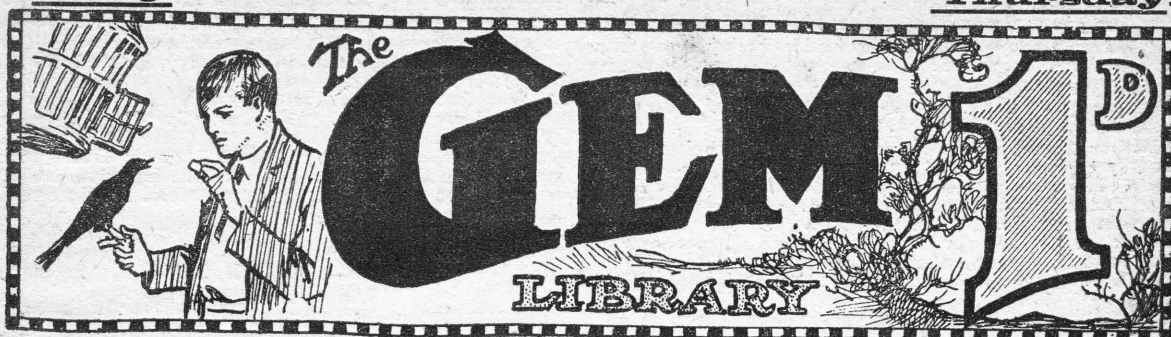


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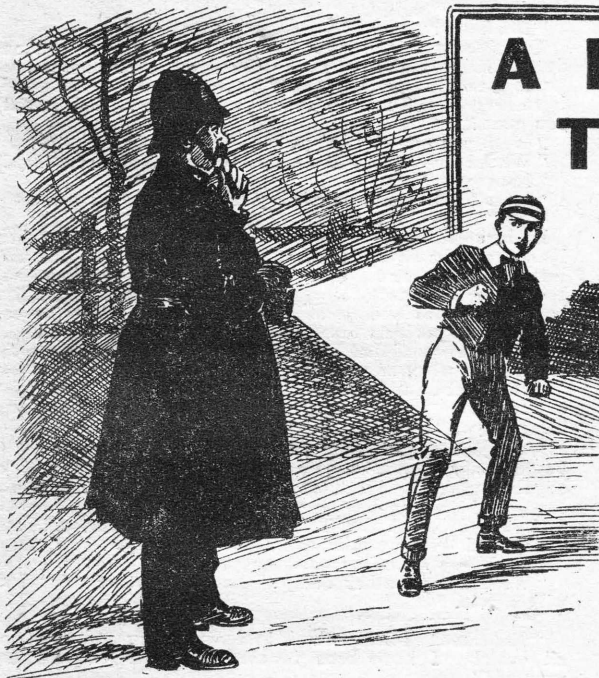
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A Splendid, New, Long, Complete Tale
of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's.

- - BY - -

MARTIN CLIFFORD.



CHAPTER 1.

The Third Form have Their Own Way.

BUMP—bump!
Tom Merry paused in the Form-room passage in the School House at St. Jim's. He was passing the door of the Third Form-room, when the sounds of disturbance came to his ears from within.

Bump!
And following the third bump, came a voice Tom Merry knew well—the voice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form.

"Ow! Weally, you young wascals—"

Tom Merry grinned.

"Gussy in trouble again!" he remarked, cheerfully. Manners and Lowther, Tom Merry's chums in the Shell Form, stopped too. The Terrible Three had just finished their preparation, and were coming down to the common-room for a chat with the fellows before going to bed, when the sound of the bumping in the Third Form-room arrested them.

Monty Lowther looked at his watch.

"Quarter past nine!" he said. "More than time the Third were in bed. It's bedtime in a quarter of an hour for our noble selves. What are those blessed fags doing up at this time of night?"

"Bumping Gussy, apparently."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Better give them a look-in!" said Manners. "Some giddy prefect ought to have seen them to bed a quarter of an hour ago. Perhaps Gussy has taken on the duty for him."

"Hence these tears!" grinned Lowther.

Tom Merry opened the door of the Form-room. Although it was a quarter of an hour past their bedtime, the Third Form were evidently not gone to bed. Two-thirds of the Form at least were there, and they were apparently in an unusually lively frame of mind. At St. Jim's, bedtime for all Forms below the Fourth was at nine o'clock. The Fourth and the Shell went at half-past nine. The rule was generally strictly enforced, it being a prefect's duty to see that the juniors went up to their dormitories at the right time. But on this special evening it was clear that some prefect had forgotten the Third.

The Terrible Three looked into the Form-room. In the excitement there, they were unobserved for the moment. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form, was struggling vainly in the grasp of the fags. Chief among his assailants was his own minor, Wally D'Arcy, and Wally was ably backed up by Curly Gibson, and Fane, and Hobbs, and Joe Frayne, and a crowd more of inky-fingered youngsters.

"Give him another!" Wally was saying.

"Bai Jove!"

"Bump him!"

"Wally, you young wascal—"

"I'm sorry, Gussy!" said Wally solemnly. "This is a painful duty—painful to both of us. But as your minor, I feel bound to bring you up in the way you should go. We can't have Fourth Form chaps coming into our Form-room jawing us! It wouldn't do! Give him one more!"

Bump!"

"Ow! You young wascals—"

"Now, Gussy, are you going to be good?"

"Weally, you fwithful young wuffian!" gasped the swell of St. Jim's. "You awf'ly wuffianly young wascal!"

"Give him another!" roared Hobbs.

"Bump him!"

"Ow! Wescue!" shrieked D'Arcy. "You are spoilin' my twousahs, you young wascals! Oh!"

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

The fags paused for a moment in the punishment of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, and stared round at the chums of the Shell.

"What do you Shell bounders want here?" demanded Wally.

"Clear out!" said Gibson.

"Outside, you bounders!"

Tom Merry laughed.

"Isn't it time you kids were in bed?" he demanded.

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"GUSSY'S APRIL FOOLS!" AND "WINGS OF GOLD!"

Wally snorted.

"Gussy came in to ask that question," he said. "We're answering it. Do you want to be answered the same way?"

"We can bump a Shell boulder for his cheek just as easily as a Fourth Form duffer!" said Curly.

"I don't think you'd find it easy if you started," grinned Tom Merry. "You'll get into a row if you're found out of your dorm., you young asses!"

Arthur Augustus jerked himself free from the fags. The usually elegant swell of St. Jim's was in a very dishevelled state. His trousers were rumpled and dusty, and his collar was torn out, and his necktie hung over his shoulder. His eyeglass streamed at the end of its cord. He gasped for breath, and in fact, his manners and his appearance had quite lost the repose that stamps the caste of Vere de Vere.

"You—you uttah young wotahs!" he exclaimed. "Bai Jove, I—I—I—"

"What's the trouble, Gussy?" asked Tom Merry.

"I came in here to warn Wally that it was time to go to bed," D'Arcy explained. "Langton, of the Sixth, ought to see the Third to bed to-night, but he has appawently forgotten them. As Wally's majah, I am bound to see that he goes to bed at the pwopah time."

"As Gussy's minor, I am bound to see that he doesn't play the giddy goat," Wally explained. "These chaps are helping me."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We're going to bump Gussy till he promises to go away quietly and behave himself," said Curly Gibson.

"Weally, Gibson—"

"Now, are you going?" demanded half a dozen of the Third.

"Certainly not!" said Arthur Augustus indignantly. "As your majah, Wally, I am bound to look aftah you."

"Rats!"

"If you say wats to me, Wally—"

"Rats!"

"I shall be sowwy to thwash you, Wally—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Monty Lowther. "You look more like getting the thrashings at the present moment, Gussy. You'd better let the fags alone. If Langton doesn't see them off to bed, let them stay up."

Arthur Augustus shook his head. Arthur Augustus had a very strong sense of duty towards his minor—a sense of duty which was not in the slightest degree appreciated by Wally.

"Imposs., my deah boy!" said D'Arcy. "I am bound to look aftah Wally. I wegard him as bein' in my charge. He must go to bed at the wight time."

"No fear!" said Wally cheerfully. "If a prefect forgets bedtime, we're going to make the best of it."

"You will wuin your health with these weckless ways, Wally!"

"Rats!"

"And young Fwayne, too, I wegard him as bein' undah my care," said Arthur Augustus. "You ought to be in bed, young Fwayne!"

"Oh, I'm all right," grinned Joe Frayne. "I used to stay up to midnight often enough, Master Gussy, when I was in London. Don't you worry your 'ead about me!"

"Weally, Fwayne—"

"Now, are you going, Gussy?" demanded D'Arcy minor. "Certainly not! I am goin' to see you to bed—you and Fwayne!"

"Outside!" roared the Third, exasperated.

"Weally, you young waseals—"

"Oh, bump him again! He hasn't had enough!"

The fags closed upon the swell of St. Jim's. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy began to hit out, but they were too many for him. In a moment he was whirled over in the grasp of many hands, and he descended upon the floor with a loud concussion.

Bump!

"Yawo-oh!"

Bump!

"Ow! Wescue! Tom Mewwy! Wescue, deah boys! Ow!"

