"TOM MERRY'S FIX."

A SPLENDID TALE OF THE CHUMS OF ST. JIM'S.

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Arthur Augustus gave a jump as he viewed the result of Kerr's handiwork in the glass. "Bai Jove! That's stunnin'!" he exclaimed. (*See page 8.*)

TOM MERRY'S FIX

A Splendid, Long, Complete School Tale of the Juniors of St. Jim's.

BY

Martin Clifford.

CHAPTER 1.

Arthur Augustus Considers the Position.

"I'VE been considewin' the posish, deah boys."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, made that statement with a very serious expression upon his aristocratic countenance. He jammed his eyeglass into his right eye, and took a survey of the fellows in Study No. 6.

Jack Blake grunted.

Blake was wearing a worried look. So was Digby, and so was Herries. They were worried about Tom Merry, and there were other fellows in the School House at St. Jim's who were in the same state of mind.

"I've been considewin' the posish," repeated D'Arcy, with more emphasis, as if he regarded Blake's grunt as a challenge.

"Then for goodness' sake consider it quietly!" said Blake peevishly.

"Weally, Blake——"

"And ring off!"

"I wefuse to wing off!" said Arthur Augustus, with dignity. "I have been considewin' the whole posish——"

"We've had that before," remarked Digby.

"Weally, Dig——"

"I've got something like an idea," Herries said abruptly. "I've been thinking——"

"Pway don't intewwupt me, Hewwies——"

"Look here——"

"Oh, stop jawing, all of you, when I'm trying to think out some way of helping Tom Merry," exclaimed Blake.

"I have been considewin' the posish——"

"Oh, cheese it!"

"I decline to cheese it. Havin' considewed the posish——"

"Rats!"

"Havin' considewed the posish," went on D'Arcy calmly, "I have decided that we ought to do somethin' or othah to help our old fwiend Tom Mewwy, as he is in awf'ly low watah just now."

"I've thought of something," said Herries, in his slow way.

"I was about to say, Hewwies——"

"Oh, Herries first," said Blake. "Go ahead, kid!"

"I wefuse——"

"Oh, dry up! Go on, Herries!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy turned his eyeglass in turn with deep indignation upon each of the juniors in Study No. 6, but they did not seem to feel any withering effect. Herries went on, in his slow way:

"Tom Merry's in a rotten fix. He's lost all his money, and he's got to look for work. He won't be able to come back to St. Jim's, and he won't let anybody give him any tin. It's a rotten position altogether."

"Yaas, wathah! I have considewed——"

"Dry up, Gussy!"

"Weally, Blake——"

"Order! Get on, Herries. If you've thought of any scheme for backing up Tom Merry we'll be only too jolly glad to hear it," said Blake, with a sigh.

"Well," said Herries, "we can't find him work, and he won't let us give him tin, and he can't come back to St. Jim's. But there's one thing I can do, and I've made up my mind to do it."

"What is it?"

"I'll let him have Towser!"

The three chums stared at Herries as he made this

announcement. The expression upon Herries's face showed how much it cost him to say the words. Towser, the bulldog, was as the apple of Herries's eye. Towser, like the King in the British Constitution, could do no wrong. Towser, in short, was Towser. And it did not occur to Herries that the bulldog would not appear so priceless to another as it was to him.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated D'Arcy, at last.

"My word!" said Digby.

"Great Scott!" murmured Blake. "And is that your idea?"

"Yes," said Herries, with a touch of defiance in his tone. "And a jolly good idea, too, I think!"

"I should think Tom Mewwy would wefuse to have that feahful beast planted on him."

"You utter ass——"

"Weally, Hewwies——"

"Of course, Tom Merry will be feeling rotten and low-down, and that's just the time you want a dog with you," said Herries. "I don't know what I shall do without Towser. But I'm willing to let Tom Merry have him."

"Wats!"

"You chump——"

"Towsah has no wespect for a fellah's twousahs. Now, as Tom Mewwy is poor, it stands to weason that he won't have vewy many pairs of twousahs. I believe that chaps who have to live on a small income have only about eight or nine pairs of twucks altogether, and pewwaps fewer than that," said D'Arcy. "Therefore, you see, if Towsah were to wuin any of Tom Mewwy's twousahs it would be a sewious mattah."

"Ass!"

"Weally, Hewwies——"

"Blessed if I see how Towser's going to solve Tom Merry's difficulties," said Jack Blake. "And if he gets a job somewhere, a bulldog would be a disadvantage. I've often seen advertisements for people wanted with no children, and Towser would be more trouble than a heap of children of all sizes."

"Ass!"

"I wegard that as an oppwobwious expwession, Hewwies——"

"Chump!"

"Weally, you know——"

"Oh, don't you chaps begin to argue!" said Blake crossly. "If you've got something sensible to suggest——"

"I have considewed the posish——"

"Br-r-r-r!"

"I wegard that as a vulgar noise, Hewwies. I have considewed the posish, and I have decided that we've got to help Tom Mewwy."

"But how, ass?"

"I have thought of a plan."

"Oh, go ahead!" said Blake, in a tone of resignation, which implied that he did not feel very much faith in D'Arcy's plan.

"Well, you see, Tom Mewwy is wuined," said D'Arcy. "He is actually short of money. It's wotten, you know. Of course, there are othah chaps in the world who are short of money, and, in fact, I believe it's not an uncommon thing, but it's wotten for Tom Mewwy, all the same. Now is the time for his fwiends to wally wound him."

"To what?"

"To wally wound him."

"Oh, to rally round him," grinned Blake. "Yes, certainly, we'll all do that like a shot, if we can find anything to do."

"What-ho!" said Digby.

"I myself am goin' to wally wound him, in any case," said D'Arcy. "You fellows can help if you like. Now, Tom Mewwy's old governess, Miss Fawcett, has gone to stay with Cousin Ethel, so that's all wight. Tom Mewwy is lookin' for a job, and I undahstand that he is stayin' at pwesent with Mr. Dodds, the cuwate of Hucklebewwy Heath. Now, his only source of income is Lauwel Villa, if he can let it."

"So he said in his last letter."

"Well, then, Lauwel Villa will have to be let."

"I suppose he's trying to let it, but it's a rotten season for letting a house in the heart of the country," said Blake. "They've been having snow down there, too."

"That's where we come in."

"Eh?"

"That's where we wally wound Tom Mewwy."

Blake stared.

"Blessed if I can see how!" he exclaimed. "We can't let the house for him, can we?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"How?"

"Oh, he's off his rocker!" said Herries.

"I wefuse to be considewed off my wockah——"

"Go ahead, Gussy! How are we to let the house?" asked Digby.

Arthur Augustus smiled serenely.

"That's where I'm awf'ly deep," he remarked.

His chums grinned. They knew that Arthur Augustus prided himself upon being awfully deep, but they had never been able to see where the depths came in.

"Yes, we know you're as deep as—as a frying-pan," said Blake. "But go on with the washing."

"You wemembah," said D'Arcy, "that I am about the best membah of the Amateur Dwamatic Society——"

"I don't remember anything of the sort!" said Blake warmly. "I remember you can't act for toffee, if that's what you mean."

"Weally, Blake——"

"But what has the Amateur Dramatic Society to do with this matter, anyway?" demanded Digby. "Stick to the point."

"I'm sticking to it. As the best actah—pway excuse my puttin' it like that, deah boys, but this is no time for false modesty," explained D'Arcy—"as the best actah in the Juniah Dwamatic Society, I shall be able to play the part in the most wippin' way."

"What part?"

"That's where the ideah comes in."

"But what's the idea?" yelled the three chums together.

"Oh, it's simply wippin'! I'm going to disguise myself as a person——"

"Eh?"

"What?"

"Which?"

"I am goin' to disguise myself as a person," said D'Arcy firmly. "I have not decided what kind of person, but any person would do. I am goin' to disguise myself as a person, and go down to Hucklebewwy Heath——"

"What?" roared Blake.

"And take the house as a tenant, and pay a jolly big went for it."

"Eh?"

"Tom Mewwy won't have the slightest suspish, and, of course, you fellahs will keep it awf'ly dark——"

"My hat!"

"What do you think of the ideah, deah boys?" asked Arthur Augustus, beaming round upon the chums of Study No. 6 with great satisfaction.

Blake rose to his feet.

"Think of it?" he said.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"What I think of it is, that a chap who can propound such an utterly idiotic and howlingly fat-headed wheeze is wasting time, and ought to be bumped!" said Blake wrathfully. "Collar the chump!"

"Weally, Blake——"

"Bump him!"

"Ow! Leggo! Yow! You will wuin my twousahs! I wefuse to be bumped!"

"Bump him!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy struggled desperately in the grasp of three indignant juniors. But his struggles were unavailing. He was whirled off the floor and bumped.

Bump!

Bump!

"Yawooh! Yawooh! Oh!"

CHAPTER 2.

Tom Merry's Letter.

BUMP!

"Yawooh! Stop it, you duffahs! Oh!"

Arthur Augustus wriggled out of the hands of his chums at last. He scrambled to his feet, very red and breathless, very wrathful and dusty.

"You uttah asses——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I wegard you as a set of wuff beasts! I have a gweat mind to give you a feahful thwashin' all wound!" shouted D'Arcy.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you uttah wastahs! I will shake the dust of this studay fwom my feet."

"You can't shake it from your clothes in a hurry," chuckled Digby.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus, bursting with indignation, swung away towards the door. He walked through the doorway blind with wrath, and stalked into two fellows who were just about to knock at the door.

"Oh!"

"What——"

"Weally——"

Manners and Lowther of the Shell grasped D'Arcy and shoved him back into the study. They glared at him indignantly.

"What do you mean by buzzing into us just as we were coming in?" roared Monty Lowther wrathfully.

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"You howling, frabjous chump!" roared Manners. "You've trodden on my beastly foot! You fat-head! Ow!"

"Weally, Mannahs——"

"Oh, bump him!" said Jack Blake. "We won't interfere. We've just been bumping him for making a burbling, frabjous suggestion, but another one will do him good."

"Hear, hear!"

"I uttahly wefuse to be bumped, you wottahs!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, retreating into a corner, and putting up his fists. "I wegard you with pwofound contempt! I defy you all to come on!"

Monty Lowther chuckled.

"Run and get your camera, Manners!" he said. "I should like a picture of him in the attitude of Ajax defying his laundress."

D'Arcy dropped his fists at once.

"You uttah ass!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I wegard you——"

"I've had a letter——" began Monty Lowther.

"You are intewwuptin' me!"

"I've had a letter from Tom Merry," said Lowther. "If Gussy ever leaves off talking, I'll read it to you. I came here to show it to you fellows."

"Bai Jove!"

"Go ahead!" said Blake. "We'll squash Gussy if he talks any more."

"Weally, Blake——"

"Shut up!" roared Blake.

"Undah the circs——"

"Oh, another time will do!" said Lowther, putting the letter back into his pocket. "I can see Gussy is out for the day."

"Pway wead the lettah, Lowthah. I will wefwain fwom intewwuptin' you, though undah the circs——"

"Cheese it!"

Monty Lowther read out the letter from his absent chum:

"'Dear Lowther and Manners,—I have some news to tell you. Miss Fawcett has quite recovered from her illness——'"

"Hear, hear!" said Blake.

"Bai Jove, I'm glad to heah it, deah boy!"

"'And has gone to stay with Cousin Ethel, at D'Arcy's governor's place,'" went on Lowther. "D'Arcy's governor has been very kind indeed."

Arthur Augustus adjusted his eyeglass.

"I'm glad to hear that," he said. "That's one thing about the governah, he does play up when he's expected to, you know. I was sure the governah would be decent. Go on."

"Sure you've finished talking?"

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"'I am staying with Mr. Dodds, at the rectory here,'" proceeded Lowther. "'I am staying here until I have succeeded in finding a tenant for Laurel Villa. That is all that remains to Miss Fawcett and me—the house—and the only income we shall have is what it lets for. So long as it brings in enough to provide for my old nurse, I shall be satisfied. I shall see all you fellows again, I hope, before I leave for London——'"

"London!" exclaimed Blake.

"Bai Jove!"

"'When I leave here, it will be to look for work. But I hope to come to St. Jim's and have one jolly day first. There is a chap coming to see about the house soon. If it turns out all right, well and good. If not, I shall leave the letting in Mr. Dodds' hands—though I don't want to trouble him if I can help it, for he's a jolly busy and hard-worked chap. I've no doubt I shall pull through all right, and when I've made my fortune I'll come swanking down to St. Jim's in a waistcoat as gorgeous as one of Gussy's——'"

"Bai Jove!"

"'I think you ought to make Blake or Figgins captain of the junior eleven. But I suppose you'll settle that in committee.

"'Good-bye, my sons, and be good! Always yours,

"'TOM MERRY.'

"'P.S.—Kind regards to Towser.'"

"My hat!" said Herries. "Does he really say that?"

"Look!"

"Good! That makes me think my idea was a really jolly good one—though it will come a bit of a wrench," said Herries, with a sigh.

"Hallo! Have you been having ideas, too?" asked Manners. "Is it an epidemic in this study?"

"Hewwies' ideah is wathah wotten——"

"I was thinking of letting Tom Merry have Towser," Herries explained. "I think he deserves it."

"Why, what has he done?" asked Lowther innocently.

Herries glared at the humorist of the Shell.

"Look here, you silly ass——"

"Tom Merry's letter sounds cheerful enough," Blake remarked thoughtfully. "I suppose it's a great weight off his mind to have his old governess quite well again. The poor old chap's had a rough time lately."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"But it's jolly rotten if he doesn't come back to St. Jim's," Blake went on. "We shall all miss him a lot. Then there's the footer eleven. Of course, I shall have to be captain, but I'd rather Tom Merry were back in his old place."

"He mentions you and Figgins."

"Oh, he only mentions Figgins as a matter of form, of course. But never mind that," said Blake hastily. "Look here, you chaps, we've been discussing this matter, and we want to find some way of helping Tom Merry out of his fix."

"Yaas, wathah! I have been considewin' the mattah——"

"Cheese it, Gussy!"

"I wefuse to cheese it! I have been——"

"Order! If we could do anything to help Tom Merry, I'd jump at it," said Blake. "Can't you Shell-fish think of anything?"

"Jolly well wish we could!" said Manners.

"I have been considewin' the mattah, and I have an ideah——"

Blake held up his finger warningly.

"You've been bumped for that idea once!" he exclaimed. "Are you looking for another bumping?"

"I should uttahly wefuse to have anothah bumping. My ideah is this—and I put it to Mannahs and Lowthah, who have more sense than you chaps——"

"Good!" said Lowther. "Right so far!"

"Why, you ass——"

"Shut up, and let Gussy speak."

"Thank you, Lowthah. Tom Mewwy is twyin' to let his house, and if he gets a smackin' high went he will have lots of tin. Now, I have asked my governah to help me in doin' somethin' for Tom Mewwy, and he has weplied that if Tom Mewwy will accept anythin' he is only too willin' to find the cash."

"But Tom Merry won't," said Manners. "If he would, we could all do something. But the obstinate bounder is as proud as Lucifer."

"Yaas," said D'Arcy, with a superior smile. "But what is wequiahed in this mattah is a fellow of tact and judgment. I was thinkin' of disguisin' myself as a person, and takin' his house at a smackin' big rent, and not sayin' a word to him about it."

"Ass!" roared Manners and Lowther.

"Weally, you know——"

"Chump!"

"I wegard it as a wippin' ideah——"

"Oh, bump him!" said Blake. "We won't interfere."

Manners and Lowther rushed at the swell of the Fourth. Arthur Augustus dodged out of the study just in time, slammed the door behind him, and ran.

CHAPTER 3.

D'Arcy Means Business.

"I WANT you to do me a favah, Kerr, deah boy!"

The Scottish junior stopped. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had been looking for him in the quadrangle, and he spotted Kerr as the latter came out of the New House.

House rows at St. Jim's had been a little "off" of late. Figgins & Co. of the New House were thinking just as much about Tom Merry as Blake and the rest were in the School House, and, as D'Arcy had said, it was a time to rally round, and not to indulge in the playful little alarums and excursions which usually enlivened things at St. Jim's. So Kerr, after debating whether he should give D'Arcy a dig in his gorgeous waistcoat, or knock off his silk hat, decided to do neither.

"Go ahead, Gussy," he remarked.

"I suppose you know what we ought to do at a time like this," D'Arcy remarked.

Kerr looked a little puzzled.

"A time like this?" he repeated.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Kerr looked round the quadrangle. He glanced at the sky, and then at the ground, and then at his watch.

"Have tea, I suppose," he said at last.

"Weally, Kerr——"

"Well, it's tea-time. I suppose there's nothing else special that ought to be done, unless you've got an impot to do."

"I was not wefewwin' to the pwesent moment especially, but to the time genewally—the time of misfortune for a vewy valued fwiend," said D'Arcy. "My ideah is that we ought to wally wound Tom Mewwy."

"My dear chap, I'm ready to rally at a moment's notice,"

said Kerr. "If there's anything I can do to help Tommy, I'll rally round like—like the Territorials when the Germans come. But what can I do?"

"I want you to help me. You are a wathah clevah chap——"

"Thanks awfully," said Kerr, with great gravity.

"Not at all, deah boy. You are wathah clevah. I have wemarked it befoah—in fact, you are one of those beastly Scotch chaps who can do evewything——"

"Eh?"

"Pway do not take the word beastly in an oppwobwious sense, deah boy. I was simply usin' it as a superlative expwession."

"Well, go on."

"You are the best amateur actah at St. Jim's—exceptin', pewwaps, one person," went on D'Arcy. "You are aw'fly skilful in disguisin' people, and so on."

Kerr stared.

"Surely you School House chaps aren't going in for theatricals just now!" he exclaimed. "I shouldn't think it was just the time for Christmas celebrations now!"

"I wasn't thinkin' of Chwistmas celebwations, Kerr. I was thinkin' of disguisin' myself as a person."

"As a what?"

"As a person—an ordinawy, avewage, normal person."

"My hat!"

"I am goin' to cawwy out a plan to help Tom Mewwy," D'Arcy explained. "As it is wathah a delicate mattah, I cannot acquaint you with all the details, deah boy, but I twust you will give me your assistance. It will be necessawy foah me to pwoceed to Hucklebewwy Heath in disguise."

Kerr chuckled.

"I weally fail to see any cause for mewwiment," said Arthur Augustus. "If you decline to help me, I shall have to seek assistance elsewhere, of course. But I should weally be vewy glad of your aid."

"But what's the wheeze?"

"Undah the circs., as it is a vewy delicate mattah, I am compelled to keep it dark."

"Have you told Blake?"

"Yaas, but he weceived the suggestion in a wibald spiwit, and I shall wefuse to entah into any discush with him on the subject again," said D'Arcy. "I should weally be glad if you will help me. The plan will have the effect of pwovidin' comfortably for Tom Mewwy."

"Rats!"

"Weally, Kerr——"

"But I'll help you, right enough," said Kerr. "I'll rally round, if that's what you want. I only hope you won't get into trouble."

"I twust not, deah boy; but I am perfectly pwepared to get into twouble, if necessawy, to help Tom Mewwy out of feahful fix. You know, the poor chap has no money, don't you see, and he hasn't a governah to tip him, eithah. I wegard his posish as simply howwid, and I am goin' to help him out of it."

"But——"

"It will be necessawy for me to pwoceed to Hucklebewwy Heath at once, and I shall go to-mowwow mornin'——"

"Got leave?"

"Certainly not. I cannot vewy well ask the Head, as he would want to know all about it, don't you see."

Kerr grinned.

"I've no doubt he would! Look here, you'll get yourself into trouble, Gussy. You'd better drop the whole idea."

"Wats! I shall go in any case, and if you wefuse to help me——"

"Oh, I'll help you!" said Kerr, somewhat perplexed. "What sort of a disguise are you idiot enough to want?"

"I want to be disguised as an ordinawy person—a gentleman of middle age, if poss.—but ordinawy—quite ordinawy—as ordinawy as poss., in ordah not to attwact undue attention."

"In fact, extra-ordinary?" said Kerr.

"Pway don't be an ass. If you will help me, I will come into your studay before lessons to-mowwow mornin', and you can have the things weady."

"Oh, all right! But you'd better drop it."

"Wats!"

"Well, I'll help you if I can; but I think you're an ass."

"More wats!"

And so they parted.

Arthur Augustus strolled into the School House. He went up to Mellish's study. Mellish, the cad of the Fourth, was no friend of D'Arcy's; but the swell of St. Jim's tapped at his door and walked in quite cheerfully.

Mellish looked up with a growl. He was alone in the study, Levison having just left it after an argument on the subject of half-a-crown that Mellish owed him. Mellish was not in a good temper, and the sight of D'Arcy did not make him any more amiable.

"Well, what do you want?" he growled.

"I want you to w'ite a lettah for me, Mellish, deah boy."

"Go and eat coke!"

"I wegard that as a wude weply, Mellish."

"Rats!"

"If a half-crown would be an inducement to you, Mellish, not to act like a wotten cad and a wank outsidah——"

"Oh, now you're talking!" said Mellish, with alacrity. "What do you want me to do?"

"I want a lettah w'itten that Tom Mewwy won't wecognise," explained D'Arcy.

Mellish stared at him.

"You're writing to Tom Merry?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"And you don't want him to recognise your hand?"

"Yaas."

"What are you going in for anonymous letters for?"

D'Arcy's eyes gleamed.

"You uttah wottah, Mellish! If you are wantin' a thick ear——"

"Oh, hold on! No offence," said Mellish, thinking of the half-crown. "Look here, I'll write the letter, if you like. Go ahead! I don't care a rap what it's for."

"Vewy well. I s'pose Tom Mewwy doesn't know your hand?"

"I suppose not."

"Go ahead, then!"

Mellish took up a pen and dipped it in the ink, and drew the paper towards him. Arthur Augustus reflected.

"Now, write this, Meliish. Dear Wewwy——"

"Yes?"

"Upon the whole, are you sure Tom Mewwy doesn't know your hand? He may have seen it in the class-room?"

"Oh, that's all right!"

"When I come to think of it, he must know it."

"Oh, I'll disguise it!"

"Wats! That's no good!"

And Arthur Augustus turned towards the door. Mellish simply glared at him.

"Look here, what about the half-crown?" he exclaimed.

"But you haven't w'itten the lettah."

"I'm ready to write it."

D'Arcy shook his head.

"It would be widiculous to give you a half-crown for w'itin' a lettah, Mellish, when you haven't w'itten it. I must decline to do so. But I will pwesent you with a half-cwown because you are hard up, if you like."

And D'Arcy tossed the coin upon the table and retired.

"I shall jolly well have to w'ite the lettah myself," he murmured. "I can disguise my hand all wight, by w'iting backwards, or somethin' of that sort, and Tom Mewwy won't smell a wat!"

Jack Blake met him in the passage. He grinned at the swell of St. Jim's.

"Got any more ripping ideas?" he asked sarcastically.

"Weally, Blake——"

"Still sticking to the same one?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Good! You can go ahead."

"Thank you, I have gone ahead!" said Arthur Augustus, with dignity, and he walked on.

Jack Blake gave a whistle.

"My hat!" he ejaculated.

— —

CHAPTER 4.

A Letter from John Smith.

