masters and prefects. Battle was impos-

sible, and when the audience broke up the New House fellows marched off yelling with laughter.

The School House yelled too, all excepting Tom Merry & Co. They did not feel like laughing, especially Blake, who was vainly scraping at the paint on his face.

Outside the School House, in the moonlight, a crowd of New House fellows gathered, and the roars of laughter drew Tom Merry & Co. to the door.

There was Figgins, alias Professor Bulger.

His wig was off now, but the moustache and beard were there, and Figgins was hoisted on the shoulders of Kerr and Wynn, and surrounded by a yelling crowd.

"Who's cock-house at St. Jim's?" roared Kerr.

And the crowd took up the yell.

"New House! New House!"

"Who's been spoofer and done and didder?"

"Tom Merry!"

"Three cheers for Figgins!"

"Hip, hip, hurra! Figgins to the fore! Figgy for ever!"

"Hear us smile!"

"Ha, ha ha!"

And the New House juniors marched off with their redoubtable chief shoulder-high, yelling; and the School House fellows were laughing too much to even think of pursuing them. Tom Merry & Co. looked at each other with sickly smiles. They were all very red, though none so red as Blake. He was scarlet still.

"We've been spoofer," said Tom Merry at last.

"Yaas, wathah! My hat is wuined!"

"Look at my face," grunted Blake.

"I wonder where the professor is," remarked Kangaroo—"the real professor I mean?"

"Blessed if I know or care!" said Tom Merry. "What does it matter? We've been done, spoofer, dished, and the New House have given the giddy entertainment after all, and scored all along the line."

"It's wotten!"

"Beastly!"

Tom Merry burst into a laugh.

"Never mind!" he exclaimed. "It was a good jape, and we'll get even with the New House yet. We'll make Figgins & Co. sit up soon."

And the juniors vowed that they would. But for the present Figgins & Co. triumphed, and the New House fellows gloated.

(Another splendid tale of Tom Merry & Co., entitled: "The Terrible Three's Committee," by Martin Clifford, next Thursday. Please order your copy of "The Gem" Library in advance. Price 1d.)



By Lieutenant Lefevre.

READ THIS FIRST!

Oswald Yorke, a youth of eighteen, whom peculiar circumstances have forced to become a highwayman, one night holds up the carriage of Admiral Sir Sampson Eastlake. He is overpowered, however; but the good old admiral offers him a chance of serving the King in the Navy instead of handing him over to justice. Oswald, therefore, joins the frigate Catapult as a midshipman, under the name of John Smith.

Driven to fury by the captain's tyranny, the crew of the Catapult mutiny, and a fierce fight takes place. A terrible storm strikes the frigate while she is thus unattended, and

she is soon a hopeless wreck. Boat after boat is launched, only to be dashed to pieces against the frigate's sides.

At last the handful of men who represent the sole survivors of the crew manage to get a boat off, and they pull desperately away from the dangerous sides of the sinking Catapult.

(Now go on with the story.)

After the Storm.

A wave, rearing its foam-crested head, came whirling down upon them. Again it seemed that nothing could save them from destruction. The two men at the oars knew that

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 119.

By

MARTIN CLIFFORD.

NEXT THURSDAY:

"THE TERRIBLE THREE'S COMMITTEE."

they were battling for life. Their chests rose and fell, and their breath came and went in long, hoarse gasps.

In the grip of the second wave the boat was lifted up and carried backwards, but, with a mighty effort, they won their way over this wave as they had the last.

Another and another followed. Benton was dead-beat, and Mr. Pringle slipped into his place and took his oar; but old Fid stuck to his place with an endurance and strength marvellous in one who had long since left his youth behind him.

And then it seemed that the waves grew less powerful. A ray of yellow sunshine pierced through a break in the clouds, lighting up a patch of tumbling sea.

Steadying himself with his hand on Maxwell's shoulder, Oswald rose and turned to look for the Catapult, but looked in vain. Their little boat floated alone on the water of waters. There was no Catapult. She had gone to her last home. And just at that spot where she had floated a ray of sunshine touched the water with gold.