The Terrible Three could not resist that appeal. They rushed forward to drag the elegant Fourth-Former from the grasp of his tormentors. But the Third were not disposed to be robbed of their victim, neither would they dream of brooking the interference of Shel' fellows in their Form-room.

"Go for 'em!" roared Wally. "Down with the Shell!"

"Sock it to 'em!"

"Hurray!"

In a second the Terrible Three were struggling with a crowd of fags. Tom Merry & Co. were great fighting-men in the Shell; but numbers were too great for them, and they went down under the onslaught of the fags. But they did not go down unresisting. The combat was terrific, and

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the din was more terrific still; and it rang along the Form-room passage and over the whole School House.

In the wild excitement, no one heard the footsteps that came hurriedly along the passage. Kildare, of the Sixth, the captain of St. Jim's, stood in the doorway, his brows knitted, and his eyes gleaming with anger.

"Stop that row!" he shouted.

"Ow!" gasped Wally. "Kildare! Cave!"

The struggle ceased.

The Terrible Three and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy were sprawling on the floor, gasping; and the fags, with sheepish looks, backed away a little as the captain of St. Jim's strode into the room.

CHAPTER 2.

Where is Langton?

KILDARE stared angrily at the heroes of the Third. "What does all this row mean?" he exclaimed sharply.

"Ahem—" said Wally.

"Ahem—" said Curly Gibson.

"Bai Jove!"

Tom Merry & Co. scrambled up, looking very red and dusty. Kildare glanced at the clock in the Form-room.

"It is nearly half-past nine!" he exclaimed. "You should have been in bed half an hour ago, you fags! Why haven't you gone?"

"Well, you see—" began Wally cautiously.

"Whose duty was it to see lights out in your dormitory?"

"Langton's."

"Hasn't he been here after you?"

"No."

Kildare frowned. He was head prefect of the School House, and he never failed in his own duties, and had very little tolerance for fellows who did. Langton was known to be a very careless and happy-go-lucky fellow, but a fellow had no right to undertake a prefect's duties unless he was prepared to perform them. So Kildare considered, and his expression showed that he had some unpleasant things to say to Langton when he saw him.

"Well, cut off to bed now!" he exclaimed. "I'll see lights out for you. As it is Langton's fault, I shall not say anything to you about this."

Wally & Co. obediently marched off. Kildare was not to be argued with. They would as soon have thought of arguing with the Head of St. Jim's himself as with the captain of the school.

Kildare followed the Third out of the Form-room, and marshalled them upstairs like a flock of sheep.

Tom Merry & Co. looked at one another.

"Well, I feel rather dusty!" Monty Lowther remarked, with a grin.

D'Arcy gave a gasp.

"Bai Jove! I feel howwid! I am dustay and wumped all ovah! I have been tweated with the gwossett dis-wespect!"

"You'll know how to mind your own bizney another time!" Manners suggested.

"Weally, Mannahs, I suppose it is my business to see that my minah does not get into weckless ways!" said the swell of St. Jim's, with a great deal of dignity.

"Oh, rats!" said Manners.

"Weally, you ass—"

"Langton will have a warm five minutes when Kildare sees him!" said Tom Merry, as he dusted down his clothes with his handkerchief. "I wonder how a prefect could be such an ass as to forget the Third Form? He might have known that the Third wouldn't go to bed without being told!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Gone out, perhaps," Monty Lowther remarked.

"I don't see where he could have gone to at this time of night," said Tom Merry, as the juniors walked down to the common-room. "I don't think Langton is a chap like Knox, who breaks bounds of a night. Though I've noticed he's been very chummy with Knox just lately."

"Hullo!" exclaimed Blake, of the Fourth, as they entered the common-room. "Have you been through a mill, Gussy?"

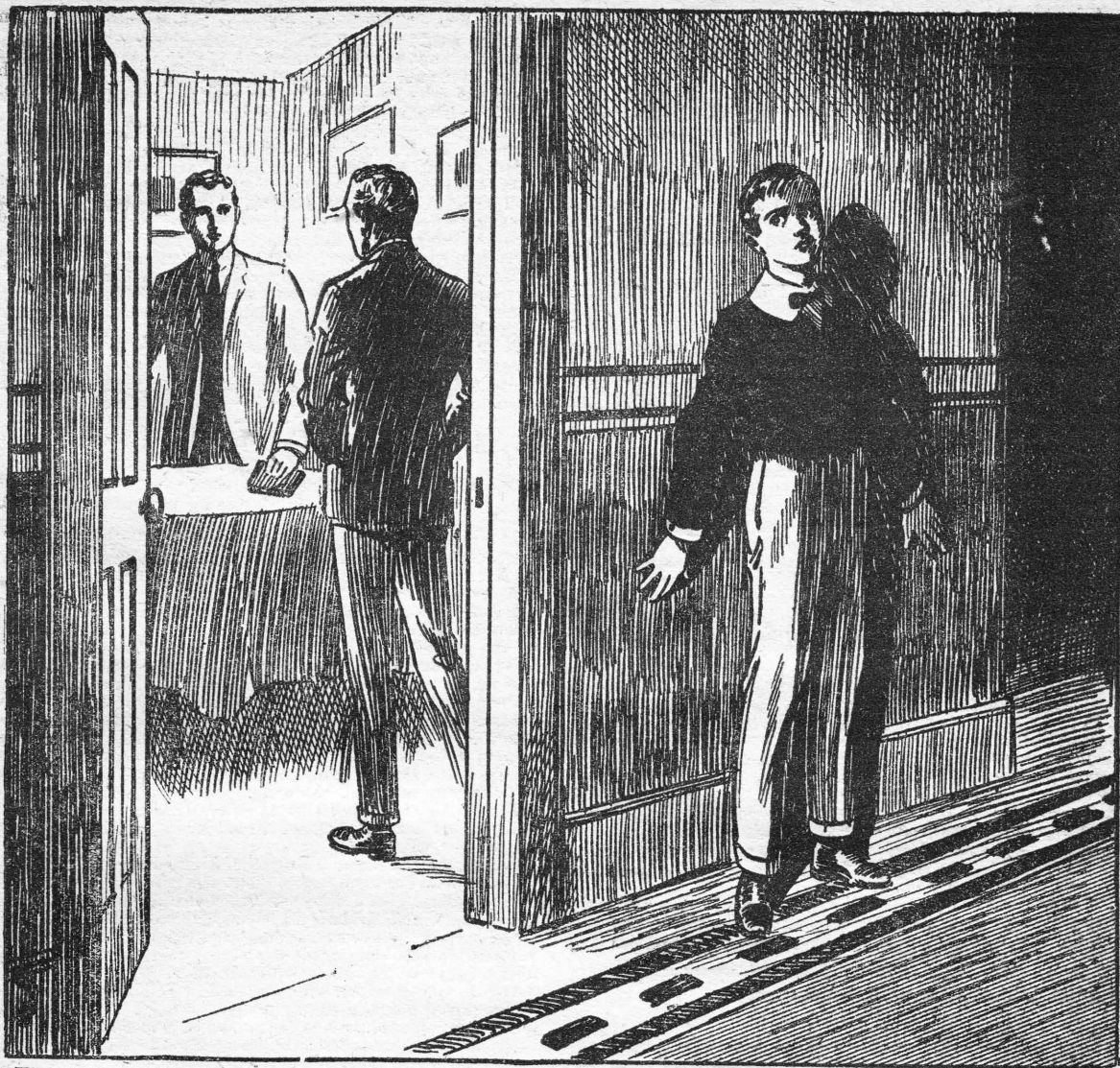
Arthur Augustus D'Arcy jammed his monocle into his eye, and surveyed his humorous chum with a scornful stare.

"No, Blake, I have not been through a mill!" he replied, with dignity. "I have been tweated with gwoss dis-wespect!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

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

"You can't see yourself, old chap," said Jack Blake blandly. "Look in the glass, and you'll see heaps of reasons for laughing."



Joe Frayne, crouching in the shadow with his heart beating hard, heard all that passed between Kildare and Knox, the black sheep of the Sixth. The little walf realised that, unless he could be warned in time, his benefactor would be trapped! How could he save Langton? (See Chapter 4.)

"Weally, you ass——"

"Gussy has been undertaking a prefect's duties," explained Tom Merry. "Langton, of the Sixth, forgot to see the Third Form to bed, and Gussy sailed in."

"Good old Gussy! Always shoving his silly nose in somewhere!" remarked Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies——"

Kildare came into the room. He was frowning.

"Time for you kids to go up," he said. "Does anyone here know where Langton is?"

"Langton," said Kangaroo, of the Shell. "I saw him go out about half-past eight. He was with Knox."

"Gone out?" said Kildare.

"Yes. Anything wrong?"

"Not that I know of," said Kildare curtly. "Buzz off, you youngsters. Darrel will see lights out."

"Right-ho, Kildare."

The St. Jim's captain strode away, his brows knitted.

"Bai Jove, Kildare is watty!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I'm wathah sowwy for old Langton. He's wathah an ass, but he's a decent chap."

"Silly ass to chum up with Knox!" growled Blake. "You all know what Knox is."

"Yaas, wathah!"