"NEWS, Tom?"

Mr. Dodds, the curate of Huckleberry Heath, asked the question, as Tom Merry looked up from a letter he was reading at the breakfast-table in the rectory.

Tom Merry was looking perplexed.

"Yes," he said, "another application for the house."

"Oh, very good!"

"There was the chap who wrote before coming to-day," said Tom Merry, "Mr. Solomonson. Now, here's another man wants to come to-day, too."

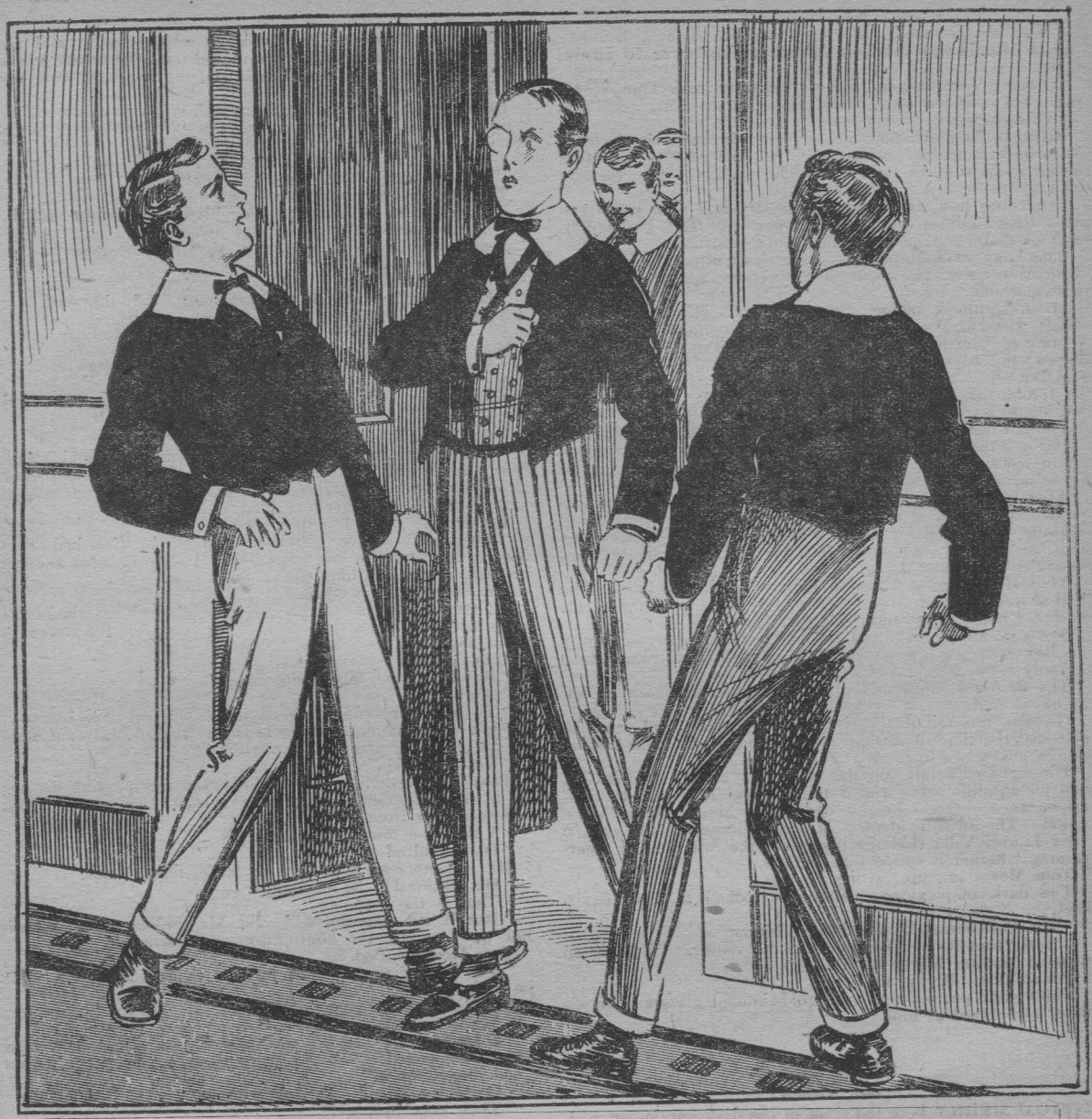
"It never rains but it pours," said the curate, with a smile. "It begins to look as if Laurel Villa will go easily, though it is a bad season of the year for letting."

"Yes, sir; but I can't quite understand the letter. Will you look at it?"

"Certainly."

Tom Merry handed the letter across the table to Mr. Dodds. The curate's face assumed a somewhat puzzled look as he perused it.

The letter was written in a backward, sloping hand, but the letters in some places assumed an upright position, and in others sloped over to the right, as if force of habit had



Arthur Augustus walked through the doorway blind with wrath, and stalked into two fellows who were just about to knock at the door. "Weally!" he gasped. (See page 2.)

been too much for a writer who was trying to disguise his hand.

Why a man should try to disguise his hand in writing about the letting of a house was a puzzle, and the curate could only conclude that the impression was a mistaken one. But it certainly looked very like it.

The letter ran as follows:

"Dear Sir,—Having heard that you have a very desirable house in the country to let, I am prepared to take it for any term of years you may choose to fix, at a smacking big rent I will call in the morning to see the house, and arrange the matter.—Yours faithfully,

"JOHN SMITH."

The clergyman pursed his lips.

"That is a very curious letter, Tom."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Yes, Mr. Dodds. The chap describes the house as if he were a house agent, trying to let it. An incoming tenant, I believe, generally runs it down a little."

"And then the offer of a big rent——"

"It's very odd sir"

"And the adjective," murmured Mr. Dodds, "really, I should imagine that someone had asked his little boy to write this letter for him, and left to him the choice of language."

"Looks like it."

"It may be a hoax," Mr. Dodds observed. "Some lad in the village may be taking advantage of this matter to puzzle you"

"Nobody in Huckleberry Heath, sir."

"No?"

Tom Merry held out the envelope.

"The postmark is Rylcombe, sir. Rylcombe is the village near St Jim's, where the station for the school is. I imagine that someone there has heard the fellows talking about having a house to let, and so has written—as for a hoax, some chap at Rylcombe might have done it, of course."

"Well, Mr. John Smith says he is coming down to see the house to-day," Mr. Dodds remarked. "There is no harm in seeing him and viewing the house."

"No, I suppose not."

"You are to meet Mr. Solomonson at the house at ten o'clock," said the curate. "You had better come back here and wait for this new applicant, after disposing of him. If you settle with Mr. Solomonson, you will bring him here to go through the arrangements with me."

"Yes, Mr. Dodds."

And after breakfast Tom Merry walked over to Laurel Villa.

It was a fine, bright winter's morning, and Tom Merry could not help feeling cheerful as he strode along breathing in the crisp air.

Misfortunes had fallen heavily of late upon the hero of St. Jim's; and yet he never lost sight of the fact that matters might have been worse. Tom Merry was born to look upon the bright side of things.

Only once had he almost given way, and that was when Miss Priscilla Fawcett was in danger, and Tom had feared that he might lose his affectionate old guardian.

That danger had passed, and a weight was gone from Tom Merry's heart. Lighter troubles he felt he could bear with courage.

He was ruined, so far as money went. His career at St. Jim's was cut short; his dream of a college life was to remain only a dream. He had to turn to and work for his bread; but he was ready for the fight.

After all it would be very hard if there was not work to be found for willing hands, and money for one who was willing to earn it.

He had health and strength, and true friends, and so long as he had those, what right had he to grumble at fate, when there were so many fellows in the world who had none of those advantages?

That was how Tom Merry tried to look at it, and he succeeded pretty well. One thing was certain; there was nothing "soft" about him. When fate rained blows upon him, he had no inclination to surrender, but only a keen desire to be up and doing.

Tom Merry had not visited Laurel Villa since the day he had moved out with Miss Fawcett. As he entered the silent, deserted house, a strange feeling came over him.

Many a happy day had he spent there, many a happy holiday with his chums from St. Jim's, in a time which already seemed to him to be a long way past.

The deserted, unfurnished rooms struck him with a chill as he entered.

He was ten minutes early for the appointment, and he occupied the time in strolling about the grounds, and looking at the old scenes so familiar to his eyes.

The sight of a tall, angular man with a dark complexion, and an aquiline nose, and a tall silk hat that added to his appearance of great height, drew Tom Merry to the house again. This was evidently Mr. Solomonson, who was to view Laurel Villa that morning with the intention of ascertaining whether it suited him to take.

Tom Merry ran up, raising his cap.

The dark-complexioned gentleman looked at him inquiringly.

"Mr. Solomonson?" asked Tom Merry.

"Yeth, that ith my name," said the visitor. "I expected to meet Mithter Merry here."

"I am Tom Merry, sir."

The visitor pushed a pair of gold-rimmed glasses upon his nose, and stared at him.

CHAPTER 5.

Not Taken!

TOM MERRY bore the stare of the dark gentleman with equanimity.

He knew that Mr. Solomonson was surprised to find a mere boy in charge of the property, and he was taking stock of Tom Merry, examining him from head to foot.

Tom Merry could not help smiling.

"Ah! It ith a joke, I thuppose?" Mr. Solomonson remarked.

"Not at all, sir. The fact is, Miss Fawcett, who owns the place, is too delicate in health just now to see about it, and she has placed the matter in the hands of Mr. Dodds," said Tom Merry. "If you like the place, sir, I am to take you to Mr. Dodds' place to make arrangements."

"Oh, I thee!" said Mr. Solomonson.

"Shall I show you over the house, sir?"

"Thertainly, my lad."

Tom Merry led the way indoors.

He was not very much impressed with Mr Solomonson. That gentleman certainly gave an impression of wealth. But he gave an impression, too, of being a man who would not be very easily induced to part with any of his wealth.

Mr. Solomonson was, in fact, the kind of tenant who expects a first-class house, with every possible appointment and convenience, at a nominal rent, and with a landlord always ready to rush in with architects and plumbers and decorators at a moment's notice, free of charge.

And with a view to depreciating the property he intended to take, Mr. Solomonson found fault with everything he saw.

The rooms were either too large or too small, and the bath-room was inconveniently situated, and the access to the garden was not what he wished, and the windows were not where he wanted them.

He doubted if the soil was gravel, and he expressed an opinion that it would require heaps of "thovereigns" to get the garden in order.

He sniffed at the greenhouse, and sneered at the lawn, and snorted at the fruit-trees.

Tom Merry was very patient.

He wanted to let the house for his old governess, and he was shrewd enough to guess that Mr. Solomonson was finding endless faults with a view to lowering the price he was to pay.

So he said nothing.

"Dear me," said Mr. Solomonson, "I thuppose the decorationth will all be renewed, from ground to roof, my lad?"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"Nothing will be done to the house, sir," he said.

Mr. Solomonson threw up his hands in horror.

"Nothing?"

"No, sir."

"But that ith abthurd!"

"You see, sir, Miss Fawcett has no money to spend," Tom Merry explained. "The tenant must take the house just as it is. The rent is being made purposely low for that reason; and the house is in excellent condition."

"Abthurd!"

"Very well. Have you seen enough, sir?" asked Tom Merry, beginning to lose patience. "I have to meet another gentleman this morning about the house."

Mr. Solomonson winked.

"That cock won't fight, my dear," he remarked. "I have been in thith line of bithneth myself. I know that other applicant, you know."

Tom Merry's eyes gleamed.

"But it is true, Mr. Solomonson."

"Abthurd!"

"There are people who tell the truth, even in business, though you may never have heard of them, sir," said Tom Merry. "Have you seen enough?"

"Yeth, thanks."

They left the house. Mr. Solomonson was pursing his lips in a very thoughtful way. He turned suddenly to Tom Merry at the front door.

"Vat is the rent?" he asked.

"One hundred pounds a year, sir."

Mr. Solonmonson threw up his large, shiny hands.

"Oh, abthurd!" he exclaimed.

"That is the rent, sir."

"But it ith impothible!" said Mr. Solomonson. "I do not want to buy the houth, my young friend."

Tom Merry smiled.

"The selling price would be two thousand pounds, sir," he said.

Mr. Solomonson gasped.

"My dear young friend——"

"I suppose we needn't wait any longer about it?" Tom Merry suggested. "If the price doesn't suit you, it's no good discussing it."

"Quite tho," said Mr. Solomonson.

"Then good-bye, sir."

"Stay a minute, my young friend. Don't be hathty," said Mr. Solomonson. "I might offer Mith Fawcett fifty poundth."

"Thank you, that would be useless."

"Quite utheless, do you think?"

"Quite, sir."

"Thuppose we say theventy-five poundth?" said Mr. Solomonson persuasively. "I am thure Mith Fawthett would be pleathed to conthider that thum."

Tom Merry shook his head.

"One hundred pounds is the rent, sir, and it is cheap."

"Nonthenth!"

"Very well, sir. Good-morning!"

Tom Merry raised his cap and walked away to the garden gate.

Mr. Solomonson looked after him for a full minute, debating whether Tom Merry was bluffing and meant to come back again. But the hero of St. Jim's went out of the gate, and it clicked behind him.

Then Mr. Solomonson ran down the path.

"I thay!" he called out.

Tom Merry was walking down the lane.

"I thay, young thir!"

The junior looked round.

"Yes?" he said.

"Thuppose we thay eighty poundth?"

"Impossible, sir."

"But, I thay——"

"Good-morning, Mr. Solomonson."

Tom Merry strode away.

Mr. Solomonson waved his fat, shiny hands in the air, and smote his palms together. Then he walked after Tom Merry. He had almost overtaken the hero of the Shell by the time he reached the rectory gate.

"Young thir!" he called out, as Tom Merry went in.

The junior stopped. The pertinacity of Mr. Solomonson rather amused him.

"Well?" he said.

"I think we might thay theventy-five," murmured Mr. Solomonson.

"Impossible, sir."

Mr. Dodds came out of the house. The tall, hook-nosed gentleman turned to him with a bow, raising his silk hat.

"Ah, Mithter Doddth, of course!" he exclaimed. "I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Mr. Doddth. I have come down about the houth."

"I hope you have found it to your satisfaction," said Mr. Dodds, with a somewhat puzzled glance at Tom Merry's smiling face.

Mr. Solomonson waved his hands.

"Hardly tho, thir, hardly tho. I was really thinking of taking the houth to help a very ethtimable lady in a time of mithfortune."

"Indeed!"

"Our young friend has made some mithtake about the rent," went on Mr. Solomonson. "You thee, I take it that the rent is fifty poundth?"

"One hundred pounds," said Mr. Dodds

"You mean theventy-five?"

"I mean what I say."

"Eighty, I thuppose, would be all right?"

"Not in the least."

"Then I am afraid we cannot do bithneth together," said Mr. Solomonson, smiting his fat shiny hands.

"I am sorry," said Mr. Dodds. "Good-morning! Tom, there is a visitor waiting for you in the dining-room—a Mr. John Smith. He has come down about the house. I wish you a very good-morning, Mr. Solomonson!"

The curate walked away, and Tom Merry entered the house. Mr. Solomonson stood rooted to the ground.

The dining-room window was open, and a few minutes later he could see Tom Merry in that room, where the junior had gone to see the new applicant for Laurel Villa. Mr. Solomonson crossed the window and blinked in.

"Theventy-five poundth, my young friend?" he said.

The window snapped shut so suddenly, that Mr. Solomonson jumped back. Then, with a mournful expression upon his olive countenance, he took his departure.

CHAPTER 6.

Arthur Augustus is Disguised as an Ordinary Person.

"KERR, deah boy, I'm weady, if you are!" remarked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

The quadrangle at St. Jim's was alive with juniors.

They had turned out from the class-rooms for the brief morning recess, and were making the most of it.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, full of the idea in which Kerr was to help him, had sought out the Scottish junior at once. He found him in the quad., talking to his chums—Figgins and Fatty Wynn.

Both the latter looked at D'Arcy as he spoke.

"Hallo! What's on?" exclaimed Figgins.

Kerr grinned.

"Only another of Gussy's little wheezes," he said

Fatty Wynn pricked up his ears.

"A feed, I suppose," he remarked. "Well, I don't care if I come with you, you fellows. I'm feeling a bit peckish—I'm always hungry in December, I've noticed that. Perhaps a bit of a pick-me-up would do me good."

"It's not a feed," said Kerr.

The fat Fourth-Former's face fell.

"Oh, rats!" he said. "Look here, let's bump that School House duffer. What does he want to come bothering for?"

"Weally, Wynn——"

"Cheese it, Fatty!" said Kerr, laughing. "You can come into the study and help. Gussy is going to disguise himself."

"To—to which?" stammered Figgins.

"To disguise himself."

"As what?"

"As a person."

"Look here, you ass——"

"Fact!" said Kerr. "Ask Gussy!"

"It's certainly quite twue," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Kerr is so obligin' as to help me to disguise myself as an ordinawy person."

"Well, you'll want a lot of changing!" grinned Figgins.

"Yaas, wathah!" D'Arcy agreed innocently. "I know I am a wathah distinguished-looking chap, and I want to become absolutely ordinawy—like one of yourselves, in fact."

"What?" shouted Figgins.

"Pway don't woah at a fellow like that, Figgay. It thwows me into quite a fluttah. I'm weady if you are, Kerr."

"Come on," said Kerr.

He led the way to the New House, and Arthur Augustus accompanied him. Figgins and Fatty Wynn followed, in a state of considerable astonishment. From the twinkle in Kerr's eye, they guessed that there was a humorous side to the matter, although Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was in the deadliest earnest.

They entered Figgins's study in the New House. Kerr soon had his make-up box out, and had brought various garments out of his well-stocked theatrical wardrobe. Kerr had been the founder of amateur theatricals at St. Jim's, and as his father was a famous actor, he had a great many "props" which were beyond the reach of the other fellows.

"What sort of a chawactah are you thinkin' of?" asked D'Arcy.

"Suppose we say a railway porter?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Figgins and Wynn.

Arthur Augustus turned his monocle upon them with a very severe expression.

"I twust you fellows will weserve your mewwiment for a more suitable occasion," he remarked. "This is an extwemely sewious mattah."

"I should jolly well say so!" exclaimed Kerr. "It's not every day that a real, genuine, blue-blooded, non-skidding D'Arcy disguises himself as an ordinary person."

"Weally, Kerr——"

"Suppose we say a shunter, or a porter," said Kerr. "I could make you a postman or a policeman, if you like; only you would be rather small for a policeman."

"No good, deah boy. I must appeah to be a somewhat pwospewous chap, the kind of chap who could be entwusted with pwoperty."

"How old?"

"Oh, feahfully old—about thirty or forty."

"Good! That's all right. Suppose we say a City clerk?"

"Can City clerks afford houses in the countwy at a wental of, say, two hundwed pounds?" asked Arthur Augustus thoughtfully.

"Ha, ha, ha! Not as a rule, I believe."

"Then that won't do. I must appeah pwosperous."

"Suppose I make you a stout, rich City gent?"

"I object to the word gent. It is vulgah to use such words as gent, or absolutely, or any of those howwid expwessions."

"Absolutely," said Kerr. "I mean exactly. Well, we'll say a rich City gentleman. I suppose we can manage to disguise D'Arcy as a gentleman, you chaps."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Figgins.

"Weally, Figgins——"

"Come on, then," said Kerr briskly. "No time to be lost. The bell goes for classes in a quarter of an hour."

"Gussy isn't going into class disguised, surely!" exclaimed Figgins, in amazement.

"Ha, ha! No!"

"But if you rig him up now——"

"I am leavin' St. Jim's tempowawily," explained Arthur Augustus.

"Have you got leave?"

"I have taken it."

"Oh, French leave," said Figgins. "There'll be a row."

"I twust I shall be able to explain satisfactowily to Dr. Holmes," said Arthur Augustus. "Anyway, I am goin'. It's for Tom Mewwy's sake."

"How are you going to help Tom Merry by disguising yourself as a gentleman?" demanded Figgins.

"Weally, Figgay, that is a wathah invidious way of puttin' it."

"But what good will it do Tom Merry, anyway?"

"I am unable to explain at pwesent; and, besides, I have no time to talk now. I have to leave St. Jim's when you fellows go into class again."

"Blessed if I think we ought to let the duffer go!" growled Figgins.

"I wefuse to be called a duffah, Figgins. And I twust you will wemembah that I placed myself on your honah by comin' here, and you cannot possibly intahfere with my actions," said D'Arcy, with a great deal of dignity.

"But you'll be missed."

"Vewy likely."

"And searched for."

"That's all wight."

"But—but——"

"I shall wiah to the Head fwom Hucklebewwy Heath, explainin' that I have gone down there on account of Tom Mewwy, so that will be all wight."

"I jolly well think it won't be all right!" growled Figgins. "But I suppose you're your own master, so if you won't take advice, go ahead."

"I am weady, Kerr."

"So am I. Here goes!"

Kerr started to work upon the swell of St. Jim's.

In a very short time D'Arcy's elegant Etons were changed for dark clothes of a less conspicuous cut, and his slim figure had been padded out to a respectable middle-aged size.

D'Arcy was somewhat tall for his age, and in a man's clothes, and padded out to stoutness, he passed for a man very well, so far as his figure went.

His face was easy to disguise under Kerr's manipulation.

The beloved monocle had to be sacrificed, and Kerr suggested a pair of blue glasses for the more complete hiding of the features.

Whiskers and a short beard, and a straggling moustache so utterly changed the character of D'Arcy's face that his affectionate governor would never have recognised him.

A somewhat shabby overcoat was added, and a silk hat, and, with a fat umbrella in his hand, Arthur Augustus was complete.

The chums of the New House looked at him in great admiration.

D'Arcy looked like an extremely commonplace and somewhat eccentric gentleman of about forty-five.

He gave quite a jump as he viewed the result of Kerr's handiwork in the glass.

"Bai Jove! That's stunnin'!" he exclaimed.

Kerr chuckled.

"You'll have to change your voice, too!" he exclaimed.

"My voice?"

"Yes, rather. It sounds like a boy's voice, for one thing, and it sounds like—like Gussy, for another."

"Bai Jove! I nevah thought of that. Tom Mewwy will wecognise my voice unless I am vewy careful, I suppose."

"Ha, ha! I rather think so."

"I suppose I could speak through my nose, pewwaps."

"Better have a cold, and keep your handkerchief to your face as much as possible," said Kerr reflectively. "Keep on coughing, you see, and ask them to excuse you, and speak in a bass, growling voice."

"Yaas, wathah! That's a jolly good ideah!"

"Well, let's see you try it."

D'Arcy snuffled.

"I twust you will excuse me," he said.

"H'm!"

"How's that, deah boy?"

"Rotten!" said Kerr.

"Weally, you know——"

"Make it like this," said Kerr. "I hobe you will egscuge me."

"I hobe you will excuge me, deah boy!"

"Leave out the deah boy, ass!"

"Vewy well. I think I must be off."

"You must be, to go out in that rig," said Fatty Wynn. "Off your rocker."

"Weally, Wynn——"

"There's the bell for classes," said Figgins.

"Bai Jove!"

The juniors hurried down.

"Of course, you will keep this dark, you fellows," said D'Arcy, as they went downstairs. "Not a word to anybody, you know."