Each succeeding wave now seemed to lose in force. In an hour the sea, though still rough, was calming perceptibly. The heavy, lowering clouds had drifted away southward, and the sun, which they had for so long shrouded, was blazing down from a heaven of the purest azure.

Towards noon the wind dropped, and the white foam patches were no longer visible on the swelling waters.

And now, for the first time, the survivors of the Catapult found the opportunity to look their position in the face. And perilous indeed that position was. As far as the eye could roam, not a speck or spot marred the uniformity of the sea. They were alone in a waste of water—water that rose and fell sullenly and sluggishly, as though some huge monster far below the surface was lying breathing on the bed of the ocean.

Of food and water they had neither; they had had no time to provision the boat. During their escape from the foundering frigate each second was fraught with life and death. There was no time to think of food and drink then. But now—

Mr. Pringle searched in the boat's locker, and found nothing, and his face took on a still more serious expression.

"Our only hope lies in falling in with some vessel soon, before—"

He paused suggestively, but Dr. Telford, to whom he spoke, understood.

The last vestige of the storm had gone now, and the sun, shining bright and clear, poured its heat-laden rays down upon the bare heads of the boat's crew.

They had no instruments to tell them where they were, no compass by which to steer—nothing but the burning sun overhead. They had escaped from the Catapult with their lives, but of what lay before them none of them dared to think.

Old Fid and Mr. Pringle had shipped their oars, and the boat lay idly rocking on the surface of the sea. What use to row when each stroke of their oars, for all they knew, might be carrying them farther and farther from succour?

In the stern sheets Captain Burgoyne sat, with Brabazon beside him. The faces of both men were pale, their eyes bloodshot, their hands shaking and trembling from the effects of the excesses of the night, and the excitement and danger through which they had passed.

In the bottom of the boat Mr. Fryer lay unconscious, and moaning feebly. His wound had come undressed, and had started to bleed anew, as was evident from the deep, dark stain in the planks on which he lay.

As well as he was able, Dr. Telford re-dressed the wound with fragments torn from his own clothing, and, taking off his coat, made of it a pillow for the sufferer's head. Then, because he could do no more, he sat beside the wounded man, watching him, and listening to the ceaseless moans that came from his lips.

An hour, and another, passed, during which time an almost unbroken silence had reigned. Then suddenly Captain Burgoyne leaped to his feet with a cry of passion, and his face distorted with frenzy.

"I can't stand it," he shouted wildly—"I can't stand it! It will drive me mad! For Heaven's sake, Telford, do something to silence him!"

Dr. Telford lifted his head, and gazed full in the captain's face.

"He will be silent enough ere long," he said quietly. "Water," gasped the sufferer—"water! Telford, for Heaven's sake, give me water!"

The doctor tried to soothe him in vain.

"Presently—presently," he murmured; then cast an anxious, hungry look round over the sea.

"Water!" repeated the wounded man. "Telford, don't keep it from me! It is cruel!"

The doctor groaned.

"Give him this—not much. It is all I have," said Captain Burgoyne, bending forward and holding out a small flask to the surgeon.

Dr. Telford took it.

"What is it—neat spirit or brandy-and-water?" he asked.

"Spirit. Don't give him much. I can't spare it. But anything to make him quiet."

The doctor lifted Mr. Fryer's head, and poured a little drop of the fluid between his lips.

"My Heaven! What is it? I asked for water, and you have given me liquid fire!" screamed Fryer. "Oh, my Heaven, it burns—it burns! Water! Telford, have you the heart of a man to refuse me? Water!"

"Hush, hush! There is none—not yet. It will come soon—soon!" said the doctor earnestly.

Mr. Fryer sank back into the bottom of the boat, and for an hour remained senseless and silent. Then, as the shadows of the night began to creep up, he awoke in a fresh frenzy.

A burning fever was on him. He moaned and rolled from side to side, tossing his arms, and crying incessantly and piteously for water. Then the roughly-improvised bandage slipped away from the wound, and a rush of blood came pouring out.