The Fourth and the Shell went up to their dormitories. Darrel, of the Sixth, saw their lights out, and then descended to the Sixth Form passage to Kildare's study. He found the captain of St. Jim's frowning.

"Langton not come in yet?" asked Darrel.

"No."

"It's queer."

"He will have to explain it," said Kildare. "Langton and Knox are both out. Between ourselves, Knox is a cad, and I'm not surprised; but we should never have known about either, but for the accident that it was Langton's turn to see lights out for the Third, and the young rascals stayed up as he didn't go to them. I shall see Langton when he comes in."

Kildare had performed Langton's duties for him, and had seen lights out in the Third Form dormitory. He had cautioned the fags before he left them that if there was any more noise they would hear from him. The Third Form knew Kildare, and they knew he was a fellow of his word, and there was not likely to be any more disturbance.

"My only Aunt Jane!" Wally ejaculated, when the dormitory was left in darkness. "Now I come to think of it, I wish we'd kicked Gussy out quietly instead of bumping him, and getting those Shell bouncers in."

"It's all right," said Curly Gibson. "Langton will get a jaw from Kildare, but it really serves him right. Like his cheek to forget us."

Wally chuckled.

"Yes, that's so, Curly. But I don't want to get Langton into a row, you see. He's a good-natured chap, and my belief is that Knox, of the Sixth, is getting him into rotten ways. If there's any trouble, Knox will get out of it all right. He's as deep as a fox, and Langy will get it in the neck."

"Langton's owl right," remarked Joe Frayne. "He 'elps me with my Latin, and he's took a lot of trouble over me."

"Taken, you ass!" said Hobbs.

"Thank you, 'Obbs!" said Frayne.

"Hobbs, you fathead; my name is spelt with an H!" growled Hobbs. Hobbs was friends with Joe Frayne now, but he had never quite got over his horror of Joe's peculiar English.

"Owl right," murmured Joe.

"Oh, shut up, Hobby!" said Wally. "Don't be so blessed aristocratic. You'll have to chuck it, you know, when you go home to the public-house."

"My father doesn't keep a public-house!" roared Hobbs.

"Well, the coffee-house, then."

"Look here, Wally—"

"It's owl right, Master Wally," said Joe Frayne. "I don't mind Master 'Obbs tellin' me. It's owl right."

But there was a faint tone in Joe's voice which betrayed that he felt it all the same. Joe Frayne had been some time at St. Jim's, but he was still Joe Frayne. The little fellow's history was a peculiar one. It was not so very long since he had been a waif in the streets of London, homeless and hopeless; and from that fate Tom Merry had saved him. Tom Merry's uncle paid his fees at St. Jim's, and at first the waif of the streets had had a very hard time in the Third Form.

Hobbs and Fane, and many others had been very much up against him; but Wally had taken his side from the first, and championed him against everybody. And, in the long run, little Joe's pluck, and good nature, and really fine qualities, had won upon the Third, and even the most snobbish of them had come to tolerate him, and most of them to like him. And Joe had improved in many ways, though often—especially when he was excited—his old manner of speaking would betray itself, and though Wally did not seem to mind, Hobbs and his friends always seemed to be horrified on such occasions. And when Hobbs was specially aristocratic and exclusive, it always amused Wally to "chivy" him on the subject of his people. Wally's father was an earl, and so he could afford to chum with anybody he chose; Hobbs's father was a solicitor, so apparently he had to be more select.

Joe Frayne tagged for Langton, of the Sixth, and Langton had been very kind to him, in a careless way; and Joe never forgot a kindness. He worshipped Tom Merry, who had saved him from the slums, and he was greatly attached to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. As he lay in bed now, he was thinking of Langton, and of many good-natured things the weak, careless senior had done for him, and he was troubled over the prospect of Langton getting into the black books of the captain of the school.

The fags were discussing the matter without much sympathy for Langton. To many of the youngsters a Sixth-Form prefect was merely a natural enemy, and they did not care twopenny what happened to him.

"Where the dickens can Langton be?" Hobbs said thoughtfully. "Of course, he's gone out."

"Without permission," remarked Fane.

"Prefects don't require permission to go out," said Wally.

"But they're not allowed out at this time of night. Even the captain of the school would have to explain."

"That's true."

"Oh, it's Knox at the bottom of it," said Curly Gibson. "Knox is a blackguard, if ever there was one. You know the row Wally had with him for refusing to smuggle in tobacco?"

"Yes, rather," said Wally, "and the beast is still up against me."

"They've gone down to the Green Man, as sure as a gun," yawned Hobbs. "Knox has friends there, I know—Joliffe, and Banks, the bookmaker. Langton has plenty of money, and Knox has taken him in."

"I shouldn't wonder."

"Kildare will come down on him heavy!" chuckled Curly. "I shouldn't wonder if he comes in squiffy."

The fags laughed at the prospect. But Joe Frayne did not laugh. He had seen too many people "squiffy" in his days in the London slums to regard it in a humorous light. The curse of drink had been too clearly brought home to his knowledge for him ever to think of laughing at it as less-experienced lads might.

"Do you really think Langy is at the Green Man, 'Obbs?" he asked.

"I think it's most likely."

"'Orrid, ain't it?"

"Yes, 'orrid," said Hobbs sarcastically—"in fact, 'orrible! Not to say 'arrowing."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Joe Frayne dropped into silence. Although he had stopped saying "Crikey!" and "Strike me pink!" his aspirates still formed a great difficulty in his path; they were the pons asinorum that Joe could not clamber over.

The fags discussed the matter till they dropped off to sleep.

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one by one. Their last sleepy remarks were to the effect that Kildare would "nail" Langton when he came in, and would bowl him out if he had been to the Green Man, and that Langton would lose his prefectship, and perhaps be sacked from the school. That thought was too troublesome to Joe to allow him to fall to sleep easily.

He remembered that Langton had helped him many a time with his Latin, which was terribly hard for Joe, and his Form-master, Mr. Selby, was very sharp and impatient with him about it. He remembered that Langton had chipped in and saved him when Sefton, of the Sixth, was licking him cruelly. Joe Frayne remained awake after all the other fellows had gone to sleep; and when the rest of the Third were buried in slumber, the little waif rose.

He dressed himself quietly, and stole to the door of the dormitory. The passage without was in darkness; all the junior Forms had been in bed long ago. Joe closed the dormitory door softly behind him, and stole away to the head of the stairs—and crouched there in the shadows—listening. Langton's fag was waiting for Langton to come in. And there was another fellow who was waiting, in a grimmer humour, for Langton to come in—Kildare, of the Sixth!

CHAPTER 3.

Caught!

KILDARE was sitting in his study, with the door wide open, and the light streaming out into the dusky passage.

It was half-past ten, and the rest of the Sixth had gone to bed. None of the studies showed a light with the exception of Kildare's.

Neither Knox nor Langton had come in yet.

But for the fact that it was Langton's duty to see the Third Form to bed and put their light out, and that the Third had stayed up, with considerable noise, because Langton was out, Kildare would have known nothing of the prefect's absence.

Now, as he waited up in his study, he wondered grimly how many times this had occurred before.

Knox, he more than suspected, was a blackguard; but Knox was too cunning to be caught napping. But Langton he had always believed to be a decent fellow—weak and good-natured to a fault, but decent enough, and not at all the kind of fellow to keep bad company.

If he had an explanation to offer, Kildare was willing to hear it. If he had not, he would have to take the consequences.

No one could come along the Sixth Form passage now without Kildare seeing him. The clock in the tower of St. Jim's had rung out half-past ten, when there was a step in the passage, and Kildare listened. The step came along, and paused, as if the new-comer had seen the light streaming out from the open doorway of the study, and was struck by it. The captain of St. Jim's smiled grimly.

He rose to his feet, and his shadow fell into the passage as he moved between the light and the door. Then the footsteps came on again. The fellow in the passage had evidently realised that it was impossible to pass undiscovered, and that it was useless to retreat, since Kildare had heard him.

"Knox!" said Kildare quietly, as the figure of the senior came into view.

Knox stopped outside the door. His thin, vulpine face looked a little startled, but he had had time to recover his coolness, and he was quite ready for Kildare. He glanced into the study, and nodded coolly to the captain of St. Jim's. "Hallo, Kildare!" he said genially. "Waiting up?"

"Yes."

"For me?" said Knox, with a smile.

"You and Langton?"

"Langton! Is he out?"

"Yes."

Knox yawned.

"By Jove, is he? I'm in a bit late myself. I was over at Wayland, you know, and I missed the train back. Deuced bore, these rotten local trains!"

Kildare looked at him steadily.

"You've been to Wayland?" he asked.

The prefect nodded.

"Yes; it's market day there to-day, you know, and very lively."

"Did Langton go to Wayland with you?"

"He strolled down the road with me."

"But did not go to Wayland?"

"Really, Kildare, it sounds as if you were catechising me!" said Knox, with an unpleasant laugh. "Don't pile it on too thick, you know. I know you are the head prefect of the house, but I am a prefect, too, not a fag in the Second!"

"Did Langton go to Wayland with you?"

"Better ask Langton."