"Oh, that's all right," said Figgins.

"Honah, you know?"

"Honour bright."

"Thanks awf'ly!"

They quitted the New House. Arthur Augustus walked down to the gate. Taggles, the porter, was outside his lodge, and he glanced curiously at the stranger; but, taking him for a visitor of one of the masters, he took no further notice of him. Blake met the chums of the New House as they hurried towards the Fourth-Form room.

"Where's Gussy?" he asked.

"Gussy!" repeated Figgins.

"Yes, Gussy."

"How should I know?" queried Figgins.

"Oh, rats!" said Blake. "He went into the New House with you. Kangaroo saw you together. Have you been japing him."

"My hat!" exclaimed Kerr. "We shall be late! Come on!"

And the three New House juniors rushed into the Form-room without replying to Jack Blake's question. Blake followed them in, and looked round. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was not there. The rest of the Fourth Form had turned up for the resumption of morning lessons; but the swell of St. Jim's was conspicuous by his absence.

CHAPTER 7.

A Tenant in a Thousand.

TOM MERRY turned away from the window, after snapping it down in the face of the persistent Mr. Solomonson. Tom had had quite enough of that gentleman, and he had not had time yet to look at his new visitor.

He turned to Mr. Smith.

The latter had risen to his feet. He had a handkerchief in his hand, with which he sometimes rubbed his somewhat red nose.

His silk hat and umbrella lay upon a chair, and his hair was so untidy that Tom Merry suspected at once that he was wearing a wig. That, however, was no business of the junior's. If a bald-headed gentleman chose to cover his pate with fictitious hair, it was surely his own affair.

The gentleman, who seemed short and fat, blinked at Tom Merry through smoked glasses.

"Master Merry, I presube," he said, with a cough.

"Yes, sir. You are Mr. Smith?"

"I have been waiding a liddle while," said John Smith.

"I'm sorry. I was occupied with showing another gentleman over Laurel Villa," said Tom Merry. "I am quite at your service now, if you like."

"You are very kide," said the gentleman, blowing his nose with a loud report, which quite startled Tom Merry.

"I am sorry you had to wait."

"Nod at all. But are you the person who has the ledding of the house?"

"Mr. Dodds will make arrangements if you are satisfied with the house, sir."

"Very good. Are you the owner?"

"My guardian, Miss Fawcett, is the owner."

"And you——"

"I am here to show tenants over it, at present," said Tom Merry.

The gentleman put his hand up to his smoked glasses, and tried to jam the right lens more tightly into his eye, as if he were accustomed to an eyeglass. Then he coughed violently.

"You have a bad cold," said Tom Merry sympathetically.

"Oh, thad is nodding."

"Perhaps you do not care to go out in this cold wind, with such a cold," Tom Merry suggested.

"Id is all right."

"Very well, sir. I am ready."

Mr. Smith followed Tom Merry from the house.

The junior could not help glancing at his companion curiously sometimes during the walk to Laurel Villa.

Mr. Smith's letter had been very curious, both in the writing and in the expressions used, as well as in the fact that no address had been appended to it.

Tom Merry hardly regarded the gentleman as a likely tenant, and his experience with Mr. Solomonson that morning was not encouraging. But Tom Merry was determined to do the best he could.

If this tenant did not turn out to be a success, Tom Merry had already arranged to leave the matter of letting Laurel Villa in the hands of Mr. Dodds, and to take his departure from Huckleberry Heath to begin to face the world. It was useless to waste time lingering in the little village.

Tom Merry hoped very fervently that Mr. John Smith would be satisfied with the house, and he meant to do his best to point out all the advantages of it. A hundred pounds a year would be sufficient to place Miss Priscilla Fawcett above want, while Tom Merry was fighting his way in the world.

Mr. Smith did not speak all the way to Laurel Villa. He blew his nose loudly several times, but that was all.

Tom Merry unlocked the door and let him in.

It was well past noonday now, and the sun was at its brightest, a most favourable time for viewing the house.

But that was hardly sufficient to account for the admiration Mr. Smith showed for the place. He uttered an exclamation of great admiration as soon as he saw the place.

"Splendid!" he exclaimed. "I thig this will suit me all righd."

"I'm glad of that, sir."

"What is the rent, blease?"

"One hundred pounds."

"Nodsense."

"Really——" began Tom Merry, somewhat nettled, and thinking that he had another Mr. Solomonson to deal with after all.

"Nodsense!" repeated Mr. Smith. "You could not bossibly led this splendid broberty for one hundred bounds. You mean two hundred bounds."

Tom Merry laughed.

"No, sir, one hundred."

"Two hundred."

"My dear sir——"

"Two huddred," said Mr. Smith, blowing his nose. "I shall refuge to take it for less."

Tom Merry stared.

Mr. Solomonson's method of fixing the rent of the house he had been prepared for, but Mr. Smith was a surprise to him.

For a prospective tenant to insist upon paying twice as much rent as his landlord asked was surely a novelty.

"The place—I mean the blace," said Mr. Smith hurriedly —"the blace is worth id, you see."

"Well, we are letting it at a low rent, because none of the decorations can be renewed," said Tom Merry. "Miss Fawcett cannot afford to spend any money on it, and it goes just as it stands."

"Quite—quide so," said Mr. Smith. "That is all righd." He coughed. "I suppose the broperty is worth two huddred."

"One hundred and fifty, certainly," said Tom Merry. "But Miss Fawcett is willing to let it for one hundred pounds, for the reason I've given you."

"I subbose you be brebared to sign an agreement?" asked the stout gentleman

"Certainly, sir."

"For whad beriod?"

"Any period you like."

"Say for seben years."

"Certainly."

"Very well, at two hundred bounds rend."

Tom Merry could not help laughing.

"If you insist upon paying that figure, sir, I suppose Miss Fawcett will make no objection," he said. "I must say that you are very unusually generous."

"Nod at all."

"Then you are satisfied with the house?"

"Quide zatisfied."

"You will come back to the rectory, then, and see Mr. Dodds, sir?"

"Cerdainly!"

And they walked back to the rectory together. Tom Merry felt very cheery and light-hearted. It was only his second attempt to let the house, and he had succeeded in letting it at double the rent asked. It crossed his mind that he might do worse than take up a house-agent's business as a profession.

CHAPTER 8.

Where is D'Arcy.

MR. LATHOM, the master of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, blinked round the class through his spectacles.

"Where is D'Arcy?" he said. "D'Arcy is not present."

There was no reply.

"Dear me! D'Arcy is late."

The lessons went on. The first lesson was over, and D'Arcy did not appear. Jack Blake was growing anxious. He could see grins exchanged by Figgins & Co., and he more than suspected that a New House jape was detaining the swell of the School House from the Form-room.

"Kerr," he whispered, when Mr. Lathom's back was turned a little later—"Kerr, do you know where Gussy is?"

"I can't see him."

"But do you know where he is?"

"How should I know?"

"You jolly well do know," growled Blake.

Kerr grinned.

"Then why ask me?" he said blandly.

"Look here, if you've been japing Gussy, it's too bad to keep him away from the lessons," said Blake. "He will get it in the neck, you know that."

"We haven't kept him away from the lessons."

"Then where is he?"

"Don't talk in class. Lathom's looking round."

"Look here, Kerr——"

"Dear me!" said Mr. Lathom. "You are talking class, Blake. I cannot allow you to talk in class. Take fifty lines."

And Blake snorted and relapsed into silence.

Morning lessons were over at last, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had not put in an appearance in the Form-room.

"D'Arcy has not come," said Mr. Lathom, making a note of it. "You may tell him, Blake, that he will be punished. Dismiss!"

The juniors crowded out of the Form-room.

"Where on earth can Gussy have got to?" exclaimed Digby. "I suppose he hasn't carried out that dotty wheeze of going off to Huckleberry Heath?"

Blake shook his head.

"Those New House bounders know where he is," he exclaimed.

"How do you know?"

"Kangaroo told me he saw Gussy go into the New House with them, and I know jolly well that he never came out again."

Digby looked startled.

"But Figgins wouldn't make a chap miss lessons," he said. "That would be carrying a jape too far."

"Well, Gussy missed lessons, didn't he?"

"Yes, no doubt about that."

"I'll tell you what," said Herries. "I'll run round the kennels for Towser, and we'll let him track Gussy down."

"Oh, blow Towser!" said Blake crossly.

"Look here, Blake——"

"Here's the Shell coming out; let's speak to Kangaroo."

Kangaroo, the sturdy Australian boy, whose right name was Harry Noble, came out of the Shell Form-room with Lowther and Manners and Clifton Dane. He stopped as Blake came up to him.

"You told me you saw Gussy go into the New House with Figgins & Co., Kangy," Blake exclaimed.

The Cornstalk nodded.

"Yes, rather!" he said.

"You didn't see him come out."

"No; but I didn't look," said Kangaroo.

"Well, I did, but I didn't see him," said Blake. "I noticed Figgins & Co. come out, and nobody came out at the same time excepting an old chap in spectacles, a friend of old Ratty's, to judge by the look of him. Gussy's still in the New House somewhere, and they've made him cut lessons for a rotten House jape."

Kangaroo whistled.

"That's rather rough on Gussy," he remarked. "I should hardly think that Figgins would play a jape like that."

"Well, where is Gussy?"

"Gentle shepherd, tell me where?" sang Lowther softly.

"He must be in the New House," said Blake. "Figgins & Co. have shut him in a study for a lark, I expect, and they hadn't time to let him out before lessons, perhaps."

"Better ask Figgins."

"Well, I suppose we've got to rescue Gussy," said Blake. "No good asking Figgins. We'll collar the bounders in the quadrangle, and bump them till they let out where Gussy is."

"Good egg!"

"I suppose you Shell-fish are going to stand by us?"

"Oh, we'll see you through," said Manners.

Blake sniffed, and led the way into the quadrangle. The chums of the School House looked round for Figgins & Co., and Blake sighted them at the gates, talking to three fellows in Grammar School caps.

The three were Gordon Gay, Frank Monk, and Jack Wootton, of the Fourth Form at Rylcombe Grammar School. The School House chums walked towards them, and the Grammarians nodded cheerily. They had ridden over, and were holding their bikes as they talked to the New House fellows.

"We've run over to see you about the match on Saturday," said Gordon Gay. "Is it coming off, or do you want it to be postponed?"

"Oh, I suppose it had better come off," said Blake. "Tom Merry has promised to come back and see us, but whether he'll be here on Saturday I don't know. If he's here, of course he'll play for us."

"Of course," said Figgins. "Otherwise I shall captain the team."

Blake gave him a freezing glance.

"You'll what?" he demanded.

"Captain the team," said Figgins.

"Joking, I suppose?"

"Quite serious," said Figgins. "I don't see who else could do it, unless it's Kerr. Kerr could manage it all right."

NEXT "THE SEARCH FOR TOM MERRY." Another Splendid, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co.

"Oh, I leave it to you, Figgy," said Kerr.

"I make it spades," said Figgins. "I mean, I'm going to captain the team. I want you School House chaps to keep hard at practice."

"Ass!"

"Look here, Blake——"

"Look here, Figgins——"

"Well, if it's settled that the match is coming off all the same, we'll buzz off," said Gordon Gay, laughing.

"Oh, buzz off, then!" said Blake. "We're playing you on Saturday—that's settled, though I haven't made up my mind about the team. I don't know whether I shall play any of these New House fellows."

"I haven't fixed up the eleven," Figgins remarked, "but I suppose I shall have to put a few School House bounders into it. But I don't know."

"Rats!"

"Scat!"

Gordon Gay laughed.

"Well, we'll leave you to settle that for yourselves," he said. "It's all right; we'll be along on Saturday. Kick-off at half-past two."

"Right!"

And the three Grammarians mounted their bicycles and pedalled away cheerfully through the frosty lane.

Jack Blake turned wrathfully to Figgins.

"Look here, what do you mean by this rot about captaining the eleven?" he exclaimed. "You know jolly well that a New House chap couldn't do it."

"Rats!"

"If you want a thick ear——"

"All you can give me," said Figgins, squaring up.

"I'll jolly soon——"

"Come on, then!"

"Here, chuck it!" exclaimed Kangaroo, interposing. "Suppose you leave that question till Saturday to be settled? If Tom Merry's here I take it he'll take his old place, and both of you will sing a little smaller."

"Hear, hear!" said Manners and Lowther together.

"Oh, all right!" said Blake. "We'll leave it till Saturday. Of course, if Tom Merry's here, he skippers us, but if not——"

"If not——" began Figgins.

"Oh, leave the 'ifs' till Saturday!" said Digby. "That's all right! What about Gussy?"

"Blessed if I hadn't forgotten Gussy?" exclaimed Blake, with a start. "And that's really what I was going to speak to Figgins about. Figgins, where's Gussy?"

Figgins shook his head.

"Don't ask me," he said.

"Does that mean that you don't know?"

"It means anything you like."

"Look here! Do you know where Gussy is?"

Figgins looked up at the sky.

"Looks like being a fine afternoon," he remarked.

"Eh?"

"But if it becomes rainy it will be wet."

"What?"

"But the rain will be good for the farmers, perhaps."

The Shell fellows chuckled, and Jack Blake glared with wrath.

"Look here!" he shouted. "I didn't ask you to be funny, Figgins. We get enough of that in the School House from Lowther. Have you seen Gussy?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Lots of times."

Blake breathed hard through his nose.

"Do you know where he is?"

"I shouldn't wonder if it rains."

"What?"

"If it does it won't be so fine as it looks at present."

"Oh, collar them!" cried Blake. "They know where Gussy is, and they won't tell. Collar the New House rotters!"

And Figgins & Co. were promptly collared.

CHAPTER 9.

D'Arcy Does Not Turn Up.

FIGGINS struggled in the grasp of Manners and Digby. Blake and Herries had collared Kerr, while Fatty Wynn was grasped by Kangaroo and Lowther. The New House trio struggled, but their struggles did not help them much.

"Here, fair play!" exclaimed Figgins indignantly. "We'll tackle you man for man, and knock you sky-high!"

"Rats! Where's Gussy?"

"Find out!"

"You know where he is?"

"Nice weather, ain't it?"

"Oh, bump them!" roared Blake, exasperated. "That's what they want. Bump them!"

Bump!

The three New House fellows were promptly bumped. Three separate and distinct roars rang out on the frosty air.

"'Nother one!"

Bump!

"Ow!" roared Fatty Wynn. "Rescue!"

"Rescue, New House!" yelled Figgins.

New House fellows ran up from all sides to the rescue. But School House juniors rushed up, too, and there was every prospect of a general row.

Figgins & Co. were in a rather awkward position.

They had no objection, as far as they were concerned, to tell Blake where Gussy was, or where they believed him to be, but they had promised D'Arcy that not a word should be spoken as to his expedition.

That promise held them silent.

Pratt and French and several other New House fellows rushed at the School House chums, and Reilly and Hancock and Gore and Glyn of the School House joined in, and fellows were running up from all quarters. Fortunately, Kildare, the captain of the school, came up with the rest.

"Stop that at once!" shouted the captain of St. Jim's.

Kildare's word was law. The tussling ceased at once, and Figgins & Co., looking very dishevelled, were released.

"Now, what is this row?" demanded Kildare.

"About?" stammered Blake.

"Yes. What is it?"

"It's about over!" ventured Monty Lowther.

There was a giggle, but Kildare took no notice of Lowther's little pun. He glanced sternly at Blake and Figgins.

"You two are the ringleaders, as usual," he exclaimed. "You'll bring me fifty lines each this evening, and if there are any more rows in the quad. to-day you'll be caned. Be off!"

Figgins & Co. walked away grinning. Kildare shook his finger warningly at Blake, and walked away. The School House fellows remained looking at one another.

"Well, of all the rotten luck!" said Blake wrathfully. "We should have bumped the facts out of those bounders in another minute or two."

"Yes, rather!"

"What on earth can have become of Gussy?" exclaimed Digby. "Those chaps must know where he is, or they'd say they didn't know."

"Quite so. He's shut up in the New House somewhere, I suppose."

"Well, we can't rag them again, after what Kildare said," Manners remarked.

"Kildare said no more rows in the quad.," replied Blake.

"Well, that settles it."

"It doesn't. We can look in the New House, can't we?"

"Phew!"

"Come on! Figgins has just gone into the gym., and we shall have the place to ourselves. Let's go and look for Gussy."

The School House fellows hesitated. To raid the rival House in broad daylight was a big undertaking. But Blake was marching off, and the other fellows could not do less than follow him.

But just as they reached the doorway of the New House a lean figure in cap and gown appeared there. It was that of Mr. Ratcliff, the House-master of the New House. He gave the crowd of juniors a sour look.

"What do you want here?" he asked.

Blake coloured.

"We—we were just going to look in at Figgins's study, sir," he exclaimed.

Mr. Ratcliff smiled sourly.

"You will not enter the House," he said. "I disapprove very strongly of these endless rags, as you call them. Kindly keep to your own House."

The juniors turned away.

There was no disregarding a House-master's orders, and the raid upon Figgins's quarters had to be postponed till a more favourable opportunity.

"Never mind," said Blake. "We'll get another chance later."

"Oh, Gussy is bound to turn up for afternoon school," said Digby.

"I don't know."

D'Arcy was missing from his place at the dinner-table. Mr. Railton, the master of the School House, noticed it, and

questioned the Fourth-Formers. No one could tell him any news of D'Arcy. The New House juniors, of course, were dining in their own House, and so were not present to be questioned.

Mr. Railton looked very puzzled, and concluded that D'Arcy had absented himself for some reason of his own, and made a note of it, with the intention of interviewing the swell of St. Jim's when he did turn up again.

At afternoon lessons D'Arcy's place was empty again.

The rest of the Fourth Form took their place in the big Form-room, but one was missing, and that one was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Jack Blake would have been alarmed about his chum but for the looks of Figgins & Co., which convinced him that they knew what had become of the swell of the School House, and that, therefore, no real harm could have befallen him.

But where was he?

It was almost incredible that Figgins & Co. would carry a jape so far as to keep D'Arcy away from lessons, and make him incur the severe consequences.

But Blake could think of no other explanation.

Mr. Lathom again remarked upon D'Arcy's absence, and noted it down. Blake began to wonder whether the swell of the Fourth would turn up again that day or not.

When the Fourth Form were dismissed Figgins & Co. went to the gym. for some kicking practice, having rigged up goal-posts there, for it was at this season too dark for footer practice out of doors after afternoon school.

Blake saw them go, and he gathered his chums.

"Now's our chance for raiding the New House and looking for Gussy," he remarked. "Figgy's busy, and I saw old Ratty go out. Come on!"

"What-ho!" said Digby.

"Shall I fetch Towser?" asked Herries.

"No, ass!"

"Look here, if Gussy's hidden away in some box-room or other Towser would smell him out in next to no time," declared Herries.

"Rats!"

"Look here, Blake, if you're determined to be a silly ass——"

"We'll have Kangy and Clifton Dane and Manners and Lowther, and Towser can be drowned," said Blake. "Buck up!"

"I'm going to fetch Towser."

"Oh, blow Towser!"

Herries snorted, and started off in the direction of the kennels. Blake was quickly on his way to the New House with half a dozen fellows. Herries joined them near the rival House—with Towser.

Blake breathed hard as he saw the bulldog. But it was useless to say anything to Herries on the subject. Herries could be very obstinate, and he had a touching faith in the powers of Towser to track down anything or anybody. The School House juniors hurried into the New House, and Herries dragged Towser in after them. Pratt sighted them in the hall, and gave a yell—and Towser gave a growl, and Pratt fled. Blake & Co. rushed upstairs to Figgins's study.

The search for D'Arcy in the enemy's quarters had begun. Meanwhile Pratt was sprinting across the quad. at top speed to fetch Figgins & Co.

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CHAPTER 10.

The Spoofer.

MR. DODDS was sitting down to his lunch when Tom Merry came in. The junior's face was so bright that the curate at once guessed his news.

"So Mr. Smith has proved satisfactory, Tom?"

"Yes, sir; I've let the house."

"Very good."

"He liked the place immensely from the first, and never ran it down at all like Mr. Solomonson," said Tom Merry.

"That is better still."

"And he has insisted upon paying twice as much rent as I asked."

Mr. Dodds jumped.

"What!"

"It's odd, isn't it?" said Tom Merry.

"I should say so! You asked——"

"A hundred pounds."

"And he has offered——"

"Two hundred."

"The man must be—well, very eccentric," said Mr. Dodds. "I have certainly never heard of such a thing before. It is incomprehensible."

"He insists upon it, sir."

"Extraordinary!"

"I suppose we shall be justified in accepting it, sir," said Tom Merry. "The house is worth much more than we asked, only we never expected to get more than a hundred pounds. If it is worth two hundred to Mr. Smith, I suppose he has a right to pay it if he chooses?"

"I suppose so. But——"

"But if you see him, sir, to make the arrangements, you can judge for yourself."

"Certainly. Ask him to lunch, by all means, Tom, and I shall be able to judge of this extraordinary gentleman."

Tom Merry returned to the hall, where Mr. John Smith was waiting, toasting his toes at the fire.

"I hope you will stay to lunch, sir?" said Tom Merry.

Mr. Smith hesitated.

"Weally——" he began. "I—I mean"—cough—"ah! I really don'd wad do drouble you, you see——"

"Not at all, sir. Mr. Dodds particularly wishes you to stay to lunch—and, anyway, you will have to stay some time, to see about the agreement for the house."

"Thad is drue."

"Please stay to lunch, sir!"

"I subbose I had better. Thag you very much."

"This way, sir."

Tom Merry took his new friend's hat and coat, and then led him into the dining-room.

Mr. Dodds greeted him very politely. The new tenant of Laurel Villa sat down so that his back would be to the light as far as possible, and Mr. Dodds did not fail to notice that circumstance.

The offer of double the rent had naturally excited the curate's suspicions. He could not help suspecting that he had to do with someone whose eccentricity amounted to lunacy, or else with some swindler—though how a swindle was to be effected by paying out money for nothing was past his power of guessing.

But there was no doubt that the circumstances were suspicious, and pointed to something of a hidden and secret nature in the matter.

Mr. Dodds meant to make a very searching examination of his visitor before he signed any agreement transferring Laurel Villa to his tenancy, and to make a keen investigation, too, into his references.

Mr. Smith appeared to be ill at ease.

Perhaps it was his cold—though his cold was a curious one, too. For sometimes he appeared to have no cold at all, and then all of a sudden he would begin sniffing and coughing and blowing his nose with great activity, as if to make up for lost time. He managed to eat a pretty good lunch, all the same—the keen wintry air having evidently sharpened his appetite.

"You have a very bad cold, sir," Mr. Dodds remarked, sympathetically.

The stout gentleman coughed by way of reply.

"Have you had it long?"

Another cough.

Mr. Dodds rose from the table, his lunch finished.

"We might now go into the library, and settle the preliminaries about the house," he remarked.

"Yaa—I mean"—cough, sniff—"yes, cerdainly."

Mr. Dodds placed a chair for his visitor in the library, so that the light from the window fell upon his face.

Sitting with his own face shadowed, the curate watched the countenance of Mr. John Smith while he talked.

It was a critical test for Mr. Smith.