With lightning haste, Dr. Telford sought to re-dress the wound.

"Let it bleed! It will be sooner over!" said the captain brutally. "It will be better for him and for us!"

He rose in the boat as he spoke, and cast a long look round over the glassy surface of the sea, which was reddened by the light of the dying sun. Then he sank back silently and hopelessly into his place.

Long into the night Mr. Fryer lay in delirium, raving and talking. His mind wandered far away to the land that he would never see again. Now he was in the streets of Portsmouth, making his way to the George. The admiral had sent for him. He talked on monotonously, describing the scenes he passed through. A group of sailors were marching a couple of pressed men off to a man-of-war lying in the harbour. An old woman was selling apples in the road. In fancy, he stopped to caress a half-starved cur. "Poor fellow!" he muttered compassionately. And then for a few moments was silent.

When next he spoke, his fancy led him out on to the green South Downs of Sussex, where the sheep were browsing among the gorse, where the arms of the mill creaked as they revolved in the wind.

A pitchy blackness had fallen over sea and sky. An intense stillness reigned, broken only by the quivering, uncertain voice of the dying man, and the gentle lap of the water against the boat's sides.

"How long—how long will this last?" came the captain's voice hoarsely from the stern. "Telford, how long will he take to die?"

(Another long instalment of this thrilling serial next Thursday.)

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.

"THE TERRIBLE THREE'S COMMITTEE,"

is the title of next Thursday's long, complete tale of the juniors of St. Jim's. I can assure you that Mr. Martin Clifford has written a really excellent story of Tom Merry & Co., as you will find when you read

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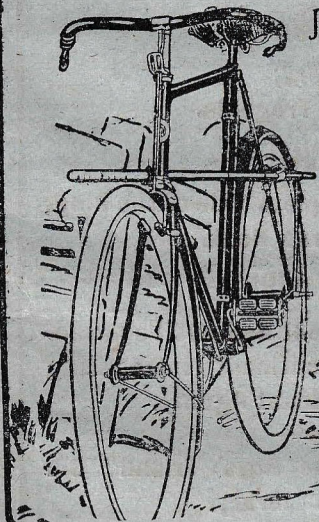
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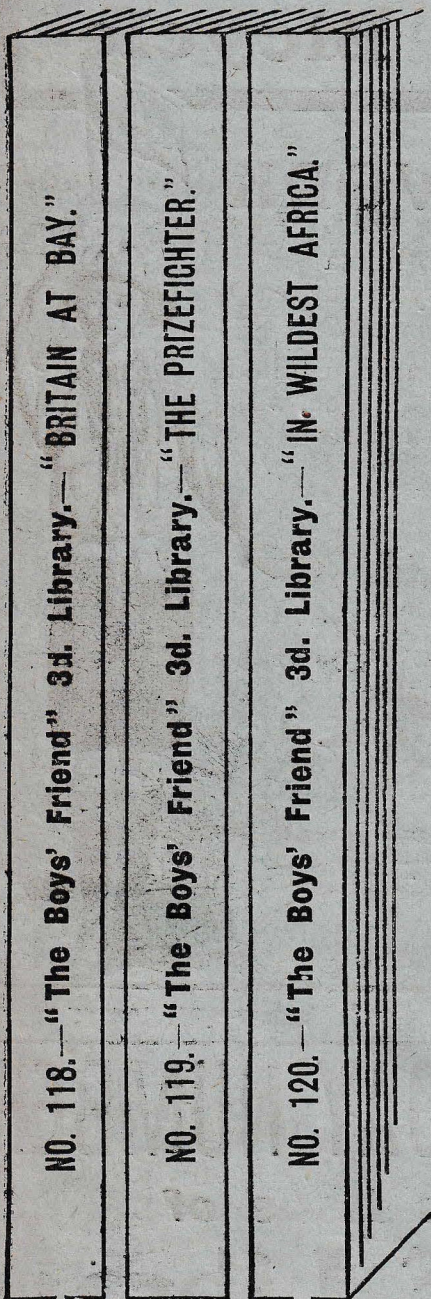
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