"Have you really been to Wayland?"

"Kildare!"

"I ask you that question because I can't take your word," said Kildare grimly. "Look here, Knox, it's no good beating about the bush. You remember Sleath, of the New House, who was expelled from St. Jim's for doing what I suspect you of doing? The Head has told me that he has reason to believe that that old connection between some of the seniors here and the rascals at the Green Man has not been broken off. He has asked me to look out and to report to him, as is my duty as captain of St. Jim's."

Knox sneered. "It won't be much use telling tales about me," he said. "I have been to Wayland, and I dare say I could find witnesses to prove it."

"I dare say you could, whether you have been there or not," said Kildare scornfully. "I know you know how to cover up your tracks, Knox, though I think you will come a cropper one of these days. Very well; you can go to bed, if you like—I shall stay up for Langton."

"And noble him as he comes in?" asked Knox unpleasantly.

"Yes." "And take him by surprise, and make him blurt out something?" sneered the prefect. "You don't suppose Langton will be as much on his guard as I am."

"I shall certainly ask him to account for staying out this evening, and leaving the Third up after bedtime," said Kildare quietly.

Knox started. "The ass! Just like him to overlook something like that!" he ejaculated.

Kildare's lip curled. "Yes; you wouldn't have forgotten," he said. "But you can get along—I'm going to stay up for Langton. And I'll trouble you to go into your study and close the door—you are not going to make any signal to Langton as he comes in. And I shall see that you don't drop out of the study window, either."

Knox drew a deep, hissing breath, and his eyes glittered as he looked at the captain of the school. For a moment it looked as if he meant to defy Kildare, and to measure strength with him. Kildare thought so, too, and he clenched his hands and straightened up. He would not have been sorry. At that moment he would have been glad of a good excuse for knocking the black sheep of the Sixth headlong along the passage.

But if the thought was in Knox's mind, he dismissed it at once. He had either to defy Kildare, and face serious trouble afterwards, or to abandon his companion in wrongdoing. Anybody who knew Knox would have known at once which alternative he would choose. He shrugged his shoulders with an assumption of carelessness.

"I'm going to bed," he said, with a yawn. "Good-night! You're welcome to sit up and do the Sister Ann bizney!"

He moved along the passage. Kildare did not return his good-night. He disliked the cad of the Sixth too much for civility just then. If Arthur Langton was in trouble, and had disgraced himself, as Kildare suspected, he suspected, too, that Knox was the one who had led him into rascally ways. And it would never be brought home to the cunning prefect; Knox was always too careful in covering up his tracks.

Knox returned in a few moments, and looked into the study again. He made a gesture along the passage.

"Langton's door is locked," he said.

"I know that," said Kildare.

"He may be in his room, asleep," suggested Knox.

Kildare shook his head. "I have knocked and called him," he said. "If he were there he would answer me. And he was seen to go out with you, Knox, and no one has seen him come in. As a matter of fact, you know as well as I do that he is out of doors, and you know where he is."

Knox shrugged his shoulders again, and walked up the passage. Langton's door was half-way up the passage, and Knox was nearer to Kildare's study. Kildare stepped into the passage, and saw the prefect go into his room, and heard the door close. A slight sound on the stairs caught Kildare's ear, and he glanced up past the banisters. But there was nothing to be seen, and the sound was not repeated.

In his study, Knox's face lost the assumption of cynical carelessness, and now that he was alone he looked almost haggard with anxiety. The blackguard of the Sixth knew well enough that he was playing a dangerous game. Nothing could make him follow the straight path, and yet he knew that the crooked path was full of danger, and might lead to his being "sacked" from the school.

"Hang it!" he muttered. "And hang him! What an utter fool Langton is! I never dreamed that it was his turn to-night to look after the brats, or— But it's too late to think of that now. He is a fool—a fool! He forgot that, and he refused to come home with me, the fool! When

he comes in, Kildare will spot him—I can't warn him—he will be trapped, and he'll blurt out the whole story!"

Knox gritted his teeth. "He won't give me away; he's too decent for that, but the game will be up for him! Kildare will report him—he's bound to, whether he wants to or not. Langton's done for! I—I can't help him without ruining myself, and—and that's not to be thought of! It's his own fault, for being an obstinate fool. Why couldn't he come away with me, as I wanted him to?"

Knox moved to the window, and looked out. Kildare's window was open, and the light streamed out into the dark quadrangle. The prefect could not leave by the window without almost the certainty of being discovered—he dared not risk it. Knox dared very little in any line except playing the rascal; he was not of the stuff of which heroes are made, and he was not likely to run the danger of ruin to himself to save a friend, even if he had led that friend into danger and disgrace in the first place.

He remained for some minutes with a knitted brow, thinking. Then, with an oath, he undressed and went to bed. He, at least, was safe, and Langton must take his chance! That was the decision of Knox the prefect.

CHAPTER 4.

The Faith of a Fag.

JOE FRAYNE crouched in the shadows on the big staircase, his heart beating hard, his breath coming and going in quick throbs.

He had heard all that passed between Kildare and the blackguard of the Sixth, and he knew, even more surely than Kildare did, that Knox had lied—that he had left his companion in some questionable company, and it was pretty certain that it was in the back-parlour of the Green Man. More fellows than Knox paid visits to Mr. Jolliffe's little back-parlour—Frayne knew that. There were Crooke and Cleaver, of the Shell, and Levison and Mellish, of the Fourth, and Sefton, of the Sixth—they all knew the place well. Lumley-Lumley, of the Fourth, too, had known it well, though Lumley-Lumley never visited the place now. Joe Frayne knew where Langton was, and he knew that he would come in unsuspecting, and find Kildare waiting for him, and then the whole truth would come out.

The senior would deserve what would happen to him—that was likely enough, but little Joe was not out of bed at that hour to think out ethical questions. Langton had been kind to him; Langton had stood his friend many times, and had helped him, and Joe's only thought now was how he could help his benefactor.

And, besides, did Langton deserve what would befall him, after all? There were fellows who drifted into wickedness from a natural kink in their nature, like Knox, and there were fellows who took the wrong path through sheer carelessness, and too easy listening to evil counsellors. Arthur Langton would not be the first fellow who had trodden the primrose path of dalliance without any inherent bad in his nature.

Joe Frayne crept back to the dormitory passage, his face pale, his heart beating hard, his thoughts very busy.

How could he save Langton?

That was the thought that was hammering in his mind. There was but one way. If the absent prefect could be warned, he might escape Kildare's keen eyes, or he would, at least, be prepared for the coming interview, and would not be taken by surprise and trapped into making dangerous admissions. And there was only one way to warn him—if someone should seek him where he was, and tell him that Kildare was waiting up and watching for him at St. Jim's.

Frayne trembled.

That meant breaking bounds! Tom Merry, his friend and protector, had impressed upon him often enough that he was to obey all the rules of the school—that he was never to violate any of them, and more especially such an important one as that about breaking bounds at night. And to go to the Green Man, the lowest public-house in Rylcombe! Joe Frayne had heard of a senior who had been expelled from St. Jim's for doing so, though it had happened before his time, and he knew the story of Lumley-Lumley, and how he had narrowly escaped expulsion for doing the same thing. If Joe Frayne went to the Green Man late at night, and it came out, he knew what would happen—he would be expelled from the school!

It was a fearful risk for the fag to run, but there was a depth of courage and loyalty in the little fellow's nature that few would have guessed.

It required only a few minutes for Frayne to make up his mind.

Gladly enough he would have asked advice from Tom Merry, but the hero of the Shell was in bed and asleep, and Joe could not speak to him about the matter, either, without

betraying Langton. And that was not to be thought of! If Langton, of the Sixth, had disgraced himself and brought himself within measurable distance of ruin, his miserable secret must be kept.

Joe Frayne stole silently along the dormitory passage, and reached the window at the lower end. It looked out upon an outhouse, and fags had used it many a time for leaving the house without permission. That was when some youthful "jape" made it necessary, but it was no jape that Frayne of the Third was engaged upon now. He realised very clearly how deadly serious the matter was, but he did not hesitate.

He opened the window silently and clambered out, and dropped softly upon the roof of the outhouse. In a minute more he was upon the ground, and was hurrying round the mass of dark buildings. The quarter to eleven had chimed out. Joe's great fear was that he might miss Langton, and that all his trouble would be for nothing. But as he halted in the shadowy quadrangle, and looked up at Kildare's window, he could see the stalwart figure of the captain of St. Jim's pacing to and fro in the light. Langton had evidently not returned yet.

Joe scuttled away to the school wall, and climbed the slanting oak, and a minute later dropped into the road.

Then he lost no time.

At a swift run, the little fag dashed away in the direction of Rylcombe.

The road was very lonely, and very dark. There were few stars in the clouded sky, and only at long intervals a dim lamp shed a glimmer of light upon the shadowed road. Joe's hurried footsteps rang with startling clearness upon the hard road in the silence of the night.

The fag's heart was beating hard as he ran.

He might meet footpads on the road—such a thing had occurred to a St. Jim's fellow only a short time before—or—

Joe Frayne gave a gasp of terror as a dark figure detached itself from the shadows of the trees, and the light of a bullseye lantern gleamed upon him.