Mr. Dodds was quite certain, in a few minutes, of two things—that Mr. Smith's hair was false, and that his wrinkles were artificial—in short, he was in disguise.

The curate's brow darkened at the knowledge.

Who was this man? What was his object in coming there disguised? That he was a criminal of some sort was the obvious explanation. The pretence of taking the house was probably a mere blind to cover some attempt to rob the rectory. Possibly he had some articles of value in his pockets already.

"You have decided to take Laurel Villa?" said Mr. Dodds, in spite of himself a stern note creeping into his voice.

"Yaa—yes."

"You like the place?"

"Very mudge."

"You are willing to pay double the rent demanded?"

"Cerdainly."

"And to sign an agreement to that effect?"

"Cerdainly."

"May I ask for your references?"

"Lord Eastwood is one."

The curate started.

He had never met Lord Eastwood, but the name, of course, was familiar. Tom Merry had often met D'Arcy's father, and he looked at Mr. Smith with new interest.

"You know Lord Eastwood?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, cerdainly."

"I know him well," said Tom Merry. "His son is a great

friend of mine—a chap named D'Arcy, at St. Jim's. You know him?"

"Cerdainly," said Mr. Smith, coughing.

"You wish me to communicate with Lord Eastwood?" asked Mr. Dodds.

"Oh, ya—cerdainly! You see Lord Eastwood will guarantee me, and id will nod be necessary to go into odder references," sneezed Mr. Smith.

"Quite so, if his lordship answers for you," said Mr. Dodds, almost staggered in his belief that he had to do with a rascal. "I suppose you are aware that Lord Eastwood lives within a drive of this village, and that I could see him this afternoon to put your statement to the test?"

"Quide so."

The curate was silent for a few moments. Tom Merry, who saw something unusual in his manner, watched the two in silence. Mr. Dodds rose finally, crossed to the door, and turned the key in the lock.

Tom Merry started to his feet. For the moment he thought that Mr. Dodds had taken leave of his senses.

Mr. Smith jumped up too—very actively for a gentleman of his years and girth.

"You give me Lord Eastwood's name, and tell me that he will answer for you, Mr. Smith?" the clergyman said sternly.

"Q-q-quide so."

"And you represent yourself as a genuine tenant for Laurel Villa?"

"C-c-cerdainly."

"Then why," said the curate quietly, "why have you come here with false hair, and a false beard, and a made-up face?"

Mr. Smith staggered.

Tom Merry uttered a cry of astonishment.

"Mr. Dodds!"

"It is the fact, Tom," said Mr. Dodds quietly. "The man is disguised, and his real appearance is nothing like that which appears to us now. I ask you again, Mr. Smith, what do you mean by that?"

"Bai Jove!"

Mr. John Smith uttered that ejaculation involuntarily.

Tom Merry jumped.

The words, the accent, all were familiar, and had he been in the dark he would have sworn that Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of St. Jim's, was present. But he could see all who were in the room, and the only persons there beside himself were Mr. Dodds and Mr. Smith!

Tom Merry seemed to feel his head turning round.

Mr. Dodds seemed thunderstruck too for a moment. Then he strode towards Mr. John Smith, and laid a grasp upon his beard, and jerked.

The beard came off, and the straggling moustache with it, and at the same time the smoked glasses slid down. Then, in spite of the wig and the make-up, the face was easily to be recognised.

Mr. Dodds gasped.

"D'Arcy!"

Tom Merry gave a yell.

"Gussy! You awful spoofer!"

CHAPTER 11.

Towser Does It.

GR-R-R!

That was Towser's remark as Herries dragged him upstairs in the New House at St. Jim's. Towser didn't like stairs. He regarded them probably as a human invention which was the outcome of the fact that human intelligence wasn't quite up to the doggy mark. He had to go up, as Herries had a tight grip on his collar, but he protested.

"Keep that beast quiet, Herries," said Blake.

To which Herries retorted:

"Rats!"

Gr-r-r-r!

"Here's Figgins's study," said Digby, throwing open the door of that apartment. "It's not fastened up, and D'Arcy's not here."

That much was evident. The room was empty.

Blake looked round it.

Arthur Augustus certainly wasn't hidden in Figgins's study, but Jack had not abandoned his belief that his elegant chum was secreted in the New House somewhere.

"We'll look along the studies, and then into the box-rooms," he said.

"Good egg!"

"Buck up, then," said Kangaroo. "We shall have the whole crew of those blessed larrikins here in a few minutes."

The School House fellows hurried along the Fourth-Form passage, looking into the studies. D'Arcy was not to be seen. But a good many New House fellows were seen, and they hurled remarks that were far from polite at the intruders.

The School House juniors were not slow to retort in kind, and they upset a few tables and desks as a warning to the inmates to be more civil.

But the swell of St. Jim's was not to be found.

And now the alarm was all over the house, Figgins & Co. had rushed back from the gym., and New House juniors were gathering from far and near.

"If you'd got something that belonged to D'Arcy, and let Towser smell it, he'd track him down in no time," Herries declared, more than once.

To which the unanimous reply was an ancient and classic monosyllable:

"Rats!"

Suddenly Towser tugged at his collar, and bounded along the upper passage, dragging Herries after him. Herries turned an excited face towards his chums.

"It's all right!" he shouted. "Towser's on the track! Come on!"

Towser was dashing off to the box-rooms.

"Well, we want to look in the box-rooms, anyway," said Blake. "Come on!"

And they followed Towser.

Towser dashed into a room, and began scratching fiercely at a big trunk. It was a very large trunk, with the initials L. W. painted upon it—Llewellyn Wynn, the full name of Fatty. It was the trunk Fatty used to come and go from St. Jim's, and during the term it remained stored away in the box-room. It was a very large trunk, and quite large enough to hold a human being. Towser was tearing at it excitedly, and the School House juniors gathered round in alarm.

Even Blake was impressed by Towser's excitement.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated. "They can't have been idiots enough to shut Gussy up in that trunk?"

"He'd be suffocated!" said Kangaroo.

"Open it and see—quick!"

But here arose a difficulty. The trunk was locked, and the key was not there. Blake knocked on top of the big trunk with his fist.

"Gussy! Gussy! Are you there?"

The trunk gave a hollow ring, but there was no reply.

"He couldn't answer," said Digby, in a low voice, "if he's shut up in that trunk. He's fainted long ago, or—or——"

He broke off.

"Impossible!" ejaculated Kangaroo. "Don't be an ass!"

"Well, look at Towser!"

Towser's excitement was certainly great. He ran round the big trunk, growling and whining incessantly.

There was a rush of footsteps in the passage outside. The plump form of Fatty Wynn appeared in the doorway; plump as he was, the Falstaff of the New House had outdistanced the others.

"Look here!" he shouted. "You——"

"Shut the door!" muttered Blake.

Kangaroo and Lowther seized Fatty Wynn, and hurled him spinning along the passage. He collided with Figgins and Kerr, and sent them reeling.

Manners slammed the door, and locked it.

The moment the key had turned in the lock, the New House juniors were hammering outside.

"Open this blessed door!" roared Figgins.

"Rats!"

Hammer! Hammer! Bang!

Crash!

"Oh, you can go and eat coke!" said Blake through the keyhole! "We're not going to open the door, and you can't batter it down, either, I fancy!"

"Now let's get the chest open," said Herries. "My belief is, that they've been idiots enough to shut Gussy up in this trunk, and he's fainted or been suffocated. I knew Towser would track him down."

"We can't open it!"

"Burst it!"

There was a fresh rain of blows on the door. Fatty Wynn's voice bawled through the keyhole in most excited tones:

"Don't you fellows touch my trunk!"

"There, that's pretty clear!" said Herries.

Blake wrenched at the trunk. But it was impossible to force the lock that way. Digby looked round for a weapon. He found a chisel, and it was thrust under the metal flap of the lock, which was then wrenched outwards.

It was hard to break, however. Fatty Wynn, on the other side of the door, guessed what the scraping and straining meant.

He banged hard on the door.

"Let that trunk alone!" he roared.

"Rats!"

"Yah!"

Hammer, hammer, hammer!

Blake wrenched at the trunk. The other School House fellows stood round him with startled faces. It seemed impossible that the New House fellows could have been so utterly stupid as to shut a boy up in a trunk, which was not even perforated. If D'Arcy was shut up there, D'Arcy was dead, or very near it. It was incredible, but——

But what did Towser's excitement mean, and Fatty Wynn's frantic opposition to the opening of the trunk.

Herries was sniffing suspiciously, too.

"There's a curious smell about this trunk," he said. "I noticed it when I came into the room—and it comes from this trunk!"

Blake shuddered.

"Oh, draw it mild!" he exclaimed.

"I tell you——"

"Hang it all, I can notice it myself!" said Kangaroo, sniffing. "And it certainly comes from the trunk! I don't see that it means anything."

"If there's a body——"

"Oh, shut up, Herries!"

"Well, it's suspicious!" said Herries.

"It smells like—like onions to me!" said Clifton Dane.

"Oh, don't be an ass, Dane!"

Towser was growling and trying to tear at the trunk. It was clear that the curious smell had attracted Towser to it. But——

Wrench! Crash!

The lock came to pieces under Blake's powerful wrenching.

There was a shout from Fatty Wynn outside. The Falstaff of the New House had heard the lock break.

"You—you rotters! Don't you dare to open that trunk!"

"Rats!"

Blake threw up the lid of the trunk.

The tray within was empty. In spite of himself, Blake trembled as he lifted out the tray. What was to be disclosed underneath it? The curious, penetrating smell was stronger than ever now!

The juniors stood with tense faces, looking. Blake dragged out the tray. There was a general craning forward of necks, and then a yell.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

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CHAPTER 12.

Steak and Kidney.

IT was not a body that was disclosed by the removal of the tray in the trunk. It was not Arthur Augustus, fainting, suffocated, or bound hand and foot. It was nothing so terrible.

It was a large dish, nearly full of a most savoury compound of beefsteak, kidneys, and other ingredients, with a smell of onions very pronounced.

Fatty Wynn's anxiety was explained now.

This was the treasure trove.

The School House juniors stared at it. They roared with laughter, with the exception of Herries. Herries was looking rather sheepish.

All was clear now.

Fatty Wynn had had that savoury compound cooked at Mrs. Taggles. He had taken it to the New House to eat, when Figgins and Kerr had heartlessly dragged him off to the gym. for footer practice. Fatty had been in great anxiety about his feed. He had not left it in the study, because other fellows knew that he had it, and he was in fear of its being raided in his absence. It had been a brilliant thought to lock it up in the empty trunk in the box-room. Nobody was likely to look for it there.

But the unexpected had happened.

Towser had not tracked down Arthur Augustus, but that savoury scent had reached his keen nostrils, and he had tracked down the steak-and-kidney pie.

Towser was more excited than ever. He made efforts to leap into the trunk.

Herries dragged him back almost angrily. Herries was nearer at that moment to being angry with his favourite than he had ever been before.

"Down, Towser!" he grunted.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake. "Good old Towser!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He's tracked down the pie! Do you remember the time when he tracked down the kippers, Herries? Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, shut up!"

"Poor old Fatty! No wonder he was alarmed!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We haven't found Gussy," Lowther remarked.

"Oh, he can't be in the House!" said Blake. "He would have heard us by this time, and called out, I think. He's not here, though goodness knows where he is. The trouble is, that we're here, and the New House bounders are in a pack outside."

"And we can't get out?"

"Exactly."

There was a furious hammering at the door again.

"You School House rotters!"

"Hallo, Fatty!"

"Have you opened that trunk?"

"Ha, ha! Yes!"

"Don't you touch that pie!" roared Fatty. "If you touch that pie, we'll—we'll scalp you baldheaded!"

"We'll scalp them anyway," said Figgins's voice. "We'll wait here for 'em to come out if we have to wait till bedtime!"

Fatty Wynn kicked the door hard.

"Let us in, you School House rotters!"

"Rats! Look here, Figgins, we came here to look for Gussy, and all we've found is a steak-and-kidney pie!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We're willing to make it pax, if you are."

Figgins gave a whistle of astonishment.

"Well, I like that! You've raided our House, and upset half the studies, and now we've got you cornered, you're willing to make it pax! Rats!"

"We're willing to let you off, I mean," said Blake.

There was a howl of wrath from the New House juniors. There were twenty or more of them crowded now in the passage outside the box-room door.

"You'll let us off, will you!" said Figgins. "Well, you won't get off so easy yourself. We'll duck every blessed man jack of you in the bath-rooms, when we get hold of you, and send you back to the School House with your chivvies done up in butter and soot!"

"How nice!" murmured Monty Lowther. "We've got a great leader in Blake—I don't think!"

"Oh, rats!" said Blake.

"Faith! And how are we going to get out of the fix intirely?" asked Reilly.

Blake rapped on the door.

"Figgy! I say, Figgy!"

"Going to open the door?"

"Not unless you make it pax."

"Rats!"

"We're willing to pay ransom," said Blake.

"Eh? What do you mean? What ransom?"

"A steak-and-kidney pie."

"What?"

"That's the ransom," said Blake coolly. "We've got a ripping steak-and-kidney pie here, 'nuff for a whole family, and we'll hand it over to you for a safe passage to the quad."

"Rats!"

"That's all right!" exclaimed Fatty Wynn eagerly. "We accept! We accept, don't we, Figgins? Look here, that's my pie, and——"

"No, we don't accept, Fatty," said Figgins grimly.

"Oh, I say——"

"Offer taken?" demanded Blake, through the keyhole.

"No! Fifty noes!"

"Look here——" began Fatty.

"Stuff! Do you think we're going to let your rotten pie make any difference, in making terms with the enemy?" demanded Kerr.

"It's not a rotten pie," said Fatty Wynn indignantly. "It's a splendid steak-and-kidney pie, and the biggest one we've ever had in the study. Mrs. Taggles cooked it for me, and it only wants heating up in a saucepan. I——"

"Oh, blow your pie!"

"I'm jolly well going to——"

"Are you going to keep us here?" demanded Blake.

"Yes, rather!"

"Then we'll eat the pie."

Fatty Wynn gave a yell.

"You—you pirates! Don't you dare to eat my steak-and-kidney pie!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I—I'll scalp you!" roared Fatty Wynn. "I—I—I'll pulverise you! I—I'm fearfully hungry now. I always get extra hungry in this December weather. Look here, you gimme my pie. Do you hear?"

"I'm not deaf," chuckled Blake. "You can have your pie in return for a safe passage to the quad."

"That's only reasonable, Figgy," urged Fatty Wynn. "Do be a reasonable chap. It would be a sin to risk that pie."

"Blessed if you aren't like the chap who sold his birthright for a mess of pottage," exclaimed Figgins wrathfully. "Are you going to sell the honour of the New House for a steak-and-kidney pie, you fat bounder?"

"Oh, I say!" murmured Fatty Wynn feebly.

"But I'll tell you what we will do," said Figgins considerately. "If they touch that pie we'll give 'em a coat of marmalade over their hair, as well as the soot and the butter. Now, I can't say fairer than that."

"Certainly not," said Kerr.

Fatty Wynn grunted.

"If you gave 'em a swim in lard and jam, it wouldn't bring back the steak-and-kidney pie," he mumbled.

"Pooh! Bosh!"

"Well, what's the verdict?" demanded Blake.

"We'll wait here till you come out."

"Then we'll eat the pie."

"We'll make you sit up if you do."

"Oh, rats! We'll eat the pie, and then we'll come out and lick you bounders."

There was a snort of wrath at this remark. The New House fellows would have waited hours to get at Blake & Co. after that.

Jack Blake turned to his comrades, in the glimmer of gaslight in the box-room.

"Look here, we look like being shut up here for some time," he remarked. "We'd better have tea. There's nothing but steak-and-kidney pie, but there's plenty of that, and you're welcome to all you can eat."

"Well, it looks jolly nice," said Digby, lifting the pie out of the box.

"I think it's as nice as it looks. We know how our esteemed friend Wynn does these things. We shall have to use our pocket-knives for forks and knives and spoons, but that is one of the little inconveniences of these informal meals," said Blake blandly.

"But how on earth are we to get out?" demanded Manners.

"We'll think that out after we've eaten the pie."

"Good egg!" said Kangaroo heartily.

And the School House juniors commenced operations upon the pie. Fatty Wynn, with his anxious ear to the keyhole, heard the sounds of feasting, and almost wept.

"There goes the pie!" he groaned.

"Never mind the pie; wait till you're sticking their topknots with marmalade," said Figgins encouragingly.

But Fatty Wynn only looked despondent. Even the prospect of sticking the School House fellows' topknots with marmalade failed to console him for the loss of that beautiful pie.

Within the box-room the School House fellows were enjoying themselves. The pie was still quite warm; it had a lovely smell and a lovely taste, and as the fellows had not had their tea yet, they were hungry. Fatty Wynn's pie was large, but it vanished at last under the attacks of the hungry juniors.

"Ripping!" said Blake, when it was finished. And Towser, who had come in for his share, licked his chops.

But outside in the passage could be heard movements and whispering voices. Figgins & Co. were still on the watch.

CHAPTER 13.

Back to St. Jim's.

"GUSSY! You spoofer!"

"D'Arcy!"

"You bounder!" shouted Tom Merry.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy stood revealed.

He presented a curious sight in the library of Huckleberry Heath rectory, with the smoked glasses sliding down his nose, and his wig awry, and Mr. Dodds holding the beard and moustache that was still partly attached to his face.

D'Arcy was overwhelmed with confusion for the moment. He could only stand blinking and blushing in a guilty way.

Mr. Dodds burst into a laugh.

"So it is you, D'Arcy!" he exclaimed.

"Yaas, wathah, sir!"

It was the swell of St. Jim's natural voice once more.

"What on earth have you come in this rig here for, you young ass?" demanded Tom Merry.

"Weally, deah boy——"

"Have you got leave from the school?"

"I have not."

"Then you'll get into a row."

"I am perfectly pwepared to face a wow, undah the circs."

"But—but what does it mean?" Tom Merry exclaimed. "What have you done it for? What have you been spoofing me for, you dummy?"

"I decline to be called a dummay."

"You've made me believe that I'd let Laurel Villa," said Tom Merry. "Now, hang it all, Gussy, this is a bit too rotten."

"But you have let it, deah boy," exclaimed Arthur Augustus eagerly.

"Yes, to you."

"It's all wight."

Tom Merry laughed.

"What! You're not thinking of really taking on Laurel Villa, are you? I suppose this is a jape from beginning to end."

"Not at all, deah boy."

"Then what on earth is it?"

"You see," D'Arcy explained, recovering his composure a little, "I had wesolved to help you, old man."

"But how?"

"So I w'ote to my governah, and asked him if he would stand the tin if I found a way of settin' you on your feet."

"My hat!"

"My governah agweed at once. He's an awf'ly good old sort, you know, my governah. He expwessed some doubts as to whethah I should think of a plan; you know, he doesn't weally undahstand what an awf'ly deep chap I am."

Tom Merry grinned.

"Well, this was the plan, and I was gettin' along famously when Mr. Dodds spoiled evewything," said Arthur Augustus. "I was goin' to take your house at two hundwed a year, you see, and my governah would find the tin."

"You ass!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"You chump!"

"I wefuse to be called a chump," exclaimed D'Arcy, with a great deal of dignity. "I wegard it as a weally wippin' plan."

"Fathead!"

"If you have nothin' to say exceptin' oppwobwious expwessions, Tom Mewwy, I think this discush had bettah cease."

"Ass!"

"You see, you wefused to have any tin fwom anybody, so I had to think of this dodge," said D'Arcy. "I wegard it as jollay good."

"Oh, you duffer!" said Tom Merry. "I should have bowled you out, you chump. And I'm not going to let you give me money, you fathead!"

"Weally, you know——"

"But you're a good old duffer, Gussy, and it's all right," said Tom Merry. "I'll take the will for the deed, anyway."

"I twust," said Arthur Augustus, "that Mr. Dodds will advise you to pwoceed with the mattah, and let me have the house."

"Rats!"

Mr. Dodds shook his head.

"I am afraid I cannot advise anything of the sort, D'Arcy. Tom is quite right in refusing to take monetary help from his friends."

"Of course, I should not venture to put up my opinion in opposition to that of a clergyman," said Arthur Augustus. "But I am extwemely sowwy that the mattah has fallen thwough It will be, howevah, a gweat comfort to get wid of these things. I am feelin' most uncomfortably hot and stuffy."

"Come up to my room and change, you chump," said Tom Merry. "I'll lend you some clothes."

"Thank you vewy much, deah boy."

Tom Merry took D'Arcy up to his room. Mr. Dodds, smiling very much, left about his business. Tom Merry, after the first surprise, and the disappointment in not having secured a tenant for the house after all, was delighted to see his chum again.

He had not been very long away from St. Jim's, but it seemed a long time to him. He felt as if he had grown very much older since he left all his chums behind, and D'Arcy with him again was like a ray of sunshine and youthful cheeriness.

Arthur Augustus, with Tom Merry's help, stripped off the clothes, and the paddings, and the rest of the disguise, and the things were packed up carefully to be returned to Kerr at St. Jim's.

Then the swell of St. Jim's washed the make-up off his face, and dressed himself in Etons belonging to Tom Merry.

The clothes fitted him a little loosely, and did not show off the elegance of his figure to its full advantage, but Arthur Augustus remarked that he was very glad to look "wespectable" once more.

"Well, of all the chumps, I think you take the cake," said Tom Merry, laughing. "But it does me good to see you again, old chap."

"Does it weally?" said D'Arcy. "Then, in that case, deah boy, I ovahlook all the oppwobwious expwessions you have used."

"How are they all getting on at St. Jim's?"

"We all miss you vewy much, but othahwise things are vewy much the same as usual," said Arthur Augustus, brushing his hair very carefully before Tom Merry's glass. "The Gwammah School footah match comes off to-mowwow—Saturday—you know."

"Yes, I hadn't forgotten it. Who's captaining you?"

"Blake or Figgins, unless you come back, deah boy."

Tom Merry shook his head.

"The rent will be one hundred pounds, sir," said Tom Merry. "Nodsense!" said Mr. Smith. "You could not possibly let this splendid broberty for one hundred bounds. You mean two hundred bounds. I shall refuge to take it for less." (See page 9.)

"I can't come back to St. Jim's," he said.

"But your fees are paid there till the end of the term," said Arthur Augustus. "Even if you are wuined, deah boy, you can have the west of the term."

Tom Merry smiled.

"But we're close on the break-up for the Christmas holidays now," he said. "It would only be a few days, Gussy."

"Yaas, but——"

"I'm coming back to see you all, anyway, and say good-bye, and then I'm going on to London," said Tom Merry.

"You are comin' to Eastwood House for Chwistmas?"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"Thanks, awfully, Gussy, but I can't come."

D'Arcy's face fell.

"Why not?" he asked.

"Things are changed. I'm poor now—as poor as the poorest boy on your father's land," said Tom firmly. "I can't come to your place as I used to, Gussy. You don't understand; you've never wanted for money. But—but I shall have nothing in my pockets; and that's not all. I've sold most of my clothes to pay expenses, and I have precious little more than the two suits you and I are standing up in at the present moment. I can't dress the part for a Christmas party at Eastwood House, old chap."

"I am sure we should all be glad to have you, if you came in a sack, Tom Mewwy."