It was not a footpad, but it was worse, from Joe's point of view. It was Mr. Crump, the policeman of Rylcombe! The glare of the bullseye lantern fell full upon the fag, and the constable uttered a sharp exclamation.

"Hallo! Stop!"

A heavy hand dropped upon Joe's shoulder, but the fag, hardly knowing what he did, dashed it aside, and dodged the portly constable, and dashed on at frantic speed.

The policeman pursued him for a few paces, and then stopped. He might as well have chased a will-o'-the-wisp as the panting, fleet-footed junior of St. Jim's.

Frayne tore on, his heart in his mouth. The lantern-light and the heavy footsteps died away behind him. He was in no danger of being caught, but he knew that the village policeman must have recognised him as a St. Jim's fellow. Doubtless, in the brief instant Mr. Crump had not seen his face clearly, but he would know that he was a junior from the school. And Joe knew only too well that Mr. Crump would consider it his duty to report the incident to Dr. Holmes on the morrow. It was his duty, there was no doubt about that, for he must know, of course, that the boy was out of school at that hour without permission. There would be an inquiry, and— Joe's heart sickened within him at the thought. What if it came out that he had been out of bounds?

The lights of the Green Man gleamed before him. Joe, panting, paused at the dark lane that led along the side of the public-house to the gardens at the back, sloping down to the river.

The fag turned into the path beside the house, and skirted round the building, and reached the gardens. At the back of the house was a wooden verandah, with French windows opening upon it—curtained windows, from which a light shone, and upon which the shadows of figures could be seen. Across one window fell clearly the dark shadow of a man engaged in pouring liquor from a bottle into a glass.

Joe hesitated a moment, and then firmly ascended the steps of the verandah and stopped outside the French window. A murmur of voices came from within. Joe knocked at the door.

In the silence the knock was loud and startling. The voices in the room died away instantly. Joe pushed the door open and entered.

CHAPTER 5.

The Only Chance.

THERE were three persons in the room—two men and a boy. The men were Mr. Joliffe, the landlord of the Green Man, and Mr. Banks, the bookmaker and racing tout. The boy was Arthur Langton, of the Sixth Form at St. Jim's.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 215.

DONT MISS "THE RIVAL CO.'S AT GREYFRIARS!" The Splendid, Long, Complete School Story "MAGNET" LIBRARY, 1^D. appearing in This Week's Number of the

The trio seemed petrified as the breathless fag, panting for breath, stepped into the room.

Mr. Joliffe was the first to spring to his feet.

"Who—who's this?" he exclaimed harshly.

Joe Frayne did not reply. He could not for the moment. He was exhausted with running, and the scene that his eyes beheld in the back parlour of the Green Man almost stunned him. He had feared the worst for Langton, but his imagination had not painted anything so bad as the reality.

There were cards on the table, and money, and ash-trays, and glasses. A glass that evidently contained something stronger than water was before Arthur Langton, and he held a cigarette between his fingers. His face was flushed, not only with the heat of the close and stuffy room. His eyes were heavy and strained, and his mouth strangely set. The cards dropped from his fingers as he looked at Frayne, and the cigarette fell to the floor.

"Frayne!" he muttered. "What are you doing here?"

"Friend of yours, Langton?" asked Mr. Banks.

"My fag at the school."

"Master Langton!" gasped Joe. "I—I—"

The prefect rose to his feet. His face was more deeply flushed now, and his eyes were gleaming with rage.

"You little hound!" he muttered thickly. "You cur! So you have come here spying on me!"

"Master Langton, I—"

Frayne had no chance to say more. The angry Sixth-Former rushed upon him and grasped him by the collar.

"You spying hound!" he shouted.

"So he's come here to spy, has he?" said Mr. Joliffe, with an unpleasant look. "You will 'ave to stop his mouth somehow, Langton."

"I ain't—" panted Joe.

Langton looked round savagely.

"Give me my stick!" he said. "I'll thrash him within an inch of his life! And if he says a word at St. Jim's I'll lick him black and blue again! Give me my stick!"

"Master Langton—"

"Hold your tongue, you young cad!"

The stick was in the senior's hand now. He took a firmer grip upon Frayne's collar, and twisted him round, and flung up his right hand to strike. Mr. Banks and Mr. Joliffe looked on with grinning approval. Joe tried to speak.

"I—I tell yer— Lummy! Oh!"

Slash!

The first blow fell, cruelly, and Joe gave a cry of pain. Langton seemed beside himself. He was good-natured enough as a rule, but, like most weak natures, he had a vein of savage passion in him, and he could be very cruel when it had the upper hand. And now he was far from being himself. There was strong drink in him, and the fumes of it were in his head, and his senses were unsteady.

Slash!

"Master Langton! Don't!"

"Give it 'im!" said Mr. Joliffe. "Lay it into 'im! Tan his hide for 'im, and he'll learn not to barge in where he ain't wanted!"

"Lather him!" said Mr. Banks.

Slash!

"Master Langton, you ain't no call to lick me," almost sobbed poor Joe. "I came 'ere to 'elp you—to warn you."

Langton had been about to strike again, but the words arrested him, beside himself as he was. He lowered his hand.

"What's that?" he demanded sharply.

"Master Kildare's waitin' up watchin' for you, sir," panted Joe. "I slipped out to come and tell you, so you wouldn't be caught goin' 'ome."

"Oh!"

"My 'at!" said Mr. Joliffe. "That's a 'orse of another colour! Is the young villain telling the truth, do you think, Langton?"

Langton nodded.

He threw the stick down, and released Frayne. The fag, striving bravely to keep back his tears, wriggled with the pain of the castigation he had received. Langton staggered to the wall, his face white and scared.

"Kildare waiting up for me?" he panted.

"Yes, Master Langton."

"How do you know? Why should he wait up?"

"You forgot about the Third—"

"The Third?" repeated Langton. "Oh, I remember! And—"

Frayne explained hastily.

"Good heavens!" muttered Langton. "I'm ruined!"

ANSWERS

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Joliffe and Banks did not speak. They knew enough of Kildare of St. Jim's to know that Langton in all probability told the exact truth. He was ruined if his conduct was reported to the Head, so far as St. Jim's was concerned. The wretched boy reeled against the wall, covering his face with his hands. The cards, the drink, the smoking, the wretched pleasures—so-called—that had enticed him from his duties were forgotten now. He had lost money—lost, and lost again—lost more than he dared to think of—as was only natural when he was playing with old hands like Joliffe and Mr. Banks, who knew every trick that was to be known in the card-sharper's line—and he had played on desperately in the hope of retrieving his luck, careless of the flight of time. And, as was to be expected, he had lost the more deeply the more deeply he plunged, and the two rascals held his paper for larger sums than he could afford to pay. And, as a matter of fact, Mr. Joliffe and his friend had little more use for their dupe now. They had drained him dry, and, so far as they were concerned, he could go.

"What shall I do? What can I do?"

"Better get back to the school," said Mr. Joliffe carelessly.

"But—but—"

"Well, you can't stay here all night," said Mr. Joliffe. "You can fix it up with Kildare somehow, I dessay."

"I'm ruined!"

"Master Langton!" It was Joe who spoke, quickly, eagerly. "There's a chance, sir."

Langton gave him a dull look.

"There's no chance left for me! Oh, what a fool I've been—what a mad fool! I deserve this—it serves me right!"

"Which ought to be a comfort to you," said Mr. Banks, with a sneer.

Langton did not hear him.

"There's a chance!" repeated Joe. "I 'eard Knox say as your study door was locked—"

"Yes; I locked it before I came out, so that if I was missed the fellows would think I had gone to bed," muttered Langton. "I forgot about the Third."

"If you was to get into the room somehow, Master Langton, they couldn't prove as you wasn't there all the time," said Joe eagerly.

Langton started.

"But—but if Kildare is watching—"

"He's watching the Sixth-Form passage, for you to come along the usual way," said Frayne hurriedly. "If you was to get in at the back window—same way as I got out—you could come up the passage from the other end in your stocking feet, unlock your door, and slip in, perhaps without Master Kildare's 'earring—"

Langton's eyes gleamed.

"By Jove! It's a chance!" Then his handsome face clouded over again. "But Kildare will hear—he's sure to hear."

"Not if I stop him, sir."

"You? How can you prevent him?"

"I'll draw his attention to the quad., sir, by making a noise of some sort there, and while he's looking out of the window you can sneak into your study."

"By Jove!"

Langton said no more. He put on his coat hurriedly, and his hat, and picked up his stick. He nodded good-night to the two scoundrels of the Green Man, and drew Joe out on the verandah.

"Frayne, old man, I'm sorry—sorry I treated you as I did when you came in," he muttered. "I—I didn't know. I'm sorry, kid."

"That's all right, Master Langton. 'Urry up, now!"

Langton's step was unsteady as he went down the wooden steps into the garden. Frayne caught his arm and held him, and looked into his face anxiously.

"Squiffy, ain't you?" he muttered.

Langton gave a hard, miserable laugh.

"They made me drink!" he muttered. "If it hadn't been for that—but the fresh air will bring me round. I shall be all right soon."

Joe led him down the path into the street. Save for the glimmer from the Green Man, the street was in darkness.

"Can't go 'ome by the road," muttered Frayne. "We shall 'ave to take the short cut across the fields—"

"But why—"

"Crump—the perliceman, you know—he's there. 'E nearly spotted me," muttered Frayne. "You musn't risk meetin' 'im, Master Langton."

Langton shivered.

"Good heavens, no!"

"This way—across the fields."

Joe Frayne led the way through a dim gateway. He seemed to have to do all the leading—Langton followed him like a child. Unfailingly the fag led him on through fields and by-lanes, till they came out into the road near St. Jim's, and the grey old walls rose dimly before them in the darkness.

CHAPTER 6.

A Narrow Escape.

ELEVEN o'clock had struck, and Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, came to his study window and looked out into the dim, silent quadrangle. From only one window beside his own was a light streaming out—the window of the Head's study. He stood looking out into the dimness with knitted brows.

Where was Langton.

It was useless to question Knox—he knew that. And the captain of St. Jim's was beginning to feel alarmed as well as angry about the absent senior. He had begun to fear that there might have been an accident. It was not so long since a gang of cracksmen had been at work in the neighbourhood of St. Jim's, and footpads were not unknown in the lonely lanes at night. It was quite possible that some mischance had befallen the careless Sixth-Former. A quarter-past eleven chimed on the still air of the night.

Kildare gave a start.

In the radius of light that fell from his window into the quadrangle a shadow moved for a moment. There was a sound as of footsteps grinding heavily upon a gravel path.

Was it Langton at last?

Who else could be out in the quadrangle at that hour?

Kildare strained his eyes into the gloom. He could see nothing—nothing but the dim old elms rising like shadows in the deeper gloom of the buildings.

"Who is there?" Kildare called out softly.

There was no reply.

The chime of the clock had died away, leaving deeper silence. Again a sound broke the stillness—the sound of footsteps.

Kildare wondered.

If Langton was there, why did he not come into the house, and why was he making so much noise? Was it Langton, or some junior out of bounds—some New House fellow engaged upon a House raid, perhaps? It was a late hour for such a jape, but it was possible. Kildare looked and listened and wondered.

Silence.

While the captain of St. Jim's was standing at his window, looking out and listening, he kept one eye, as it were, on his open door—no one could have passed down the Sixth Form passage from the landing without being observed.

But if there was a faint sound along the corridor, from the back of the House, Kildare did not notice it. He could hardly suspect that Langton was getting in at a back window, while these sounds were audible in the quadrangle in front of the house, for, of course, he had no suspicion that the senior was not alone.

But now the silence was deep and unbroken.

No sound came again from the quadrangle, till the half-hour chimed out.

Kildare turned restlessly back into his study.

His ears might have been deceived in fancying that the faint sounds he had heard were the sounds of footsteps. Langton had evidently not returned, after all.

What was to be done?

The captain of St. Jim's was now seriously alarmed. Surely the most reckless fellow could not intentionally have stayed out till midnight. Even Sleath, the blackguard who had been expelled from St. Jim's a long time ago, had never been quite so reckless as that. Where was Arthur Langton?

"I'll wait till twelve," Kildare muttered, "and then, if he isn't back, I'll speak to Mr. Railton! He will have to be searched for!"

It seemed a long time before twelve rang out on the stillness. But the deep boom of the hour came at last. Kildare listened to the twelve deep strokes as they came dully in at the window.

Midnight!

He quitted his study, and went to Mr. Railton's room. The Housemaster of the School House was long since in bed. Kildare knocked at his door, and after a moment or two the voice of Mr. Railton replied:

"Who is there?"

"It is I, sir—Kildare!"

"What is the matter, Kildare? Is anything wrong?"

"I am afraid so, sir! Can I speak to you?"

"Wait one moment!"

There was a sound of the Housemaster getting up. A light glimmered under the door. Mr. Railton, in dressing-gown and slippers, with a very startled look upon his face, opened the door, and met Kildare's glance.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

"Langton is out, sir. I've waited up for him, and he hasn't come back. I'm afraid that something has happened to him."

Mr. Railton started.

"Langton out—at this hour!"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you sure, Kildare?"

"Quite sure, sir."

"This is extraordinary!" said Mr. Railton.

Kildare explained the circumstances quietly. Mr. Railton's brows grew very dark.

"There may have been an accident," he said. "But it is more likely— But have you looked in his room?"

"No, sir; the door is locked!"

"May he not be gone to bed, then?"

Kildare shook his head.

"No, sir. Early in the evening I knocked and knocked, and there was no answer. It's pretty clear that he locked the door to give the impression that he was gone to bed. If it hadn't been for seeing the Third to bed, of course, I should never have missed him. It came out because he forgot about that."

"I understand. But, in order to make all sure, we will examine his room first."

"As you think best, sir."

Mr. Railton made his way to Langton's room, followed by Kildare. Kildare was quite certain that Langton was not there, and Mr. Railton had little expectation of finding him. But it was, of course, necessary to make quite certain of the fact before commencing a search.

Mr. Railton knocked sharply at the door, and tried the handle. The door was locked, and it did not open.

Mr. Railton knocked again, louder than before. There was a sound of a movement in the room, and Kildare started.

"Someone is in there," said the School House master.

Kildare looked amazed.

"I cannot understand this," he said.

Knock, knock!

"Are you there, Langton?" Mr. Railton called out sharply.

A sleepy voice replied:

"Hallo! What! Who's that?"

Kildare almost staggered. It was Langton's voice. Mr. Railton looked curiously at the captain of St. Jim's.

"He is there, Kildare!"

"Ye-es!" stammered Kildare. "I—I don't understand it!"

"Open the door, Langton!"

"Is anything wrong, sir?"

"Open the door!"

"Very well, sir!"

The key turned in the lock, and the door opened. Langton, in his pyjamas, stood there in the dark, only a glimmer of light from the passage falling into the study. The prefect rubbed his eyes, and stared at the Housemaster and the captain of the school.

Kildare was silent. He was so overcome with amazement that his voice had left him. He had kept watch and ward, and he hardly believed that Langton could have obtained entrance into the house without discovery. Even if he had climbed in at a back window, how had such a window come to be unfastened?—for Kildare knew that Knox had not quitted his room after entering it. But if Langton had been in bed all the time—

Mr. Railton struck a match, and lighted the gas. The prefect blinked in the light. He looked sleepy and a little flurried, as any fellow might have looked, at being awakened suddenly in the middle of the night.

"Is there anything wrong, sir?" he asked again.

"I wish to ask you a few questions, Langton. How long have you been in bed?"

"I don't know, sir. What's the time now?"

"Ten minutes past twelve."

"Must be nearly four hours, I should think."

"You went to bed early?"

"Yes, sir. I had a bad headache, and I thought I was catching a bit of a cold, and I meant to sleep it off. I have been reading rather hard lately."

"Had you forgotten that it was your duty to see lights out for the Third Form this evening, Langton?"

Langton started.

"By Jove, sir, I had! But I suppose one of the other prefects did it. I would have asked Kildare or Darrel if I'd thought of it. I suppose my beastly headache drove it out of my mind."

"Were you asleep when Kildare knocked at your door?"

"Did he knock?"

"Soon after half-past nine," said Kildare, speaking for the first time. "I knocked and knocked, and there was no answer!"

"I'm sorry!" said Langton. "I suppose I was fast asleep. As a matter of fact, I couldn't sleep when I went to bed, and my head was simply racking me, and I took a little draught. I had a sleeping-draught left over, sir, from the time I was ill last term, when Dr. Short ordered it for me. I took that to get off to sleep, and I suppose it made me sleep soundly. I certainly don't remember hearing any knocking at the door, or waking up."

The prefect's manner was perfectly natural.

If he was not telling the truth, he was certainly a good actor, though with so much at stake, he had every motive for doing his best in that line.

Mr. Railton looked at him searchingly.

He had always known Langton to be decent, and he could not suspect him of standing there telling a succession of lies without flinching at one of them.

The Housemaster turned to Kildare.

"It seems that you were mistaken, Kildare," he said. "I suppose you put faith in Langton's statement?"

Kildare nodded slowly.

"Yes, sir. I suppose it's as he says," he replied. "But— but Langton went out with Knox. He was seen to go with him, and when Knox came in, he certainly gave me the impression that Langton was still out of doors."

Langton's lips quivered for a moment. But he was perfectly cool.

"I didn't tell Knox I was coming in," he said.

"It is very unfortunate," said Mr. Railton. "You have had your vigil for nothing, Kildare. It is certainly very unlucky that you did not make sure that Langton was not in his room before sitting up for him. But I suppose you could only conclude that he was absent, from failing to get any reply to your knocking. Don't think that I blame you in any way; you have only done your duty!"

Kildare looked at Langton, reddening.

"I'm sorry, Langton," he said. "I suspected you of doing rotten things, and it seems that I was wrong. I don't quite understand all the matter, but I don't doubt your word. I shouldn't wonder if Knox purposely let me go on in error; it would be like him. But I'm sorry I thought badly of you; and I can say quite truly that it was a bad shock to me to think that you were doing anything rotten. I had always thought better of you than that. I'm sorry! I can't say more."