"I know you would, Gussy, old son, but I'm not going to impose upon you, all the same. Besides, I've got to be up and doing. I think I have a chance in London. I've heard of something, and I ought not to let it slip."

"When are you goin'?"

"At once, I think. I was staying here till I had seen whether there was any chance of letting Laurel Villa. It's pretty clear now that it won't let till after Christmas, and Mr. Dodds has promised to take charge of the matter. I'm living on Mr. Dodds while I'm here, Gussy, and he's a poor man. I can't stand it; I must go. He is all kindness, and I know he'd let me live here for ever if I liked. But I've got to keep my self-respect, and taking advantage of the kindness of friends is the way to lose it."

"I suppose you're wight, Tom Mewwy; but it's vewy wotten."

"Well, every cloud has a silver lining, you know," said Tom Merry, smiling, "and I hope things will turn out all right for me."

He paused, and reflected for a moment.

"Blessed if I don't come back to St. Jim's with you," he said. "You're the last tenant I had to show over Laurel Villa, and that's up now. I've got to see the chaps once more, and then leave for London. And I'll play in the match with the Grammarians to-morrow, Gussy—shove on the St. Jim's colours for the last time."

"That will be wippin', deah boy! Bai Jove, how the fellows will shout when they see you again!" exclaimed D'Arcy, with eyes glistening.

"Then they shall shout this evening."

"Wippin'!"

"You left St. Jim's without leave, didn't you?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Well, if I come back with you, I think the Head will very likely overlook it. He has been kindness itself to me, and I'll tell him you were trying to help me."

"Jollay good ideah."

The juniors descended. They found Mr. Dodds, and Tom Merry explained to him what he had decided to do—with the curate's approval, of course.

Mr. Dodds nodded thoughtfully.

"Quite right, Tom," he said. "I shall be sorry to lose you, and you know that you always have a home and a friend here when you want them. But you're quite right to try and make your way in the world. Heaven bless you, lad!"

And the next train from Huckleberry Heath bore Tom Merry and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy in the direction of St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 14.

The Return of Tom Merry.

"HALLO, there!" Blake shouted through the keyhole of the box-room in the New House. And from Figgins & Co. and the crowd of New House juniors came an answering growl.

"Hallo!"

"Oh, you're still there?" exclaimed Blake.

"Yes, rather."

"We've finished the pie," said Blake.

"Good! We'll finish you soon," said Figgins.

Fatty Wynn grunted.

"It was a ripping pie!" he said. "There was steak, and kidneys, and my dodge with the onions, you know. Oh, it was ripping!"

"Never mind; we'll make 'em sit up."

"We're willing to make it pax," said Blake.

"Rats!"

"Well, then, we'll stay here and you can sit out in the passage," said the Fourth-Former of the School House. "Don't you find it draughty?"

"Oh, go and eat coke!"

The School House fellows shut up in the box-room were looking rather serious. They had been very pleasantly occupied with Fatty Wynn's steak-and-kidney pie. But now that the pie was finished, the confinement in the box-room was far from pleasant.

It was cold, and it was uncomfortable. They thought of their cosy studies in the School House, and growled.

"This is what comes of letting a Fourth-Former lead us about," Monty Lowther remarked, addressing space.

"Oh, rats!" said Blake.

"We really owe it to Towser," said Digby—"Towser's wonderful gift for tracking down steak-and-kidney pies, I mean."

"Oh, cheese it!" said Herries.

"I wonder how long we're going to stay here."

"Jolly cold, ain't it?"

"Suppose we rush 'em?"

"They're three or four to one, and more on the stairs."

"Oh, blow!"

Jack Blake went through gymnastic exercises to keep himself warm. Kangaroo stamped up and down. From the outside of the box-room came a sound of stamping, showing that the New House juniors were similarly engaged.

"Blessed if I'm going to stand this!" exclaimed Reilly at last, going to the door. "Let's rush the spalpeens."

"Good!"

"Come on, then!" said Lowther.

Blake held up his hand.

"Hark! What's that?"

It was a ringing shout from the quadrangle, audible even in the box-room high up in the New House. The juniors listened.

"Blessed if I know!" said Kangaroo.

"Listen!"

From the dusky quadrangle came a louder yell.

"Hurrah! Hurrah!"

"What on earth is it?"

There was a sound of sudden scampering in the passage. Figgins & Co. were gone!

The School House juniors looked amazed.

There was no doubt about it; the crowd had rushed away out of the passage, and scampered down the stairs.

From the quad. came a ringing shout again. Blake jammed his face against the window, but it was high up, and the quad. was in darkness.

"Something's happened!" exclaimed Digby.

"But what?"

"Blessed if I know!"

"Hark!" shouted Kangaroo.

From the quad. came up a roar.

"Hurrah! Tom Merry! Hurrah!"

Jack Blake gave a yell.

"It's Tom Merry come back! Come on, you chaps!"

He unlocked the door and tore it open, and rushed from the box-room. The passage was deserted. Not a thought did Blake and his chums give to the New House juniors. They would have rushed out just the same to greet Tom Merry if Figgins & Co. had been ever so grimly on the watch. But Figgins & Co. were gone.

Blake and his chums rushed down the stairs and out of the New House.

There was no one to stop them.

All the New House juniors had rushed out of the house at the news that Tom Merry had returned.

In the dusky quadrangle was a shouting crowd.

Blake and the rest rushed over towards the School House.

Figgins & Co. were already there. In the radius of light cast from the windows and the open doorway, juniors of both Houses were mingled in a crowd.

Tom Merry and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy were in the midst of the throng.

Figgins was shaking Tom Merry by one hand, while Kerr gripped the other, and Fatty Wynn was thumping him on the back.

"Tom Merry! Hurrah!"

Monty Lowther and Manners rushed up, and pushed the New House juniors aside, and fairly hugged their old chum in their arms.

Figgins grinned at Blake.

"Pax now!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, rather, Figgy!"

"I should say so!" exclaimed Kerr. "Tom Merry doesn't come back every day. Good old Tommy! Still looking just the same."

"Yaas, wathah."

"Oh, yes, we'll make it pax," said Fatty Wynn. "I suppose all the steak-and-kidney pie is gone, Blake?"

"Ha, ha! Yes."

"Here's Gussy, too!" exclaimed Herries. "Where have you been?"

"Keep that wotten bulldog away, Hewwies, please. That wotten beast has no wespect whatevah for a fellow's twousahs."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, you know——"

"Where have you been, Gussy?"

"I've been to Hucklebewwy Heath," said D'Arcy. "I've bwought Tom Mewwy back with me. It's all sewene."

"Staying for good, Tom Merry?"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"No; only for a few days, kids—till Monday, in fact."

Lowther's face fell.

"You're not coming back, Tom?"

"Can't be done."

"But—but——"

"But I'm staying over to-morrow and Sunday, and I'll play in the match against the Grammar School to-morrow afternoon, if you fellows like."

"If we like," said Blake. "Of course we like! You're going to skipper us, and if Figgy says anything against it——"

"Don't be an ass!" said Figgy. "What could I say against it? Tom Merry's the only School House chap who can captain an eleven."

"Look here——"

"Rats!"

"Weally, deah boys, don't begin to wow now," said Arthur Augustus. "I wegard this as a most auspicious occasion, and I think you youngstahs ought to behave yourselves."

"Yes, rather!" said Kangaroo. "Order, please! Shut up!"

Tom Merry moved on to the School House door in the midst of an enthusiastic crowd. Fellows of both Houses were crowding round to see him, and even Gore was seen to be grinning in a pleasant sort of way. Mr. Railton, the master of the School House, met him at the door.

He shook hands heartily with the hero of the Shell.

"So you have come back, Merry!" he exclaimed. "I hope for good."

"I'm afraid not, sir. Only for a few days."

"Well, well, I am glad to see you again, at all events; and it appears that your school-fellows feel the same," said Mr. Railton, with a smile.

"Yes, sir," said Tom Merry happily. "It's almost worth while becoming poor, I think, to see what jolly good chaps one's friends are."

"Bai Jove! I wegard that as vewy well put, deah boy."

Mr. Railton glanced sternly at Arthur Augustus.

"Ah! It is you, D'Arcy! You have returned, then?"

"Yaas, wathah, sir!"

"Will you kindly explain your absence?"

"Certainly, sir. You see——"

"D'Arcy came down to see me, sir," ventured Tom Merry. "He came to try to do me a service, and—and it wasn't any good; but I hope you will be as lenient to him as you can, sir."

"Ah!" said Mr. Railton. "You should not have left without permission, D'Arcy. Under the circumstances, however, I shall let the matter drop for the present."

"Thanks awf'ly, Tom Mewwy," said D'Arcy, as Mr. Railton went back to his study. "I wathah think you've got me out of a waggin'."

"Here, where are you taking Tom Merry to?" demanded Blake, as Lowther and Manners marched the hero of the Shell off.

"Our study," said Lowther. "He's our property, isn't he?"

"Bai Jove——"

Tom Merry was marched off.

CHAPTER 15.

All Friends.

TOM MERRY had tea with his own chums in his old study in the Shell passage, and he had never enjoyed that cosy meal there more. The Terrible Three were together once again, and peace and comfort reigned in the study. That they had met only to part again very soon was a thought they drove from their minds as much as possible, making the most of the present while it lasted.

They had much to tell and to hear.

Tom Merry was keenly interested in the smallest scrap of news about the school; and even the short time he had been away had been sufficient to place him somewhat out of touch with matters there.

Whether the School House had beaten the New House in the last House match, whether Monteith had any chance of getting in as secretary to the sports' club, whether Mr. Ratcliff had been in any of his tantrums lately, whether the expected fight had come off between Hancock of the Fourth and young Wilson; how the footer practice was getting on, what state the junior ground was in, who was to referee in the forthcoming match with the Grammarians—all these, and other items of news, Tom Merry listened to eagerly, while his chums stuffed him with all kinds of eatables.

By a delicacy of tact on the part of the School House fellows, the Terrible Three were not interrupted during tea; but after that period of grace, Manners and Lowther could not expect to keep Tom Merry to themselves.

Fellows dropped in to see him, many seniors as well as juniors, and he held quite a reception for some time in his study.

That was a very happy evening to Tom Merry.

He went to bed with the Shell, in his old bed, with his old friends round him, very tired, but in a very happy frame of mind.

He slept like a top that night.

The familiar old rising-bell clanged out in the grey dawn the next morning, and Tom Merry was one of the first out of bed.

Manners and Lowther jumped out at once, and very soon the three were out in the frosty air of the quad., strolling round the old school.

"By Jove! I feel as if I'd been months away, instead of only a week or two," Tom Merry exclaimed. "How jolly it is to be here again!"

"You'll come down and see us at times, won't you?" said Manners. "I suppose you'll be able to manage that."

"I hope so, chappy."

"Good-mornin', deah boys!" said Arthur Augustus, as he met the Terrible Three. "Wippin' mornin'!"

"Jolly ripping!"

"Wippin' day for a footah match," said D'Arcy. "Of course, now you are back, I wesign the captaincy of the juniah eleven into your hands, Tom Mewwy."

The Shell fellows chuckled. They knew that D'Arcy had about as much chance of captaining the School House juniors as of leading England in an International match.

"I've got a wathah wippin' ideah, too," said Arthur Augustus. "Tom Mewwy is such an independent beast, that it is pwactically imposs. to help him, but I've got an ideah for settin' him on his feet in the most wippin' mannah."

Tom Merry laughed.

"All offers thankfully received," he said. "What's the idea?"

"I haven't quite finished thinkin' it out, deah boy, but I wegard it as wippin'. I want you to look upon me as a fathah."

Tom Merry jumped.

"What!"

"I want you to look upon me as a fathah," said Arthur Augustus calmly. "Bein' so much oldah than you are——"

"Why, you ass, you're younger!"

"I was not wefewwin' to mere years," said D'Arcy, with dignity. "In expewience, and knowledge of the world, and that sort of thing, I am evah so much your eldah, as you will of course admit."

"Rats!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"Bosh!"

"Pway don't be oppwobwious, deah boy. Undah the circs., it is imposs. for me to give you a feahful thwashin'. Now, if you look upon me as a fathah——"

"Go on, daddy!" said Monty Lowther.

D'Arcy gave the humorist of the Shell a freezing look, and continued:

"My governah is only too willin' to plank down weady cash for a good purpose like this. I have often wemarked that you can always wely on my governah to play the game. Now, I don't see why I shouldn't adopt Tom Mewwy——"

"What!"

"I don't see why I shouldn't——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, you chaps——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the Terrible Three.

Arthur Augustus jammed his eyeglass into his eye, and regarded the chums of the Shell with a withering look.

"If you are goin' to weceive a wippin' suggestion in this wibald spiwit——" he began.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Then I wefuse to continue the discush."

And Arthur Augustus walked away, leaving the Shell fellows roaring with laughter.

As the Terrible Three went into the School House to breakfast, Gore of the Shell met them at the door. Gore's face was a little shadowed, and he was not looking any more agreeable than usual as he came up to the chums. Tom Merry paused; he saw that Gore was going to speak, and he expected some taunt. Gore was the oldest of his enemies.

"I want to speak to you, Merry," Gore said abruptly.

"Go ahead!"

Gore glanced at Manners and Lowther. They walked on ahead, leaving Tom Merry alone in the doorway with Gore.

"Well, what is it?" asked Tom Merry.

Gore hesitated. He seemed to have made up his mind to speak, and yet to be doubtful how to express himself in words. He coloured, and Tom Merry watched the red deepen in his cheeks in astonishment.

"Well, go ahead," said Tom Merry, again. "Breakfast is ready, you know."

"Yes, I know. I——" Gore paused.

"Yes?"

"We've not been good friends here, Tom Merry," Gore blurted out.

"I don't want to rake that up, now that I'm leaving St. Jim's for good," said Tom Merry quietly. "Let's forget all about it."

"That's not exactly what I mean. Look here, you're in low water now."

Tom Merry flushed.

"I—I'm not saying that to get at you," said Gore hastily. "The fact of the matter is, that I—I—hang it, I can't put it very well, but I mean that I'd jolly well like to lend you a hand if I could."

Tom Merry looked at him in astonishment.

He had been very far from expecting that of Gore. But Gore's face was very earnest, and it was evident that he was quite sincere.

Tom Merry's face softened.

"Well, that's jolly decent of you, Gore," he said. "If you could help me, I'd take it like a shot. It's all right though."

"Look here, if you're short of tin——"

Tom Merry laughed.

"It's all right, Gore. I couldn't take it. But I'm just as much obliged, all the same, and I'm jolly glad you've spoken like this. It's a pleasure to me to feel on good terms with everybody when I leave. Give us your fist, old son!"

And Tom Merry gripped Gore's hand, and then hurried after his friends. Gore had pleased the hero of the Shell more than he understood.

Tom Merry's face was very bright that morning. He turned up in class as if he had never left St. Jim's at all, and it was noticeable that Mr. Linton was very kind to him. And after morning lessons he turned up on the footer field to meet the Grammarians, wearing the St. Jim's colours once more, and looking all his old self.

"They're late, the bounders!" said Lowther, looking at his watch. "But we'll beat them to-day! What?"

"What-ho!" said Tom Merry. "Hallo! Here they are! Gay, old son, how are you?"

CHAPTER 16.
Tom Merry's Last Match.

"HERE they are! Good old St. Jim's!"

Tom Merry had turned out just in good time. It was all very well for the Grammar School lot to be late, but St. Jim's were always on time.

It wasn't Gordon Gay's fault that he and his men were late. But spectators cannot be expected to reason. Another five minutes, and they would probably have raided the dressing-rooms. Nearly all St. Jim's was on the ground to see Tom Merry play in his last match for the school.

"Good old St. Jim's!" they shouted again, as Tom Merry announced himself with the well-known sky-high punt into midfield.

The St. Jim's team certainly looked in the pink of condition. D'Arcy in particular seemed to have secured a new lease of life, so to speak.

The spectators had indulged in the usual chipping as the players came on. But the swell of St. Jim's was particularly pleased with himself to-day. His "clobber" was perfectly to his satisfaction, and the crowd's kindly—and otherwise—remarks were as the wind that passeth.

In the preliminary dribble he was seen to be particularly nippy, and a roar went up when he was seen to brush carefully a speck of mud from his elegant shorts.

The Grammar School fellows bounded into the field in another minute.

"Naughty boys," yelled Wally D'Arcy, "keeping us waiting like this!"

Gordon Gay laughed, and waved his hand. Tom Merry greeted him in midfield, to general applause. Then up went the coin. Conversation sagged perceptibly while it fell.

"Merry wins it!"

St. Jim's gave a cheer. It was a good augury. First time for three matches. There's luck in tossing with a silver coin, several of the fags gravely remarked.

"Why, what on earth is he doing? He's actually playing against the wind! The champion ass!"

"Ring off, ass!" said Lefevre, of the Fifth. "Can't you see he prefers playing against the wind to having the sun in his eyes?"

The whistle sounded as he spoke. The footballers were facing one another, keen and eager.

Gordon Gay kicked off.

He opened with a short pass to Jack Wootton. Flashing past Lowther, the Australian had it back to his chief in a trice.

But Tom Merry saw what was intended. He was on it as quickly as Gordon Gay. To tread the ball and heel it with his left to D'Arcy was the work of a moment.

Everyone knew it was one of D'Arcy's days. He literally breathed good play. The swell of St. Jim's did not slacken his pace a bit. Catching the ball delightfully on his upraised left, he whizzed it out to Manners.

The Shell fellow was up. He saw the opening coming, and was waiting for D'Arcy. The whole St. Jim's front rank had seen it, in fact, and everyone swung forward like clockwork.

But the wind was a sore trial. Short passes became much shorter. The game was not old enough for anyone to have a real measure of its strength.

Frank Monk saw this. He knew a chance must come. And it did.

Manners took D'Arcy's pass splendidly.

Harry Wootton was practically waiting for him on the wing. Manners centred. It was a valiant effort, but it did not reach Tom Merry, waiting in the goalmouth.

Thinking to counteract the wind, Manners sent in a raking centre. The turf was treacherous, and he only got half the force under it which he intended.

The ball travelled very slowly. D'Arcy rushed in to make the pass good; but Monk got there first, and the whole Grammar School attack moved forward again as he put them out of their difficulty.

Passes with them, of course, tended to the reverse of the St. Jim's case. The wind was likely to serve them too well.

Monk interpreted a look from Gordon Gay correctly.

"Save yourselves for the next half," it said, as distinctly as any spoken words. "Play the long-passing game."

And out went the ball to their wing men.

But Tom Merry had seen that look. The "intelligence department" worked very well in his ranks at once, and it read, "Let the spotting be sure."

That the signals had been understood was apparent the next moment. Blake had robbed Higgs of the leather, and St. Jim's cheered as the Fourth-Former set off to give them a solo performance on the left wing.

But he found the wind very trying, like Manners, and the effort ended in no addition. Both teams settled down for a mud-plunging time of it.

The going was fearfully heavy. As Wally D'Arcy, in the crowd, was saying, "the goalkeepers might go home for a sleep. They wouldn't be wanted."

But all at once Gordon Gay got going. He had actually beaten Tom Merry for possession, and the whole Grammar School line were seen coming for the St. Jim's goal. For the moment the running was undoubtedly theirs.

Their timing was excellent. The St. Jim's fellows seemed quite at a loss. Gordon Gay and his men were having it all their own way.

But, quick as Frank Wootton and Higgs and the wind got it up into the right corner, the St. Jim's half-back line—Figgins, Kangaroo, and Reilly—were ready.

Higgs was rather excited, and his centre, meant to be a swerve right into the goalmouth, was a mis-kick. The ball rolled over the line.

Fatty Wynn restarted, but it took all his weight to put the ball really well up. Then the game was very evenly contested.

The middle of the ground was beginning to wear one of those dark patches that bespeak a stern tussle.

Arthur Augustus had more mud on him than anyone had ever seen there before. The swell of St. Jim's had not made a mistake. His play was faultless.

While everyone else was alternately slipping and diving, Arthur Augustus kept his feet, as if he were playing on the best of turf.

"Here they are!" cried the crowd suddenly. "In with it, Tom Merry!"

Tom Merry had at last instituted what seemed like a certain score. Passing to D'Arcy, that elegant youth electrified everyone by suddenly putting in a magnificent long pass to Blake, who was flying down the left wing.

"Go it, Blake!" yelled the crowd, as they saw him overhaul Higgs.

Blake was "on the ball" in a flash.

But Carboy and Lane were on him. Blake was equal to the occasion. Lowther and the whole St. Jim's line had taken good care to back him up.

He passed to Lowther. Carpenter, the Grammar School right full-back, went for the ball, too. But Monty Lowther was just quick enough, and Tom Merry had it again.

"Off side!" yelled some deluded Grammar School spectator.

"Rats!" said Wally. "He beat the man. Ever seen a game before?"

When the Grammar School halves saw Tom Merry in possession they tore across, but they might have saved their wind. He had no idea of trying to beat the other back himself.

Arthur Augustus had taken another pass, when they arrived, and the St. Jim's followers cheered lustily as they saw him extend the back in brilliant fashion.

"Now, D'Arcy," they shouted, "one for St. Jim's!"

Arthur Augustus steadied him for a brief space; then in it went.

"Oh!" cried the crowd. "Hard lines, old son!"

Lane, centre-half, if too late for Tom Merry, had raced in front in the nick of time.

D'Arcy's shot would have beaten any goalkeeper, being a rising hot volley into the far top corner.

But the very fact of its rising gave Lane a chance to get his head in front of it.

"Well done, sir!" shouted St. Jim's, sportsmen or nothing. "Jolly good! Bravo!"

Carboy managed to get it from Lane, and the Grammar School half-line made off at once. They certainly played splendidly.

But Tom Merry and his men were in amongst them again quite as quick, and the ball did not travel far beyond the Grammar School half, Kerr being well up, and, though rather pressed, easily finding touch.

"Sons of toil," said Monty Lowther to Tom Merry.

"Tons of soil, ye mane!" grinned Reilly. "Look at your togs."

From the throw-in, Manners put in a good run down the right, but no score resulted; and a few minutes later the whistle went for half-time.

The spectators cheered them as they came off. Conditions were bad for good footer, but the players were doing wonders, and their supporters were not slow to see it.

"Lemons are a good vegetable, faith!" grinned Reilly, taking the refreshment round.

"Keep it up, Gussy!" cried the crowd. "On the ball!"

"Well played, St. Jim's! Well played, Tom Merry!"

Tom Merry laughed. He was satisfied with his team. The next half would be work, he well knew. The sun had gone down, and they would have the wind. But Gordon Gay's men were good players. They would face the wind with no more than a thought, he knew. St. Jim's would have to go for all they were worth.

Hardly had the second half started when St. Jim's had a bad shake. The Grammar School had rushed all before them for the first ten minutes. Fatty Wynn was not asleep now. Gordon Gay & Co. had made three incursions since the restart, when Monty Lowther had the ill-luck to handle inside the penalty area.

"Penalty—penalty!" yelled the Grammarians in the crowd.

There was no question of it, of course, and Tom Merry & Co.'s hearts went into their boots. Fatty Wynn was their only hope. If Carpenter beat him—and why shouldn't he?—the game was lost. Once the Grammar School scored, they would take good care to keep the lead.