"Oh, it's all right!" said Langton. "Only don't jump to conclusions so quickly another time, Kildare, old man! It's jolly easy to be unjust!"

"Yes, I know that, and I'm sorry!"

"The matter is over now," said Mr. Railton. "I am only too glad that it has turned out so well, without a stain upon Langton's character. Good-night, my boys!"

"Good-night, sir!"

Mr. Railton returned to his room, and Kildare followed his example. Langton closed his door, and stood for some moments in thought. Knox would have laughed at such a success in trickery; but it did not seem a laughing matter to Arthur Langton. The red came into his cheeks as he stood thinking of it. He had always been a fellow of his word—he had scorned a lie as much as Kildare himself. And now he had lied and lied and lied—he was amazed at the facility with which he had lied. What change had come over him? Where was this leading him? How would he ever be able to look Kildare in the face again, after putting him in the wrong by cunning and the sheer force of falsehood?

"Good heavens," muttered Langton miserably—"good heavens! I never knew before that I had the makings of a scoundrel in me! But—but I couldn't own up—I couldn't face being sacked from the school! I had to lie or go, and— and how could I face the people at home if I were sacked for dishonourable conduct! Good heavens! What would the mater say? I couldn't face it!"

He sat upon the edge of the bed, pale and miserable. One sin led to another, and each was worse than the last. He realised that. From recklessness to real wrong—from careless neglect of duty and breaking of small rules, to gambling and lying and shuffling and endless wretched deceit—the path was easy! He was amazed at himself; but he was saved, and there was a chance for him now. No more of the Green Man—no more breaking bounds at night. He would pay, somehow, his debt to Mr. Joliffe, and he would never touch a card again. Above all, he would never touch the accursed liquor that had robbed him of his senses that night. If only he came clear of this, he would never run such a fearful risk again. As he sat there he made that resolve. It was long before he went to bed, but when he went he did not sleep; there was no sleep for Arthur Langton that night.

CHAPTER 7.

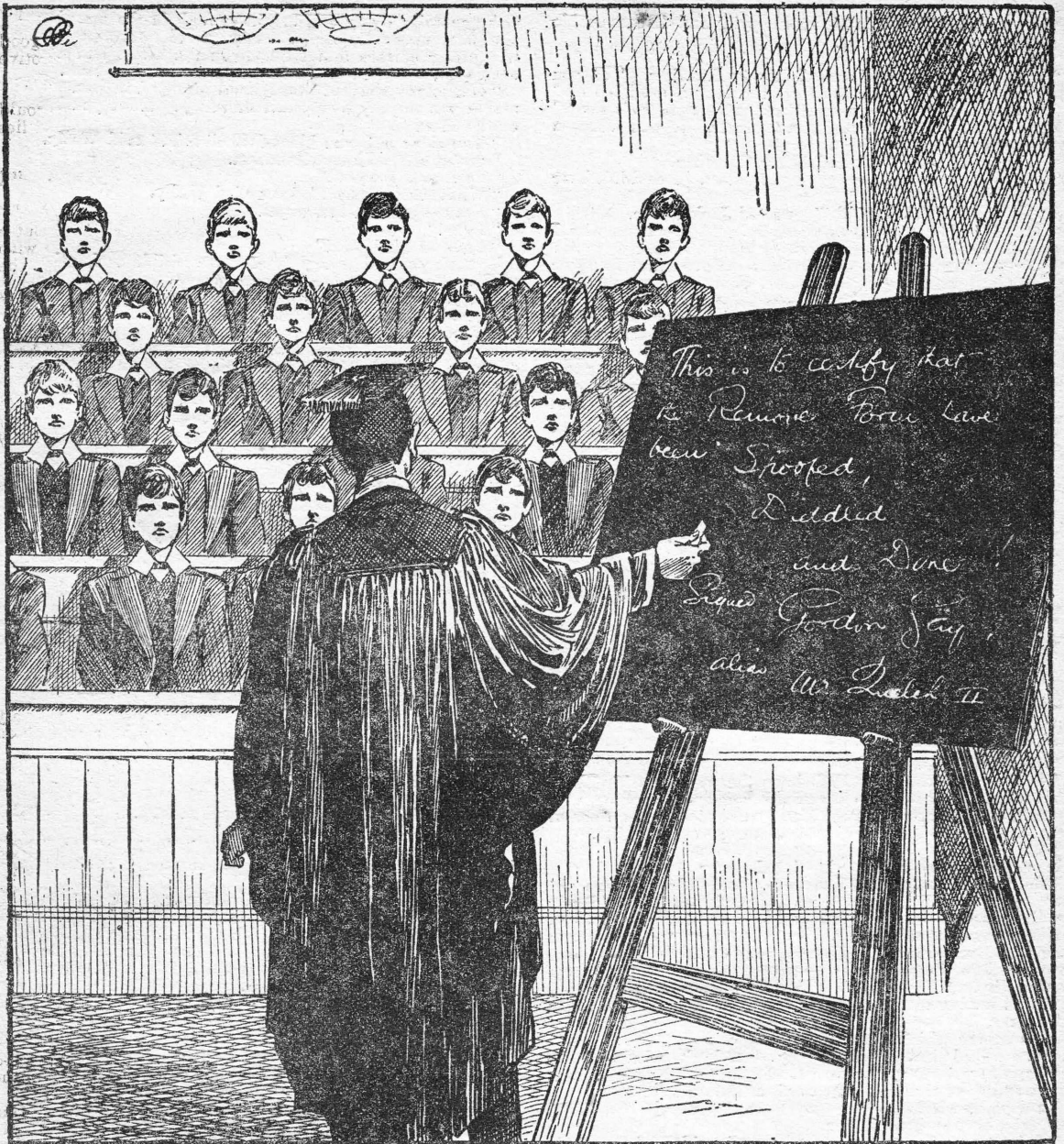
Bowled Out.

TOM MERRY sat up in bed as the rising-bell pealed out on the crisp morning air. The April sun was shining in at the windows of the Shell dormitory in the School House. Tom Merry, generally the first up in the Shell, jumped out of bed. Monty Lowther sat up, and yawned.

"Any of you fellows wake up in the night?" he asked.

"Yes, I did," said Manners. "There was somebody knocking somewhere in the middle of the night, and it woke me. Did you hear it?"

"Yes," said Lowther.



The disguised Gordon Jay pulled the blackboard round and began to chalk on it. He was finished in a few minutes. Then he laid down the chalk, and looked frowningly at the grim rows of Removites in the desks. "Wharton!" rapped out Mr. Quelch the second. "When I am gone, you will turn this blackboard round for the class to read!" *For the above incident see the grand, long complete tale of Harry Wharton & Co., at Greyfriars, entitled "THE RIVAL CO.'S AT GREYFRIARS," which is contained in this week's issue of our grand companion paper, "The Magnet" Library. On sale at all newsagents. Price One Penny.*

"I thought I heard something, too," said Tom Merry. "I only half awoke, though. Of course, I knew it couldn't be those giddy cracksmen again—they wouldn't knock to be let in!"

"Ha, ha! No."

Several of the Shell fellows had heard the knocking in the night, and had wondered what it was. The Terrible Three quitted the dormitory, and looked in at the Fourth-Form quarters as they went down. Blake and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy were about to come out, and the other fellows were all up.

"Any of you chaps hear the knocking last night?" asked Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I heard it," grunted Blake. "That ass Gussy woke me up to hear it! He couldn't listen to it alone—he's too fond of my company."

"Weally, Blake—"

"I heard it, too," said Levison.

Blake gave another grunt.

"Yes; and Levison found out what it was, of course?" he said. "You can always trust Levison for knowing what's going on."

Levison flushed angrily.

"Why shouldn't I?" demanded the cad of the Fourth. "Anyway, you asked me what it was when I came back into the Form."

"Yaas, wathah! Upon the whole, I do not wegard

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Levison as havin' acted in his usual spyin' and dishonourable way on this occasion, Blake."

"Oh, rats!"

"Well, what was it?" asked Monty Lowther. "If you know who was kicking up the row, you may as well tell us." "Railton and Kildare were knocking at Langton's door," said Levison. "They made him open it. It was about a quarter-past twelve."

"Then he was in?" grinned Monty Lowther.

"Oh, yes! I saw him, over the banisters. I couldn't hear what they said—"

"You tried, I'll bet a hat!" grunted Jack Blake.

"Yes, I tried," said Levison coolly. "I don't see why I shouldn't know what's going on. I couldn't hear a word; but it's pretty clear that Kildare had believed that Langton was still out, and had called in Mr. Railton to see whether he was in his room."

"Lucky for him they didn't find him out," said Tom Merry. "It would have meant the sack for poor old Langy, and he's too good to be sacked."

"He'll get it in the neck!" said Levison. "I can guess where he was, and I fancy Kildare was waiting up for him, though he dodged in somehow without being seen. And there was somebody else up, too."

"Good old Sherlock Holmes!" growled Blake. "And who else was up?"