"But the best-laid schemes of mice and men will often gang agley," as Burns says. The Grammar School could not have made a worse choice for a penalty kick.

Carpenter was a burly fellow, and he had heard of Fatty Wynn's achievements between the uprights. A prudent player would have banged it into the corner; but Carpenter had long nourished the idea of putting one straight at Fatty and knocking him over.

Fatty read the expression of his face. He knew instinctively when a fellow was going to drive right at him.

"Oh!" cried the crowd, as Carpenter sogged it at him with all his strength.

Fatty made no mistake. The shot brought him to his knees, but he had it safe against his bosom. In an instant he was on his legs again.

Carpenter rushed in to charge him down, but he reckoned without his host. Fatty was much the heavier, and the crowd roared as he bowled Carpenter over, and a mighty cheer went up as the leather soared far into the field, with the St. Jim's attack racing under it.

Tom Merry & Co. felt like giants refreshed with wine at the release. They must win now. And they looked like it, too, as they swept down on the enemy's goal.

The Grammar School were so satisfied that Carpenter would make the penalty kick good, that his failure perfectly dazed them.

"Now, Saints, in with it!" yelled the crowd.

Gordon Gay and his side strove manfully to retrieve the position, but they were too late. Their men had been about the field in no particular order while the penalty was taken. Tom Merry and his men had beaten them completely by their prompt action.

The Grammar School goalie saw doom impending. Everyone was beaten, including the backs. There was only him for it.

"Now, then, Tom Merry!" roared all St. Jim's.

Tom Merry would have preferred a better position, but the Grammar School men were almost on him.

"Take it!" yelled the crowd. "Take it! Kick!"

And Tom Merry kicked.

"Goal! Goal! Goal!"

Tom Merry found his favourite top corner with the loveliest of long-dropping shots. The Saints, players and crowd alike, yelled and roared. Blake thumped Tom Merry on the back. Figgins was nearly wringing his hand off. The crowd were shouting themselves hoarse. They were still yelling when the game restarted.

"Attack like anything!" whispered Tom Merry, as they got into position again.

The whistle went. It was work indeed then. But Tom Merry & Co. had the lead, and they meant to keep it.

Gordon Gay knew as well as anyone that attack is the surest defence, and the Grammar School came with as much dash as ever, but all to no purpose. Tom Merry was on the watch, and the merest slip on the other side was taken advantage of to its full extent.

The Grammar School could not get in, and at last the whistle went for "Time!" and Tom Merry led his men off the field victors.

One goal to nil!

It wasn't a big score; but the low score often shows a gruelling game, and this game had been a gruelling one, and no mistake.

The Grammarians had been beaten, and St. Jim's was roaring with delight. Tom Merry had played in his last match for the old school, and he had led his men to victory.

And as he came off the field, a cheering crowd surged round him. It was one of the brightest days of Tom Merry's young life—all the brighter by contrast with the shadows that were to follow. But for the present all was joy and satisfaction.

CHAPTER 17.

To Face the World.

SUNDAY passed quietly enough for Tom Merry. It was the last day with his friends at St. Jim's; on the morrow he was leaving. The chums of St. Jim's made the most of it; and never had Tom Merry felt more keenly than he did then the depth and faith of the friendships he had formed at the old school.

It was bitter to leave it all, to go out into the world among strangers, perhaps among enemies, to face want and work alone.

But Tom Merry did not falter.

He had to face the world, to choose between hard work and sponging, and the choice for a lad like Tom Merry could not be doubtful for a moment. And, having put his hand to the plough, he would not look back.

On Monday morning he was very quiet, very grave, but cheerful.

His special friends had obtained leave of absence from classes that morning to see him off as far as Wayland Junction, where he was to take the London express.

Dr. Holmes shook hands with him very kindly as he bade him good-bye, and Mr. Railton came to the door of the School House to see him off. Kildare came down as far as the gate, and gripped his hand hard at parting.

"Just a word of advice before you go, kid," said the big Sixth-Former, as he held Tom Merry's hand. "You're going out into a different sort of world, but you'll find things much the same at bottom. The battle of life is much like a game of footer. The fellow who plays the game gets on the best. You'll hear fools say that a man can't get on in the world if he's perfectly honourable and truthful. You'll hear rascals say that in business ordinary rules of conduct should be thrown aside, and have to be. Don't you believe it. It's all lies and nonsense, Tom! The man who succeeds in business, as in footer, or cricket, or anything else, is the man who plays the game. Play the game—all the time! That's the only advice I've got for you; but if you follow it, you'll find it worth a great deal."

"And I will, Kildare," said Tom Merry.

And he kept his word.

Off at last. He had taken his last look at the old school. The local train bore him off to Wayland, with the juniors crowded in the carriage to keep him company. They alighted at Wayland, with grim faces. Five minutes to wait for the London express. Five minutes more, and Tom Merry would be gone—for ever?

Manners was quiet and glum; Lowther, the humorist of the Shell, could see nothing humorous in this situation; the others were all very gloomy.

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus. "It's w'otten, you know!"

And the other fellows nodded. It was certainly rotten; they were all agreed upon that point.

The train was whizzing in; it stopped. Porters shouted, and doors clanged. Figgins saw Tom Merry's box bestowed in the guard's van; D'Arcy selected him a comfortable corner seat. Fatty Wynn put a packet of sandwiches on the rack for him. Lowther arranged his travelling rug. Tom Merry entered the carriage, with a lump in his throat.

"Stand clear, there!"

The last handshake had been exchanged; the train was moving.

"Good-bye, Tom Merry!"

"Good-bye—good-bye!" cried Tom Merry huskily.

Arthur Augustus's eyeglass fell off; the elegant junior's eye was moist. He waved his silk hat after Tom Merry, and then tried to jam it into his eye instead of his eyeglass, in the confusion of the moment. The other juniors were watching the departing train. It was curving in the distance; the face at the carriage window vanished; the express tore away, and vanished.

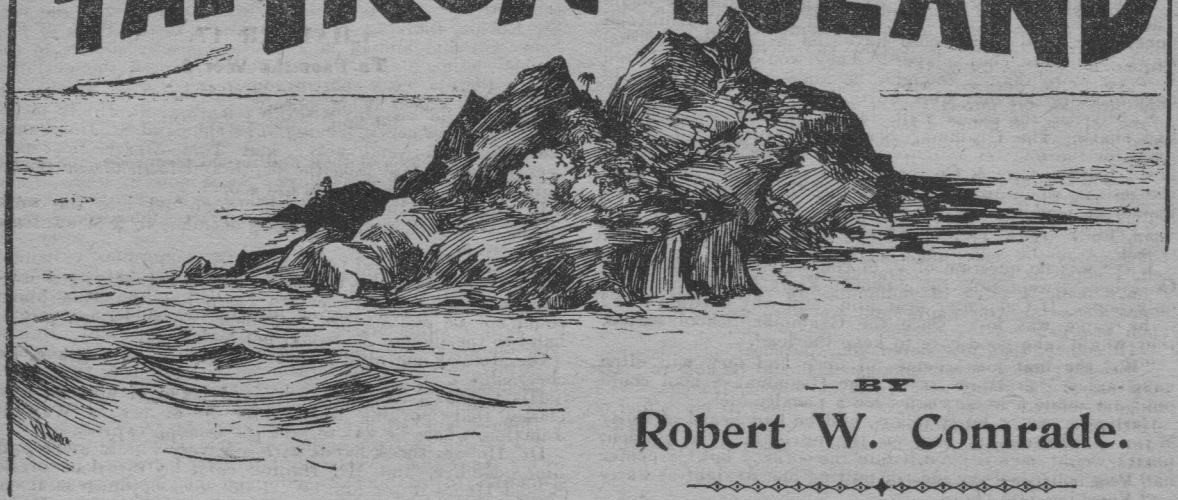
Tom Merry was gone.

THE END.

(Another splendid story of the chums of St. Jim's next Thursday, entitled: "The Search for Tom Merry," by Martin Clifford. Order your copy of the "Gem" in advance. Price One Penny.)

A Wonderful New Story!

THE IRON ISLAND



— BY —

Robert W. Comrade.

THE FIRST CHAPTERS BRIEFLY RE-WRITTEN.

Philip Graydon is a young Englishman, who has been marooned for the last eight years on an uncharted island in the Pacific Ocean by a criminal society called the Brotherhood of Iron, of which Graydon is an ex-member. He is astounded one day to meet a fashionably-dressed young lady on the island of which he had for so long been the only occupant. The new-comer is Dolores de las Mercedes, an actress, who has caused serious disturbances in France by adopting the title of Queen of France for the sake of advertisement. The French Government had considered it necessary that she should retire from civilisation for a time, and had landed her, with a tent and complete equipment, on the Iron Island, little knowing that it had already an occupant. Dolores and Graydon put their heads together, and evolve a plan of escape. The plan is successful, and Graydon and Dolores, as Frank Kingston and Kathleen O'Brien, arrive safely in London, where they each engage suites of rooms at the Hotel Cyril. The identity of Frank Kingston, who is ostensibly a young man who has made his fortune in the goldfields, is quite unsuspected by the Brotherhood, and with the help of Fraser, an ex-member of the Brotherhood, Kingston opens his campaign against the formidable society.

THE FIRST VICTIM.

The first of his enemies to be marked down for degradation by Kingston is Detective-inspector Caine, one of the most powerful of the Inner Councillors of the Brotherhood. Kingston lays his plans secretly and with complete success. Caine is utterly ruined, and the man who caused his downfall is never suspected even by his victim.

(Now go on with the story.)

Lord Askew's Government Bonds.

Frank Kingston smiled languidly.

"Well," he remarked, placing his slippered feet upon the other end of the settee on which he was lying, "our friend Caine is effectively dealt with. Who comes next, I wonder?"

"There are so many of them," replied Dolores, "that it is hard to fix on any particular one."

"Yet I have an idea as to who it will be. An incident which occurred a day or two back has pointed out the way for me. My words of a moment back were really unnecessary, as I know pretty well whose turn it will be next."

Dolores looked into his face expectantly. They were both seated in her drawing-room at the Hotel Cyril, a week after the degradation of Detective-inspector Caine. Outside it was raining heavily, and already the afternoon was drawing to a close.

This was the first time Kingston had visited her since the Caine affair, and she felt somehow that he was going to disclose something to her. His face was a perfect blank, except for a rather lazy smile; nevertheless, she felt that his clever mask of fatuity was to be lifted for a short time.

"You say you know who the next will be, Mr. Kingston!" she exclaimed. "Are you going to tell me who?"

"Of course," he replied. "There are no secrets between us, Dolores, that I know of. The most useful member of the Brotherhood of Iron is helpless, so now it remains to deal with the others. Any one of them will do, but, as I said, something which took place the other day, points to a certain man—Sir Robert Gissing."

"The big banker?"

"Yes; he is to come next on the list. I remember, eight years ago, when I was sentenced to a life on the Iron Island, he had only just joined the Brotherhood, and was more bitter against me than all the rest."

"He is a hard man, then?"

"As hard as a flint, Dolores. Yet they are all the same. They are all scoundrels—all murderers; no punishment is too severe. For eight years they left me on the Iron Island, and, but for you, I should now be dead. I can never repay you, Dolores, for what you did, and my hatred of the Brotherhood of Iron, instead of waning, is growing stronger and stronger."

Kingston rose to his feet, and paced the floor for a moment. A set, determined expression had entered his eyes, proving the truth of his words.

"They shall all pay, Dolores!" he exclaimed, in a low voice. "I shall not rest until every member of the Inner Council is either ruined or disgraced. And Sir Robert Gissing, although such a nice, pleasant man to talk to, is as bad as any. More than one man he has utterly ruined by false evidence. Only a year ago one of the clerks was convicted for forgery and sentenced to five years' penal servitude. Fraser tells me confidently that the clerk was absolutely innocent—the matter was merely a scheme of the Brotherhood's."

"And the man is in prison now? How terrible!"

"Sir Robert does not trouble his head in the least. But he shall pay for his vile wickedness—pay for it as dearly as Caine has done. It is a question of justice as well as vengeance. Even if I had no grievance against the Brotherhood, I should expose them to the police. As it is, I intend to prolong the pleasure and dispose of them one by one."

Dolores, looking at him then, shivered a little. He seemed so changed to what he had been a moment previous. All his indolence had vanished; he was drawn to his full height, and his voice vibrated with the intensity of his words. His strength, his will-power, his iron-nerve, all were uppermost for that moment.

The enormity of the Brotherhood's offence had not lessened in his estimation one whit because he was living among

civilisation again in the greatest of luxury. No, eight years of his life had been wasted—and those eight years would have culminated in death had it not been for Dolores' splendid assistance—and Kingston intended paying every member of the Council back to the fullest extent.

Not one should escape punishment; and they should be dealt with one by one, the rest remaining in absolute ignorance as to the cause of their comrades' downfall. Kingston was capable of tackling the lot himself; but Dolores and Fraser were ready and eager to help him.

"And what was this incident you referred to?" she asked curiously, as she looked out of the window into the traffic-filled Strand. "How is it that you have decided on Sir Robert Gissing as the next?"

"Well," he drawled, with a return of his accustomed langour, "it was purely chance which pointed out the way to me. I was, in point of fact, wondering who would be the third member to fall under my hand when the chance came along."

"I don't think I quite see——" began Dolores.

"Of course not," he smiled. "It was like this. I was lolling about at my club, when that hopelessly foolish young man, Lord Askew, entered. I can honestly say that, fool as I look, Askew is really much worse than I. And, unlike myself, I hope, he is a fool! During the past six weeks or so I have made a point of chumming up with him—to keep appearances up, you know—and we were generally looked upon as a pair."

"Of course, that just suited your purpose."

"Exactly; but I never imagined I should be able to make good use of the young ass. For I have done, Dolores. As I said, he entered while I was trying to make as big a fool of myself as I could, and immediately crossed over to me. After a few minutes conversation, he asked my advice on a certain matter."

"Your advice?" laughed Dolores.

"Yes, it seems hardly credible, but it was so," replied Kingston. "He told me he wanted to raise £20,000 by to-morrow."

"That is a large sum. Does he wish to borrow it?"

"Oh, no; he possesses Government bonds for that amount, and asked me the best way to dispose of them. I realised my opportunity in a second, and advised him to give them as security to a bank; for, you see, he only wants the money for a week, and will redeem the bonds then."

"But you said a bank——"

"Exactly. I told him to deposit the bonds in Gissing's Bank; to take them, in fact, to Sir Robert Gissing himself. I have met the baronet in my present personality, and know he attends business daily. He is, in reality, the managing-director of Gissing's Bank, for there are three other partners in the business."

Kingston paused for a moment.

"My idea," he went on, "is exceedingly simple. The simpler the idea, you know, the safer it is to work out. Askew will deposit the bonds to-morrow, and I shall, absolutely unknown to Sir Robert, transfer them to his own house."

Dolores opened her eyes.

"But," she exclaimed, "what good will that do? Or, rather, what harm will it do?"

"It will irretrievably disgrace Sir Robert!" replied Kingston grimly. "He will be found guilty of robbery and imprisoned—imprisoned, as the men he lied about are imprisoned!"

"I fear I am dull, Mr. Kingston!" cried Dolores. "I cannot see how you are going to attain that end."

"I will explain. Lord Askew will deposit the bonds with Gissing, and when he wishes to redeem them next week they will have vanished. Certain clues will point to Sir Robert as the culprit, and when his house is searched, the bonds will be found in his desk. As he will be in ignorance of the whole affair, he will naturally protest he had no knowledge of it, so that when the bonds are found, the case will be more than black against him."

Dolores sat for a moment thinking, then she raised her head.

"It is a good plan," she said; "but there are, what seem to me, insurmountable difficulties. For instance, how can you possibly obtain possession of the bonds? Again, how can you place them in Sir Robert's own library?"

"By sheer audacity," answered Kingston coolly. "It is not a matter of strength or will-power this time. All it requires is coolness and quickness. If I disguised myself as a burglar, and endeavoured to break the safe open, I dare say I should ignominiously fail. But as Frank Kingston, I could never be suspected. Twenty thousand pounds is a small amount to me, and there could be no object in my taking it. Apart from that, however, I think I can rely upon myself to do the job properly. Nerve is the thing that's required."

"If that is all," smiled Dolores, "then you are fairly certain of success. But it seems terribly risky to me. Is there no other way?"

"There are plenty of other ways, Dolores, but mine is, I think, the best. It is like a conjuring trick. A magician will perform a feat under your very nose, and you will not see it. I shall do likewise. Sir Robert will never suspect me, for I shall take care never to be left in the room alone. Then he will swear, if any question did arise, that I was in his presence the whole time."

"It will certainly be a splendid punishment," she said thoughtfully. "A punishment which exactly fits the case. Sir Robert, thinking himself as secure as the Bank of England, will find himself in a position exactly similar to that of his victims. But"—and Dolores paused thoughtfully—"isn't there a weak spot in your plan?"

Kingston looked at her quickly.

"You mean," he said, "the motive?"

She nodded.

"I have thought of that, and intend to devise some scheme whereby a motive is supplied. As it now is, there is none save the fact that Gissing's Bank is at present in low water, and, consequently, Sir Robert is practically without ready-money."

"Will you allow me to make a suggestion?" inquired Dolores, a sudden thought coming into her head—a thought which caused her eyes to flash excitedly, for it fitted in so well with Kingston's daring plan of the banker's undoing.

"Will I allow you?" cried Kingston. "Why, Dolores, you know I value your suggestions and opinions more than I do my own. I can't forget that it was owing to you that I escaped from the Iron Island, and that Don Sebastian is now serving his term of punishment there!"

Dolores laughed lightly.

"You are misrepresenting it," she said. "However, this is my suggestion. Yesterday afternoon I dropped in to Lady Duncan's to tea, and she informed me, in the general conversation, that her youngest daughter was ill, and so couldn't possibly go, as arranged, with Sir Robert Gissing's little girl to a school at Hastings to-morrow."

Kingston saw in a second what Dolores meant.

"Therefore, Sir Robert's child—she's only six years old—is going alone with the nursemaid. A governess from the school is to meet the train at Hastings, and take charge of her."

"I quite see your plan," said Kingston. "You mean me to kidnap the child and demand £20,000 ransom? The motive—and an excellent one—is then supplied."

"You are not quite right," replied Dolores, "because I mean to take charge of this part of the business myself. A telegram can be sent to the school in the morning telling the governess to meet the same train the day following. I shall be on the Hastings platform, and the nursemaid will accept me without question as the governess."

"Your plan is a splendid one," cried Kingston. "With both of us working, I think Sir Robert will be nicely caught. But how do you know the time of the train, and that the nursemaid will accompany the little girl?"

"Oh, you know what it is when a group of ladies get talking," smiled Dolores. "There is nothing peculiar whatever in my learning those trifling items of domestic life."

"Tea-tables are useful things," declared Kingston. "I am glad you suggested this, Dolores, for now Sir Robert will be worried in both his business and home affairs. Having been nearly driven off his head with worry, he will next find himself in the criminal dock, charged with a crime he never committed. Jove, but it is splendid! He will be able to fully appreciate the feelings of the other poor chaps he has sent, innocent, to penal servitude!"

"A more fitting punishment could not be found," said Dolores; "but does it not seem strange that these things should happen so that we can do this work?"

"Strange?" repeated Kingston. "Not at all. Hundreds of people would never have seen the opportunity the same as we have done. I generally find that if you really want an opportunity you have merely to look round, and one is already there. You make it; and we have made our opportunity this time. No, I see no coincidence or peculiarity. Even if we let the whole matter slip, it would not be difficult to find other ways. You only have to look."

Having talked their plans over at length, Kingston took his departure. In a minute he was in his own suite of rooms on the other side of the corridor. Fraser was there, and having given the valet his instructions, Kingston threw himself on to a couch and settled himself down for a good think.

But Dolores, opposite, was engaged in quite a different manner. She was in her private boudoir, sitting immediately in front of the mirror. On the dressing-table before her lay an open make-up box, and gradually her own pretty countenance disappeared, and in its place could be seen the face of a kindly-looking elderly lady.

On Board the Coronet.

The sun shone brilliantly, and the wet roads, soaked by the heavy rain of the previous day, were quickly drying up. A biting east wind assisted the sun in its work, causing people to button up their overcoats and don their gloves.

A goodly crowd waited on Hastings platform for the London train to arrive, and among them could be seen a dainty elderly lady, who possessed a remarkably graceful figure, considering her evident age.

She was veiled, but not too thickly. Her features were plainly visible, and were pleasant to look upon, a constant smile appearing to hover round her lips. She looked every whit what she aimed to be—a governess. Nobody in London would have recognised in her the rich Irish-American girl, Kathleen O'Brien. Even Kingston had been taken aback at first. At present her name was Miss Beck.

She looked expectantly as the roar of a train was heard. The other people stirred, and the porters became moderately active. It was the London train, and, as usual, there was a little commotion. With a scraping of brakes, the express came to a standstill, the doors were flung open, and the passengers alighted.

Being winter time there were comparatively few. Dolores, her sharp eyes open and watchful, immediately detected a young nursemaid, accompanied by a little girl of about six. She walked over to them.

"Oh," she exclaimed, in a voice entirely dissimilar to her own, "you have got here safely!"

"Yes, ma'am," replied the nurse respectfully. "I knowed you'd be waiting. Sir Robert told me to be very careful and not leave Miss Ivy for a minute."

"She is safe enough now, nurse," smiled the pseudo governess. "And how did you like the journey, little one?" she added, leaning down and kissing the child.

"Nice," replied Ivy shortly, her face breaking into smiles as Dolores handed her a bag of chocolates. "Don't want to go to school, though—don't like school!"

"Oh, you mustn't say that, dear!" exclaimed Dolores, being really glad of the child's dislike for school. "You'll soon forget all about your dislikes."

"She's been a-sayin' all the way along as she wouldn't stop at school, ma'am. She'll soon get to like it, though."

"She is frightened, I suppose," smiled Dolores.

"I'm not frightened!" cried Ivy indignantly. "Anyhow, not with you, governess. I like you," she added, with child-like frankness.

"Then come and have a ride in a nice big cart!" cried Dolores, taking her hand. "You are going straight back to London, I suppose, nurse?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You must be hungry after your journey—while you are waiting for the train you can have some tea in the buffet. Here is half-a-crown to pay for it."

"Oh, thank you very much, ma'am!" cried the delighted girl.

"You will have to be quick—the train goes before long. The little girl's box is here, I suppose?"

"Yes, ma'am; it's labelled right through."

"Oh, I'm glad of that; it can go by the carrier! Now, come along, Ivy, and I'll take you for a lovely ride in the country!"

The little girl expressed her delight, and readily walked by Dolores' side; the bag of chocolates had gained her trust to some extent, and Dolores' pleasant voice and complete unstiffness won her immediate confidence. This was because a few weeks previous she had left a school where the governess was unusually strict.

They were soon out of the station. A neat dogcart stood outside, and Dolores lifted little Ivy in, afterwards stepping up herself. A word to the driver, and they were off. The latter merely understood that Dolores was taking a drive in the country. He had no definite instructions except to travel by a certain road.

Dolores' very appearance allayed suspicion. Presently, after about twenty minutes, the trap was in open country, and the "governess" was pointing out places of interest to her companion. Ivy proved to be a very good talker, well-mannered, but just a little dull. She was pretty, and Dolores wondered at her being the daughter of such a hard-hearted man as Sir Robert Gissing.

Yet there was nothing peculiar in it. His wife had been a good woman during her life—she had died a couple of years previously. Also, Sir Robert would have been a much better man himself had it not been for the influence of the Brotherhood. As it was he had become hardened, until now he was a bully—an aristocratic scoundrel. He was cruel by nature, and the Brotherhood made him ten times as bad.

And his little daughter, now so innocently chattering to Dolores, was as unlike him as she could possibly be, having inherited most of her good qualities from her mother. She took to Dolores immediately, and was on the very best of terms when Dolores ordered the trap to stop.

"We will walk on from here, driver," she said, producing her purse. "It is not far now, and there are two calls I wish to make. Here is something for yourself."

"Thank you, ma'am!" said the driver delightedly, as he took the shilling she held out. He turned his horse round, touched his hat, and was soon bowling back to Hastings.

Dolores walked on slowly, her hand holding the child's, and although she passed several houses, she made no effort to enter any of them.

"Don't you like school, Ivy?" she asked presently.

"No; it isn't nice."

"You don't know that till you've tried it."

"I have tried it, governess. Don't like school."

"Then what do you like?" asked Dolores.

"Like train," answered the little mite. "Like travellin' 'bout."

"Do you like ships, Ivy?"

"Ships?" cried Ivy, clapping her hands. "Oh, governess, I should think I do! I went with daddy once, an' saw all the other ships. It was right a long, long way away, too!"

Dolores smiled. It would have been difficult for her to get Ivy on to the Coronet if she had disliked the sea. As it was, however, her task was easy; the child would be absolutely delighted at the prospect of a sea voyage.

"Would you like to go on a big ship again?"

Ivy stood still for a moment, unable to believe what she heard; then she looked up into Dolores' face excitedly.

"Now?" she cried. "Are we going on big ship now?"

"We are, if you'll be a good girl!"

"I'll be as good as anything, governess! Oh, you are nice, and I thought you'd be like Miss Browne! On a ship now—I thought I was goin' to school!"

They were still walking along very slowly. Suddenly Dolores looked round sharply, the sound of a motor-engine breaking upon her ears. She drew her breath in sharply.

"Splendid!" she murmured. "Fraser has done well."

A big landaulette drove up, and it could be seen that the driver was Fraser. He was not disguised in any way, and he raised his cap respectfully as the car came to a standstill.

"Good, Fraser!" said Dolores. "You could not have arrived at a better moment."

"I carried out instructions, miss," replied Fraser. "Do we go straight to Dover?"

"No; I think it would be as well to go back to Hastings first, and then take the main road. Then, if anybody sees the child get in, they will be unable to trace her."

"Very good, miss."

Ivy had been unable to hear this, for the two spoke in low tones. She was looking at the car interestedly, her little hands invisible in the thickness of a fur muff.

"Are we goin' for a ride in this?" she asked eagerly.

"Yes, dear; then I'll take you for a long journey in the ship. Won't that be better than going to school?"

Ivy clapped her hands again in delight. A moment later she was seated in one of the corners of the interior, and Fraser was turning the big machine round. Straight to Hastings it went, stopped there a few minutes while Dolores bought some more sweets, and then took the road to Dover.

It was not a long journey, but it was getting dusk as Fraser drove down to the pier. The steam-yacht Coronet could be seen at anchor, with full steam up; Captain Morrison had received instructions from his master—Frank Kingston—the same morning.

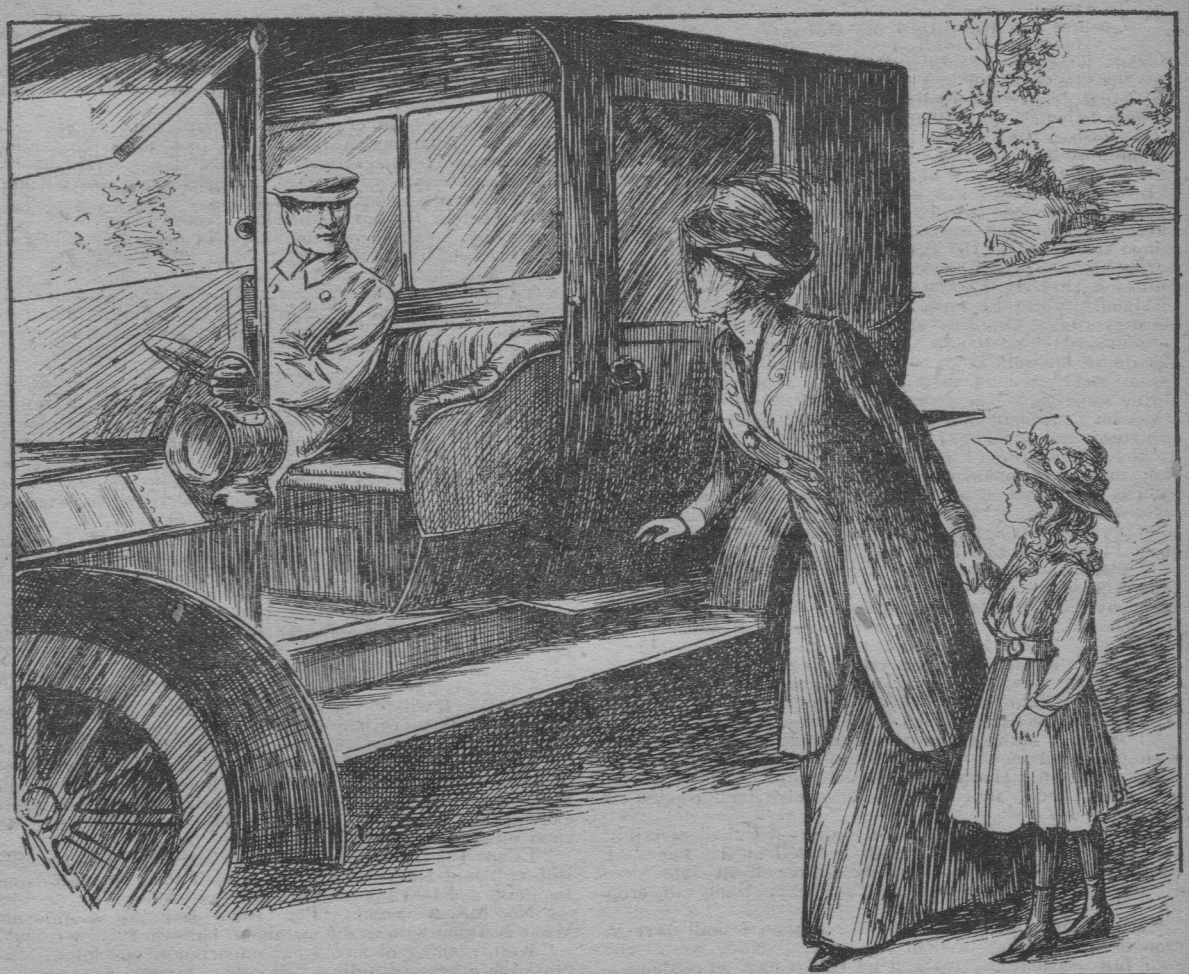
All he knew was that a Miss Beck, accompanied by her little ward, was to come aboard in the evening, and that he was to take orders from her. The skipper knew Dolores, so she had to be careful not to disclose her identity. For Morrison, like the rest of the world, fully believed Kingston to be the easy-going young dandy he appeared to be.

Fraser drove off immediately, and very soon little Ivy was being delighted at the luxurious cabins of the yacht; the electric light, the saloon, and the whole appearance of attractiveness. This was better than school, anyway!

In less than an hour the engine-room telegraph clanged, and, travelling at half-speed, the Coronet headed for the Mediterranean. Dolores' intention was to make for Algiers, and there await a telegram from Frank Kingston. As soon as events had come to a head in London she would return.

Meanwhile, what was happening to Kingston? It was on this day that Lord Askew intended depositing his bonds at Gissing's Bank. Had Kingston succeeded in his object, or was this journey of Dolores' all for nothing?

Kingston was a man who, when he thought of a thing, when he planned doing certain work, would accomplish that work with apparently the most consummate ease. It seemed no difficulty, and failure appeared to be impossible. Yet it could all be summed up in one word. His brain, his strength, his nerve, his constitution; all were phenomenally powerful.



"Good, Fraser!" said Dolores, as the big car drove up, with Frank Kingston's valet at the wheel. "You could not have arrived at a better moment." (*See page 22.*)

Frank Kingston's Amazing Ruse.

A taxi drew up sharply against the kerb, the door opened, and Frank Kingston stepped out. As usual, he was attired with immaculate care. In spite of the muddy state of the roads, his boots shone like mirrors, while the cut of his overcoat, and the set of his collar were beyond question.

"Er—thanks, driver! You needn't wait!"

He handed the taxi-cabby the fare, together with a liberal tip, and lounged into the entrance-hall of the club. Not many members were about inside, but seated up in one corner, wearing a rather worried look on his weak features, was a young man, puffing spasmodically at a cigarette.

It was Lord Askew—the title was merely one of courtesy—and he rose to his feet eagerly as Kingston approached. He was decidedly weedy, and too much cigarette-smoking had caused his complexion to be somewhat pasty.

"By Jove, Kingston, old fellow, I'm deuced glad you've come!" he cried. "I've been worryin' a lot over those confounded things!"

He held a small foolscap envelope in his hand, and Kingston smiled. He had come to the club by arrangement with Lord Askew, and hoped to gain another glance at the bonds. He had hardly expected his task would be as easy as this.

"There's nothing to worry about, Askew," he drawled. "They are genuine enough. All you have to do is to take them to Gissing's Bank, as I told you, and see Sir Robert. You have made the appointment, haven't you?"

"Yes, but I'm hanged if I like going, old man!" exclaimed Askew nervously. "I only want the beastly money for three days——"

"Three days? I thought you said a week!"

"So I did. But I've found the pater'll be home sooner. Directly he turns up I'll get 'em out again. It's such a lot, you know. Suppose I lost this envelope with the bonds inside——"

"Suppose you got run over by a motor-'bus, you wouldn't want them at all, would you?" smiled Kingston. "Don't suppose anything, Askew. Go right along to Sir Robert, and give them to him. He's sure to do as you want."

"Can't you come with me, Kingston?" asked the young man. "Be a sport, and do the talking for me. You know I'm such a rotten talker——"

"Look here, Askew!" Kingston took him by the shoulder. "You say you want this twenty thousand pounds most urgently to-day?"

"Well, rather! That confounded money-lender won't wait, or take the bonds himself. He says he must have hard cash——"

"Then pluck up courage and get it. I can't possibly accompany you. You've only got to hand this envelope to Sir Robert—he'll do the talking. You needn't worry about that a bit, my dear chap—not a bit!"

"You think it'll be all right, then?" asked Askew.

"Of course it will! The bonds are in order, aren't they? Let's see them, and I'll soon tell you. I know all about these sort of things, y'know."

Lord Askew handed the bonds over readily enough, and although Kingston handled them carelessly, he was, in reality, taking in every detail and committing them to memory. The bonds were in perfect order. There were £35,000 worth really, and as Askew only wanted £20,000, he was pretty certain of getting the money.

"They're all right, old man," declared Kingston. "You go straight to the bank now, and in less than an hour you'll come back with banknotes in exchange for those."

"If you really can't come——" begand the other.

"No, I really can't, Askew. I'm fearfully sorry, you know, but it can't be helped."

"Oh, all right. I dare say I shall pull through somehow."

"Of course you will. Here you are. Take good care of them, or you'll find yourself in a deuce of a hole."

Frank Kingston accompanied the young lord to the street and saw him drive off in a taxi. Immediately he had done so Kingston chartered another.

"Hotel Cyril!" he said to the driver.

In a second the cab was bowling along the street, and in five minutes he was in close conversation with Fraser in his own suite of rooms. A bundle of Government bonds were in his hands, but of no more value than £500—being mostly dummies, with one or two genuine ones on top. He had purchased them—or rather, Fraser, in disguise, had purchased them—out of the Brotherhood's money.

They were precisely similar to those which Lord Askew possessed, and the difference could only be detected when the bundle was fully opened. Under Kingston's directions Fraser rapidly wrote in certain little peculiarities which were noticeable on the face of the originals. Kingston did not do it himself, in case his handwriting was detected. Fraser could never be detected, for he was, ostensibly, only a valet.

"Good!" murmured Kingston at last. "They're as like as two peas now, Fraser. Jove, but you're proving your worth! They weren't idle words you said at Rio, that's plain. You are invaluable, Fraser—invaluable!"

"I'm glad I'm of use, sir," said the other respectfully. "I shall never tire of serving you, sir. You don't know what a relief it is to feel myself an honest man again—to be able to look other folk in the face fearlessly!"

"I wouldn't lose you, Fraser, for a very large sum. Now, I can't stop a moment longer. You make all haste and travel by the landaulette to Hastings. Miss O'Brien will be starting soon, and you must not be late. Remember the child."

"I sha'n't be late, sir. Everything is ready."

"Capital! Now, good-bye, Fraser, and good luck to your enterprise! Before night I hope you'll see both Miss O'Brien and the little girl safe aboard the Coronet."

"If I may, sir, I'd like to return the compliment, and wish you good luck! Your job's a sight more risky than mine, and I pray Heaven you'll come out of it all right. It ain't bodily risk, sir, but the chance of gettin' copped at the game——"

"My dear Fraser," drawled Kingston, "I shall certainly not be fool enough to get myself 'copped at the game.' I think you can trust me to bring the matter off all right."

"Rather, sir, only something's always likely to crop up——"

"If something does crop up, Fraser, then I shall have to crop it down again," smiled Kingston. "Now, you've got your full instructions; try and let things pass off without a single hitch."

A few minutes later Kingston entered the taxi which had been waiting outside.

"Gissing's Bank," he said quickly, "and drive like the deuce!"

Considering the traffic, the chauffeur did the journey in remarkably little time, finally pulling up smartly in front of the rather dingy-looking entrance of Gissing's Bank in Lombard Street.

Kingston pushed open the swing doors—having discharged the taxi—and entered. No particular business seemed to be going on, although there were numerous clerks about. One came forward.

"Yes, sir?" he said interrogatively.

"I wish to see Sir Robert!" drawled Kingston carelessly. "Just take him my card, will you?"

"Sorry, sir, but he's engaged at present. Will you wait?"

"Confounded nuisance, but I suppose I must!" answered Kingston, in his most fatuous tones.

The clerk led the way into an ante-room. A glass door on the other side bore the word "Private," and Kingston wondered how Lord Askew was getting on.

He seated himself and opened a newspaper. Anybody seeing him there would have pronounced him as harmless as a kitten. Yet he was more dangerous than a tiger. As he sat there he was, apparently, an indolent young man of the world. Who would suspect the real purport of his visit? It was absurd to suggest he had any sinister motive up his sleeve. His very appearance belied that.

It was here that Frank Kingston's art could be seen. He had set out to destroy the Brotherhood. Some men would have gone ram-headedly into it, and ruined their chances at their first attempt. But Kingston did no such thing. There was no sense in inflicting mental and physical pain on the members of the Inner Council. Their punishment would have to be more severe than that—more lasting.

Yet here was Kingston lolling in the ante-room of Gissing's Bank, in broad daylight, in his own personality, about to move the first pawn in the game which would ultimately send Sir Robert Gissing to penal servitude.

The audacity of it, the coolness, the calm assurance, practically ensured success. No other man could have carried the thing through as Kingston was doing. The task he had before him was well-nigh an impossible one, and, anyhow, extremely risky.

Risky? Not a bit of it, when it is remembered what the man was. Anything Kingston undertook to do he carried out thoroughly and without the least danger. He looked upon it as a matter of business, and performed that business with a finesse which was amazing.

And therein lay his tremendous power. Had he sought revenge by knocking his enemies on the head, he would soon have been finished. His very method was unique. He was Frank Kingston, but who the man was who had degraded Detective Caine, was unknown. In the same manner Sir Robert Gissing would be punished by a seemingly unknown, intangible hand. Yet it was here, solid and real, in the person of this affected young fop.

Suddenly there was a footfall from the other side of the glass door. Kingston had no wish to see Lord Askew, for he had told him he had other engagements. With no sign of hurry, he opened out his newspaper to its widest extent.

A second later Askew emerged, flushed and pleased. He had secured the loan, and was feeling happy in consequence. He was too excited to notice the man with the newspaper, and even had he been cool he could not have approached Kingston and stared over the top of his paper.

Kingston heard him leave the bank before he lowered the paper. Then he rose and followed the clerk who had appeared, into Sir Robert's office. The banker, his age between forty-five and fifty, was a genial-looking man enough. Nobody in the world would have suspected him of being a member of the Brotherhood of Iron. He looked a gentleman, every inch of him.

"Ah, Mr. Kingston, delighted to see you!" he cried, extending his hand. "Take a seat—take a seat!"

"Thanks, I will!" murmured Kingston, his languid eyes appearing sleepier than ever. As a matter of fact, they were at their keenest at the moment. In one glance he noticed everything that lay on the desk, and the positions in which they lay. It caused a thrill to pass through him when he saw, on the left-hand corner, the Government bonds Lord Askew had just deposited. The banker had had no time to stow them away.

"I hope I'm not interrupting your morning's business, Sir Robert," said Kingston, seating himself some distance from the desk, and twirling his cane between his fingers.

"No, Mr. Kingston. I'm rather slack just at present. What is it you wish to see me about, however?"

"Well, nothing of any great importance, you know," replied the other languidly. "Merely a matter of money."

"Then I'm your man," laughed Sir Robert.

He smiled in Kingston's face, but saw only what other people saw—weakness. Yet he was facing the most powerful man in the world. He was facing the man he—with others—had sent for life to the Iron Island. He was facing his most bitter enemy.

"To put it briefly," went on Kingston, "I have a small sum of money I wish to deposit here—to open an account with—a mere £10,000."

"That will be all right, Mr. Kingston," said Sir Robert genially.

He was doing good business this morning. Kingston made no move yet—the time was not ripe.

"I haven't got the amount with me," he continued, "but I shall expect it in a day or two. I thought it best to arrange it beforehand."

"Of course—of course!"

"So as soon as it comes I'll send it round by van and have it delivered——"

"By van? I'm afraid I don't understand you, Mr. Kingston. We are not discussing coals!"

Kingston smiled. His one object was to get the baronet curious and interested. His story was a mere fable. He had every intention of depositing some money in the bank, but as to the story he was about to tell—that was mere invention.

"Let me express myself a little clearer!" he exclaimed. "I should have told you that the gold is in bulk——"

"Ah, I understand!"

"And in connection with this gold there is a very peculiar story. I'm sure I don't know, but have you ever been in the Uganda district of Africa——"

"Have I ever been in Uganda?" cried Sir Robert, drawing his chair closer. "Why, my dear sir, Uganda is my pet subject of conversation. I lived out there for the first sixteen years of my life, and wish, with all my heart, that I was out there now!"

"You like the country, then?"

"Like it? I could talk about it for hours!" cried Sir Robert enthusiastically. "But what is this story you intend

telling me? Are you going to say this gold was found in Uganda? By gad, Kingston, let's have the yarn!"

Sir Robert forgot all about the business of the moment. Kingston drew his chair close to the desk and rested his elbow on the edge—half an inch away, in fact, from the Government bonds. He had laid his plans cunningly.

He had received information, in the course of conversation, that Sir Robert Gissing's pet subject of discussion was Uganda. He was a walking encyclopædia on the district—an enthusiastic landowner—for he owned considerable property in the principal town. He had lectured about the country times without number, and anything connected with Uganda arested his attention instantly. All else was, for the moment, sunk into oblivion.

Every man has a hobby such as this, and once started talking, his attention can centre on nothing else. It was so with Sir Robert. Kingston, with remarkable powers of story-telling, held the banker spell-bound while he related a very exciting and interesting account as to how he secured the gold.

And at the most enthralling portion of the story he possessed himself of Lord Askew's Government bonds as easily as he could have struck a match. The very simplicity of it made failure impossible. Right before Sir Robert's eyes the exchange was effected, and the banker knew absolutely nothing of it.

Quite by accident, it seemed, Kingston, in leaning back after explaining a certain point in the story, swept the foolscap envelope to the floor with his elbow. Still talking, he stooped and picked it up, the bulk of the desk hiding the action from Gissing, who was listening with huge interest to Kingston's narrative.

In one lightning-like movement Kingston slipped the bonds into his side pocket, grasped the dummies, laid them on the desk, and leaned back in his chair again. He had been talking every second—the whole incident had only occupied five—and the action was so completely natural, so unimportant, and so trivial, that it is not the least surprising that Sir Robert did not even notice the occurrence.

When one is thoroughly interested in a conversation, any little incident is practically certain to pass unnoticed. And the utter coolness with which Kingston performed the exchange was remarkable. No other man could have done it, for the nerve, the daring, and the coolness required were greater than those which ordinary men possess.

Kingston was different. His marvellous will-power displayed itself in the telling of this invented story. He took Sir Robert clean away from his civilised surroundings and went with him through a series of adventures in the heart of the African forest.

The whole idea was so simple, so splendidly effective! With Kingston to carry it out, it could not possibly have failed. And there he sat, near the end of his yarn, with the valuable bonds in his pocket, and the dummies on the table before him. Sir Robert Gissing had been facing him the whole time, and he would swear before any man that Kingston had not moved—that the bonds had been on the table the whole time.

The audacity of it was startling. Yet it was the only possible way in which Kingston could have got the bonds, for half an hour later they would have been in the bank's strong-room. He knew that, and knew equally well that the only way to cause Sir Robert's attention to wander would be to talk about Uganda. Had he said the gold had come from Australia, the banker would merely have been politely attentive.

No other man but Kingston would have ever dreamed of attaining his object by such a method, and it was this uniqueness which earned success. Gradually, little by little, he edged his chair away until it was quite clear of the desk.

"And that," he concluded, "is the way the gold came into my possession, Sir Robert. Rather an interesting incident, I thought."

"By George!" ejaculated the banker. "I should never have thought it! I'd no idea you could tell a yarn like that, Kingston—no idea whatever! It was splendid!"

"I'm glad you liked it," drawled Kingston. "I don't suppose the gold will be here for a few days, but as soon as it comes it will be sent to your bank."

"Oh, that's all right. I'll attend to it personally!" cried Sir Robert; "but just imagine it having that remarkable history. By the way, do you like Uganda, Kingston?"

"Immensely, Sir Robert! I can't say enough for the country. It's got really first-class prospects before it, I should say."

Kingston absent-mindedly produced a pocket-mirror, and glanced at his reflection. The vainness of the action brought a momentary frown to Gissing's brow. Having seen that his hair was well parted, and his tie straight, Kingston slipped the mirror into his pocket again. It was all acted, of course, but he had to keep up his foppish manners.

"First-class prospects?" asked Sir Robert. "Of course, it has, Kingston. Uganda will——"

"By the way, Sir Robert," interrupted Kingston, as if suddenly struck with a thought, "now I come to think of it, haven't you got a lot of books concerning the district?"

"I think I may lay claim to having the finest set of books on Central and East Africa there is in England," replied the baronet proudly.

"Then you may think me rather presumptuous, but would it be troubling you too much if I asked to be allowed to inspect one or two of them? I am very keen on Uganda——"

Sir Robert rose.

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to comply with your request, Kingston," he said. "You are the first man who has displayed any real interest in my favourite subject for months. Besides that, you have been out there; you have lived the free-and-easy life of the forest the same as myself. Everybody knows you found money in Africa, Kingston, but not so far north——"

"The bulk was obtained in Rhodesia and the surrounding country," replied Kingston carelessly. "Thanks awfully for letting me have those books, Sir Robert. What time would suit you best for me to pay a visit?"

"Now, my lad," cried the banker, "there's no time like the present. There's no particular business to keep me here. I always leave at noon, so I'll take you home at once."

"But your business," protested Kingston. "You can't possibly leave that on my account. Any time will do——"

"No, no, Mr. Kingston! I should much prefer you to come now. I assure you I shall not be neglecting anything on your account, nothing whatever."

"It's awfully good of you, Sir Robert. I should just enjoy a glance through one or two of your works. I suppose some of them cannot be obtained elsewhere?"

"A good many of them cannot. These are written by men who have been out in Africa, and have published their experiences only for private circulation. Several, too, are translations."

Sir Robert was full of his favourite topic, and Kingston found it hard to believe he was the cold, cruel scoundrel who had been for killing him—as Philip Graydon—instead of marooning him on the Iron Island. His marriage soon after Kingston's banishment had altered him a great deal, and now, although still a treacherous villain, he would have nothing to do with murder.

His interest in the Brotherhood was dying. Nevertheless, he would not resign. Half his income would be gone directly he did so.

"If you'll just excuse me, Kingston, I'll clear up, and be ready in a moment," said Sir Robert hurriedly, as he pressed an electric button. A minute later a clerk entered.

"Take these, and put them in the strong-room, Jones, will you? See that they are placed in perfect safety."

"Very good, sir. Will you give me your key?"

The banker did so, and the clerk left. Kingston's face remained blank and expressionless as he saw the dummy bonds being taken to the strong-room, where they would certainly remain until Lord Askew called for them the following Friday—this was Tuesday. When that day came—— Kingston turned his thoughts into other channels.

His task had been performed with almost consummate ease. True, Sir Robert himself had helped immensely. Had he been uninterested in Kingston's story, he would probably have detected the exchange. But on account of his keen interest in Uganda, he was literally assisting the hand which would bring about his own ruin.

Kingston, although he was glad of the opportunity of entering Sir Robert's library, so that he could hide the bonds, was not particularly anxious it should have been then. He knew he could do that part of the business safely.

But Gissing appeared to be anxious to help him; and, having had his keys returned, he led the way out of the bank. In a few minutes they were bowling along the smooth roads in the direction of Kensington.

The Telegram.

"Now, my dear Kingston, to show you some treasures!" said Sir Robert Gissing genially, as he led the way into his library.

Kingston followed languidly behind. In his eyes was that faraway, sleepy expression; but his fixed smile of boredom lifted somewhat as he entered the spacious apartment. Inwardly he was really interested—enjoying himself thoroughly. The ruining of these cowardly men who had sent him to a doom worse than death itself, was a keen pleasure.

Kingston was not callous in the least. To watch an ordinary man or woman suffer would pain him, but to see these members of the Inner Council receiving their just deserts was a vastly different matter.

But, whatever his inward feelings were, he had perforce to maintain his stolid, semi-foolish manner before the world. And Gissing was puzzled. He was wondering how it was this seemingly inane young man could take such an interest in rational and serious matters; how he had told the adventure of the gold so graphically and well.

"Ah, it's warm in here, Kingston. Take a seat; there are cigars on the window table."

"Jolly decent of you," drawled Kingston, "but I don't smoke."

Sir Robert stared, then shrugged his shoulders. If the man liked to be a mixture of foolishness and sensibility, it was none of his business. But certainly, considering what a first impression Kingston gave, these little traits in his character were surprising. Many people had noticed them, and although his friends gave Kingston credit for no great amount of brain, it was generally decided that he wasn't such a fool as he looked.

"I feel somehow as if I'd taken you away from your office under false pretences, you know!" exclaimed Kingston, with a peculiar, meaningless laugh. "I went there to consult you about opening an account, and instead of taking myself off——"

"You entertained me by relating a most interesting story about my favourite corner of the earth," put in Sir Robert, lighting a cigar. "I assure you, Kingston, it is a treat to have somebody to talk to who understands my remarks."

"Really, Sir Robert, you are complimentary," murmured Kingston.

The banker looked at his companion curiously. There was no possibility of recognition, for Kingston was another man—he was, in fact, Frank Kingston, whereas, the man Sir Robert had known eight years previously had been Philip Graydon, and there was not the slightest outward resemblance between the two.

"Now, all these books in this bookcase——" began the baronet; and was interrupted by a quiet knock at the door. He took his cigar from between his lips impatiently. It was annoying to be interrupted at a time like this.

"Come in!" he called sharply.

The door opened, and a pageboy appeared, bearing a tray in his hand.

"Telegram, sir," he said.

"Oh!" exclaimed his master. "Excuse me, Kingston!"

The page walked quietly out, and Sir Robert tore the buff-coloured envelope open, Kingston stood with his back to the fire, watching interestedly, making no attempt to achieve his object—viz., to secrete the Government bonds in one of the drawers of Gissing's desk.

"But—— Good gracious!" said Sir Robert, in a puzzled voice. He looked at Kingston, then at the telegram again. Suddenly an alarmed expression entered his eyes.

"Something has happened!" he cried. "Good heavens, what can be the meaning of this, Kingston?"

"I could judge better if I read the wire," replied Kingston. "May I?"

"Yes, yes, of course; it is nothing private. I sent my little daughter off this morning to a school at Hastings—saw her off at the station, in fact."

"Well?"

"Yet this telegram comes from the schoolmistress!" cried Gissing. "There is something wrong somewhere, Kingston."

Kingston took the wire, outwardly mildly concerned. In his inner self, however, a momentary feeling of alarm made itself felt, then disappeared. How foolish of him! Dolores couldn't possibly have bungled! He looked at the telegraph-form.

"Your telegram received. Shall meet same train to-morrow, instead of to-day, as directed.—Chambers."

Kingston now smiled for a moment, apparently thinking.

"Who is Chambers?" he asked.

"The head-mistress," answered Sir Robert impatiently. "She speaks as if the child hadn't arrived." He whipped out his watch. "Yet the train reached Hastings over an hour ago. The nurse who accompanied her ought to be back within half an hour."

"It is very evident," said Kingston, "that Miss Chambers—I suppose it is a miss—has received a wire, ostensibly from yourself, Sir Robert, saying that your daughter is not going until to-morrow. It looks, by Jove, as if somebody's been having a game!"

"I am worried," exclaimed the baronet—"greatly worried! Who would send such a telegram? It is not a joke—such a joke would be absurd, pointless. Nobody would do such an action. It is evident Miss Chambers sent somebody to meet the train, and I am quite sure the nurse would not have sense enough to take the child to the school herself."

"You say the nurse ought to be back soon?"

"Within thirty minutes!"

"Then wouldn't it be best to wait until she arrives?"

suggested Kingston. "If she handed the child over to somebody, then it will be quite clear that, well——"

"That my little daughter has met with foul play of some description!" cried Sir Robert. "Good gracious! What can have happened?"

Kingston looked at the distracted banker—a member of the infamous Brotherhood of Iron—in some surprise. That this hardened criminal, for there was no denying that he was a criminal—could display such concern was unexpected. Kingston knew very well where his daughter was; knew that she was probably enjoying herself immensely, and did not worry.

"Surely not foul play, Sir Robert," said Kingston. "Who would wish to harm your child? What motive could there be? I'm hanged if I can understand it all."

"It is clear that somebody sent Miss Chambers a wire which caused her to refrain from meeting the train. As it wasn't myself, and as Ivy did go to-day, then it is as clear as daylight that the somebody who sent the telegram met the train him or herself. But who it was, or for what reason it was done, I can only conjecture."

"When the nurse arrives she will be able to inform you as to whom she left the child in charge of!" cried Kingston, secretly pleased at the evident success of Dolores' plan.

For a matter of twenty minutes they waited in the library, the object of Kingston's visit entirely forgotten—the ostensible object, that is. The real object was still foremost in Kingston's mind.

Suddenly there was a sound of footsteps outside, and Sir Robert crossed the room, opened the door, and strode out into the hall. Quick as a flash Frank Kingston stooped down, opened a small lower drawer of the desk, and tucked the bonds in between a pile of old newspaper cuttings. In such a position they could remain undetected for months.

When, a couple of minutes later, Sir Robert Gissing re-entered the library, Kingston was lolling in one of the big easy-chairs, as if quite indifferent to his host's troubles. The nurse who had charge of the child followed the banker in, a frightened look on her face.

"Now then," said Sir Robert harshly, "when you got to Hastings, what did you do?"

"Please, sir, I don't think I know what you mean," stammered the girl.

"Don't be a blockhead! What did you do with the child? In whose hands did you leave her?"

"In the governess's, of course, sir. She met me on the platform, as you said she would, sir."

"Did she approach you first, or——"

"She came up to me, an' says, 'You've got 'ere safely,' or something like that, then give me 'arf-a-crown an' went off."

"You senseless ninny!" roared Sir Robert. "You might have known she was a fraud! What was she like?"

"She—she was a very nice lady, sir," said the nursemaid, half sobbing. "Just like a governess. I wasn't to know there was anything wrong, sir, was I? I was told to leave little Ivy in the 'ands of a governess——"

"That will do!" exclaimed Sir Robert. "Get out of the room! I was a fool to trust her to you!" He turned. "The only thing, Kingston, is to set the police on the track. Good heavens, I can hardly realise what it means! My little darling has been decoyed away. There is no doubt about it—none whatever."

A moment later the page-boy entered again, this time bearing a small envelope on his tray. Sir Robert snatched it up, and tore it open. Something seemed to tell him that it was of vital importance.

He unfolded the sheet of notepaper before him, and read the few words written thereon. Then his eyes appeared to bulge from his head, and he clutched at the back of a chair for support.

"Heaven help me!" he cried aloud, in anguish.

Sir Robert's Anxiety.

Frank Kingston stepped forward quickly.

"What is it?" he asked, in a concerned voice. "Great Scott! Sir Robert, you have gone as white as a sheet! What is the matter?"

The question was really unnecessary, since the letter in Sir Robert's hand had been posted earlier in the morning by Kingston himself. Kingston had, in fact, composed it.

"The matter?" cried the banker bitterly. "Nothing, Kingston—nothing further than you already know. This letter is from the kidnappers, and they demand—— But listen. 'By the time you receive this note your child will have disappeared utterly. If you wish to see her again, you have merely to agree to paying the sum of £20,000, which you can easily afford. State willingness in the "Personal Column" of the "Telegraph."' What do you think of it, Kingston? I can't do it—twenty thousand is beyond me!"

"By Jove!" ejaculated Kingston, in affected amazement. "By Jove, Sir Robert, that's rather rough, isn't it?" He noticed that the banker had kept the last line to himself. "Your punishment has started; nothing can save you now!"

"What can I do—what can I do?"

"I should inform the police!" cried Kingston excitedly. "But twenty thousand pounds! By Jove! What confounded bad luck! There'll be a sensation about this, for certain!"

He hurried towards the door.

"You'll want to be alone," he said; "so I'll take myself off. Sorry about those books, y'know. Still, 'tisn't every day people are kidnapped, is it?"

He opened the door and passed out, and Gissing, pausing for a moment undecidedly, plainly heard him muttering "Twenty thousand, by Jove!" to himself. The baronet set his teeth. Kingston was a decided fool, after all, he thought.

"One moment, Kingston—one moment!" he called. "I don't want this to be bandied about in all the newspapers."

Kingston heard the words, but pretended not to have done, for he could not very well go directly against Sir Robert's wishes. So he bustled out before the baronet reached him.

Two hours later, Sir Robert Gissing, who was being borne swiftly towards Grosvenor Square in a hansom, saw a newspaper placard bearing his own name in glaring letters. He stopped the hansom, and beckoned to the urchin, who was yelling at the top of his voice:

"Speshul! Kidnappin' of Sir Robert Gissing's daughter! Strange story. Piper, sir? 'Ere y'are, sir!"

The baronet took the news-sheet, still damp from the press, and frowned darkly as he saw a full account of all that had occurred contained on the front page.

It was quite evident that Kingston had been to the newspaper offices, for he was the only other man who knew about the note demanding ransom.

"The fool," muttered Sir Robert; "the hopeless imbecile! The very last thing I wanted—and here is the whole story emblazoned over the whole country. Curse his impudence! I was a fool to tell him anything about it at all— I might have known! Yet he seemed—— Bah! There's no denying Kingston's a weak-minded idiot!"

He glanced at the paper in his hands. Yes, it was all in—every word. Kingston had taken good care of that. He meant the public to know of that £20,000, so that when the final blow came, it would be remembered and connected.

Sir Robert was well-nigh distracted. It was quite evident he cared for his little child, for no man would change so much in a few hours as he had done, had this not been the case.

He might be bad in everything else, but certainly Kingston was surprised at his attitude over this matter. And somehow, although he had never seen the child, he instinctively felt that she was a loving little thing. Otherwise, Sir Robert's hard and flinty heart could never have been affected. Didn't it seem rather a pity—— But Kingston thrust the thought away resolutely. Gissing had to be punished like the rest; although appearance belied the fact, he was as wicked as any member of the Brotherhood.

The hansom rolled along the broad streets, the pleasant jingle of the harness being an irritation to Sir Robert's nerves. He screwed the paper up in his anxiety, and thrust it in a ball into his pocket. How slow the cab seemed to be travelling!

But at last it drew up in front of Lord Mount-Fannell's house in Grosvenor Square—that mansion which was looked upon with respect by all—but in which more villainy was planned than in any other house in London. The headquarters of the Brotherhood of Iron was an unique one.

Sir Robert Gissing hurried up the steps and rang the bell. It was opened after a moment by a footman, who bowed with respect before the visitor. All Lord Mount-Fannell's servants were common-members, and knew every Inner Councillor by sight.

"Is his lordship in?" demanded Gissing.

"Yes, sir. Will you step this way, please?"

The footman crossed the magnificent hall, and knocked on the panel of a door. A second later Sir Robert was crossing the threshold. Lord Mount-Fannell was seated at a desk, writing. He looked up and nodded.

"You look worried, Gissing!" he exclaimed. "What's the trouble?"

"The trouble!" repeated the visitor bitterly. "Good gracious, man, you can't realise it!"

He threw himself into an easy-chair before the fire, and stared moodily before him. Lord Mount-Fannell laid down his pen and rose to his feet.

"It is something serious?" he asked. "Tell me what you mean."

Sir Robert pulled himself together, and produced the newspaper. The Chief of the Brotherhood of Iron looked interested as his companion related everything. But when he had done he rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Twenty thousand pounds is a lot of money," he said—"a deuce of a lot! I can quite understand how worried you feel, Gissing."

"Money?" cried the baronet. "Bah! What do I care for money? That's all you think about—all you live for! Do you imagine I am worrying about the money? No, it is my daughter—my poor little girl!"

His voice caught, and Lord Mount-Fannell gave him a curious glance. Then he laughed lightly.

"Jove, Gissing, but you surprise me!" he cried. "You, a hardened man of the world, with dozens of men's fates to your account, carrying on like a woman! Really, it is funny!"

"You don't understand, Mount-Fannell—you don't understand in the least. You have no children, and cannot realise how it alters a man's views. I've been bad—as bad as man can be—but I wish to Heaven I were out of it all. My day's past; I shall never be any more good to the Brotherhood. In a way, my little child has converted me, and it's her I'm thinking of, not the money."

The Chief stared at Sir Robert in utter surprise. This was an aspect of the baronet's character he had never suspected. He struck a match and applied it to the end of a cigar.

"Well, I'm sorry for you, Gissing. But really, I fail to see the reason of this visit. I can't help you in any way."

"But our men could search for her," cried Sir Robert eagerly. "Our men could go out in force and rescue her ——"

"No, Gissing. I'm afraid that's impracticable. Your private affairs have nothing whatever to do with the Brotherhood, so we can't be mixed up with it in any way. I'm sorry but your suggestion is out of the question. You ought to go to Scotland Yard; you ought to have gone before this. In all probability that fool Kingston has preceded you, and you will find the task done."

"But why is it impossible for our men——"

"It is—absolutely!" replied the Chief definitely. "Look here!"

He explained his reasons to Gissing, and finally the latter took his departure. The hansom was still waiting, so he drove straight to Scotland Yard. There he found that Kingston had indeed been before him, and that the telephone and telegraphs were busy sending urgent messages over the wires.

A couple of officers had been despatched post-haste to Hastings in the hope of picking up the trail, and Sir Robert found himself detained a considerable while giving a description, etc. The evening papers sold like wildfire, for the public were vastly interested in the account. Anything connected with children draws the public attention, and many conjectures were made as to what had become of little Ivy Gissing.

Kingston felt comfortable, as he had had assurance from Fraser that the trail was absolutely concealed. Nobody could possibly connect the incident at Dover with the affair. The very idea of the missing child being brought openly in a motor-car down to the pier and taken aboard the Coronet was absurd. The police would give no attention to the matter, even if they heard of it.

And while all this fuss was being made in London, what was happening on board the Coronet?

While the papers were conjecturing all manner of harm for little Ivy, she was having the time of her life—enjoying herself as she had never done before. Sir Robert had never been a kind father; it was only when she was gone that his real love for the child revealed itself.

(A further long instalment of this thrilling story next Thursday, in which it is related how Sir Robert Gissing's degradation is completed, and what happens to his little daughter Ivy.)

Concluding Chapters of this Great Sea Story.

In the Service of the King.

By LIEUTENANT LEFEVRE.

The Two Schooners.

"Ah! That is all I want to know," said Mr. Lancing.

He ordered his men into the boat, and pulled back with all haste to the Cynthia.

"The crew have been murdered, and the vessel plundered, sir," he said to Captain Garvin.

"The pirates," muttered the captain, his brow darkening.

"Beyond a doubt; and it is not very long since they took their leave, either. Dr. Crosbie is of opinion that the crime was committed about sunset last evening. After that the wretches must have stayed some time to ransack the vessel. Probably they did not leave her much before midnight. They could have been hardly out of sight when we first sighted the Esmeralda."

The captain nodded his head excitedly.

"That is so," he said. "But the question is, in what direction have they sailed?"

"I should be inclined to keep on the same course, sir," said Mr. Lancing. "The pirates will probably make for one of the small islands off the coast of San Domingo, or may rush even further eastward to Porto Rico. In either case we are on the right course now, sir, and I would not suggest alteration."

Captain Garvin took Mr. Lancing's advice, which proved to be sound enough, for before sunset two sails were sighted over the Cynthia's bows. Two sails, and, beyond all doubt, the two rascally pirate schooners.

On board the Cynthia the excitement was intense. But darkness was fast settling down.

For hour after hour the captain and Mr. Lancing remained on deck, peering through the darkness with their night-glasses, until the moon rose, shortly before midnight.

"By heavens! I can see them!" cried Mr. Lancing excitedly.

From the deck of the Cynthia the two schooners now were plainly discernible. The moon rose higher and higher in the sky, flooding the sea with silver light; and, as he stood watching the distant sails, Oswald felt his heart beating with a rapidity that almost suffocated him.

"At last!" he muttered. Then a thrill of terror and dread passed through him. He remembered that on one of the vessels was the girl to whom he owed his life. What if, during the fight that was now imminent, she should come to harm? What if the guns of the Cynthia should sink the schooners?

Every hour that passed brought the frigate nearer and nearer to her quarry. When the sun rose she was almost within range.

"Let fly the bow-gun at her, Mr. Lancing!" said the skipper.

It was done, but without effect.

Then the order was given to clear the decks for action.

Of the two schooners, the Rattler was the faster sailer; but, probably because Captains Kester and Hutt knew that their strength lay in their unity, the Rattler's pace was lessened, so that her consort could keep abreast of her.

The sun had risen high in the sky before another shot was fired. Again Captain Garvin gave the order to load and train the bow-gun. Old Bigben took up his position by the gun.

"Train her on the weather-most schooner! Try and bring down some of her overhead gear! Cripple her—that is the main thing!" said the captain

"Ay, sir!" said the old man.

He sighted the gun, and then waited a moment until the frigate rose on a wave.

There was a report and a flash of smoke, that was instantly whirled away by the wind.

The old gunner gave a grunt of disgust, for his shot had apparently been without effect.

But the next moment his grunt was changed to an exclamation of delight, as the topmast of the schooner, which had been almost shot through, was seen to suddenly break off short and fall to the deck, bringing down with it a mass of wreckage.

In a moment the effect of the disaster was apparent. The schooner fell astern of her consort.

"Run in and reload, Mr. Bigben, and see if you can do as much for the other. There are five guineas waiting for you, my lad, if you can send some of that other fellow's sticks flying."

"I'll take the money, sir," said the old man quietly.

This time, while the report was in their ears, a cloud of spray was suddenly flung up under the schooner's stern, and the next instant the Albatross fell away from the wind.

"Would you be calling her rudder a stick, sir?" asked old Bigben, with a grin.

"Not as a rule; but it will count as two sticks this time, my lad," said the captain.

It was as the old gunner had imagined—his shot, aimed too low, had disabled the schooner's rudder; and for the two vessels further flight was practically impossible.

"We'll run between them, and give them both our broadsides as we pass," said the captain. "My lads," he cried, raising his voice, "we came out to capture or sink these two pirate schooners, and it rests with us now to do our duty. You haven't forgotten the decks of the Esmeralda yet, nor the murdered crew of the Rattler?"

A growl, that was neither a shout nor a cheer, answered him.

"Good! Then we are going to run between the pair of them. Man both sides, my lads, and give them your broadsides as we pass."

This time a cheer broke from their lips as they sprang to their posts. Only Oswald, standing white and trembling on the main deck, knew for the first time in his life what fear was, for on board one of those vessels which they were going to rake with their fire was one who he knew was dearer to him than anything else in the world.

Oswald's Fear.

The decks heaved, and the frigate trembled from stem to stern as she poured both her broadsides into the two schooners. A thick, sulphurous smoke blotted everything from sight, but out of the smoke there came sounds which made the heart grow sick with horror—the screaming of the wounded, mad with pain, the deep, heavy groans of the partially insensible, and the shouts and oaths of those who had not fallen.

When the smoke cleared away the frigate had passed between the two schooners, which now presented a sorry spectacle.

Their sails hung in ribbons; their decks had been ploughed up with the grape and canister; the foremast of the Albatross had been shot through, and, mingled with its wreckage, lay the dead and wounded of her crew.

Oswald looked, and felt sick with horror. Norah was among them; she was on board one of those vessels, among those maddened wretches who, like so many maniacs, were rushing hither and thither on the decks of their disabled craft.

But the frigate had not come out of the ordeal unscathed. A couple of men lay dead on her deck, three more lay forward, writhing in agony, and were quickly raised and carried below by their messmates.

(To be concluded.)

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