"I don't know, but somebody was, for I'll swear that somebody passed me in the dark," said Levison. "I couldn't very well call out, and he was gone in a flash, and my impression is that he whisked into the Third Form dorm."

"Some kid who got up to see what the knocking was about," Tom Merry suggested.

"More likely somebody who'd been out on the tiles!" said Levison. "Of course, it's no business of mine—"

"Has that only just occurred to you?" asked Blake unpleasantly.

"I twust it was not that minah of mine playin' some wotten twick," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "My minah is a feahful wovwy to me."

"Not so much as you are to him, I expect," grinned Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Lowthah—"

The Terrible Three strolled down the passage with Blake and D'Arcy and two or three other Fourth-Formers who were finished dressing. Tom Merry paused near the door of the Third Form dormitory, with a sudden exclamation.

"My hat! Look there!"

"Footprints, by Jove!" ejaculated Blake.

The juniors looked at the marks curiously. It was not exactly a footprint; it was a cake of mud that had evidently been dropped from a boot the previous night in the passage.

There were other marks along the passage, too. Someone who had been tramping through muddy fields had plainly come up into the dormitory passage, and he had left traces behind him. It looked as if Levison's statement was correct. And the muddy marks ceased at the door of the Third Form dormitory.

Tom Merry whistled softly.

"Some kid has been out by the back window," he muttered. "Some young rascal. I hope it was only a jape, and nothing of the kind that Levison indulges in."

Levison scowled.

"Look here—" he began.

"Better smudge these marks away," said Blake. "No good letting the ass get into a row, whoever it was. Shove your hoofs along here."

The juniors willingly lent their aid. The muddy marks were trampled away into dust that was indecipherable, and would disappear entirely when the maids came along with their brooms. And then the juniors looked into the Third Form dormitory.

The Third Form were all up, with one exception. That exception was Joe Frayne. He was sitting up in bed and yawning, and listening to emphatic objurgations from D'Arcy minor.

Wally had a cricket-stump in his hand, and was explaining to Frayne that if he didn't turn out at once the cricket-stump would descend upon him.

"You blessed slacker!" said Wally indignantly. "What on earth are you sticking in bed for? Up you get!"

"Yaw-aw-aw!"

"I'll yaw-aw-aw you, if you don't get up!" said Wally. "Now, are you getting up, or are you having this stump on your napper?"

"Orl right, Master Wally," said Frayne meekly. "I'm sleepy, that's all."

"Well, what bizney have you to be sleepy after rising-ber?" demanded Wally.

The juniors in the doorway looked at one another. Frayne

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was generally lively and bright enough in the morning; and his being unusually sleepy that particular morning, when it was pretty certain that someone in the Third had been out overnight, was a curious coincidence, to say the least.

"Hallo, you shaver!" exclaimed Monty Lowther. "What makes you so jolly sleepy this morning? Have you been out on the tiles?"

"You clear out, you blessed Shell-fish!" said Wally.

Levison uttered an exclamation.

"So it was Frayne!"

"What was Frayne?" demanded Wally.

"Frayne was out last night."

"Rats!"

"Look at his boots!"

Levison pointed to a pair of boots visible under the edge of Joe Frayne's bed. All eyes were directed on them at once. They would not have been noticed, probably, if Levison had not pointed them out, but they attracted general attention now. The boots were smothered with mud.

Wally stared at them blankly. The boots were generally collected by the boot-boy, and brought back to the dormitory for the juniors in the morning, but most of the fellows, of course, had extra boots in their boxes or lockers. It was pretty clear that Frayne had worn boots since going to bed, and that he had been out in them.

"My only Aunt Jane!" exclaimed Wally, stupefied.

"What does that mean, Frayne?"

Frayne grew crimson as he looked at the boots.

He did not speak, but his crimson face told its own tale.

Tom Merry's brow grew stern.

"Did you go out last night, Joe?" he asked.

Frayne was silent.

Levison laughed maliciously.

"Of course he did!" he replied. "I should think it was plain enough. You might have expected this sort of thing, considering where he comes from; only you were always so jolly certain he was all right. What are you to expect from a whelp dragged up in the slums?"

"Hold your tongue, you cad!" roared Wally.

Levison shrugged his shoulders.

"The young rotter's been out, goodness knows where!" he said. "I said from the first that he would be a disgrace to the school. Oh!"

Biff!

A sponge, heavy and dripping with water, caught Levison full in the mouth, and squelched there. Wally, who had hurled it with unerring aim, glared at him.

"Ow!" gasped Levison.

"Now get out, you cad!" shouted Wally. "By George, if you don't clear, we'll chuck you down the stairs! Collar him, you fellows!"

Levison whipped out of the dormitory.

Tom Merry & Co. followed him more slowly. The discovery was a shock to them. That Joe Frayne had been out during the night was certain, and he seemed to have no explanation to offer. It was certainly not a House raid or any harmless jape that had taken him out; so much mud could not have been collected on his boots within the school walls. And he made no attempt to explain.

Tom Merry's brow was darkly clouded as he went downstairs. Joe Frayne was his protegee; he had been responsible for bringing the waif of the slums to St. Jim's. If it turned out badly for Frayne, or for the school, Tom Merry's was the responsibility. What did it mean?"

CHAPTER 8.

Nothing to Say.

TOM MERRY wore a worried look when he went into the Shell Form-room that morning for lessons.

He was thinking of Frayne.

He had hoped that the lad would come to him, and tell him what he had done, and that it would turn out to be nothing very harmful, after all. Frayne had had plenty of time to do so before morning school, but he had not come. He had seemed to avoid Tom Merry. The Shell fellow had looked out for him after breakfast, but had not seen him in the passages or in the quad.

And Tom Merry could not help feeling troubled.

His faith in the fag had been unbounded—he would never have listened to a word against Joe—and he had never dreamed that the little waif might have taken to bad paths.

Yet, why had he been out of the school in the middle of the night? For out of the school he undoubtedly had been.

It was a question that Tom Merry could not answer, but he intended that Joe Frayne should answer it.

The matter was too serious to be passed over. Tom Merry thought a great deal about it during morning lessons—something to the detriment of lessons. Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell, was "down" upon him more than once for inattention.

"What's the trouble, Tommy?" asked Monty Lowther, as the Shell came out after morning classes. "What's the trouble on your mighty brain? Wherefore that worried look?"

Tom Merry smiled faintly.

"I'm thinking about young Frayne," he said. "He's been getting himself into some trouble, though I can't believe that there's any harm in him."

"Make him explain," said Manners.

"I'm going to."

The Terrible Three walked along the Form-room passage, and waited outside the Third Form-room. The Third were not yet out, and when they came out, Frayne would not be able to escape the eyes of the Shell fellows. A few minutes later Mr. Selby dismissed his Form, and the Third came streaming out into the broad, flagged Form-room passage.

Joe Frayne was the last out, and he gave a quick and almost guilty look round the passage as he came. It was plain that he dreaded seeing somebody waiting for him, and he changed colour as he caught sight of the Terrible Three.

"I want you to come with me, Frayne," said Tom Merry quietly.

"Ye-es, Master Tom."

"Come along."

Frayne hesitated one moment, and then walked away with the Shell fellows. They went into the quadrangle, and Tom Merry stopped under the elms. He did not want everybody to hear what he had to say to the waif of St. Jim's.

"Now, Joe," he said quietly, "I think you owe me an explanation."

"Yes, Master Tom," faltered Joe.

"You were out of bounds last night?"

Frayne did not answer.

"Don't you think I have a right to be told the truth, Joe?" said Tom Merry, gently enough. "It was I caused you to come to this school—"

"You was werry kind to me, Master Tom," said poor Joe.

"I'm not alluding to that," said Tom Merry sharply. "I mean, I'm the cause of your being here, and I'm bound to look after you. I've told you often enough that if you were in any fix you were to come to me."

"I know, Master Tom."

"If you've been playing the giddy ox, I may be able to help you out," said Tom Merry. "What have you been doing?"

No reply.

"Were you outside the school walls last night, Joe?"

"Ye-es, Master Tom. You know I was."

"Well, yes, I know you were," said Tom Merry. "Where did you go?"

Silence.

"What did you go out for?"

Silence.

"Won't you tell me, Joe?"

"I—I can't Master Tom!" said Frayne, on the point of tears, but bravely holding them back. "I—I can't!"

"Why not?"

"Because—because—"

"Well?"

"Because—it ain't my secret, Master Tom."

"Not your secret!" echoed Tom Merry. "What do you mean? Is there anybody else mixed up in the matter?"

Joe was silent.

"You won't tell me, Joe?"

"I can't!"

Tom Merry compressed his lips.

"I don't know what to make of it," he said. "I hardly like to believe that you are a young blackguard like Levison or Mellish—"

Joe gave a cry.

"Oh, I ain't, Master Tom—I ain't!"

Tom Merry's face softened.

"Then why won't you tell me about last night, Joe?" he said. "I'm not asking out of curiosity, you know that. You're under my charge here to some extent, as you know. You know that you ought to explain to me, and that I've got a right to ask for an explanation."

"I s'pose you 'ave, Master Tom," said Frayne miserably. "But I can't tell you. I would tell you like a shot really, but I can't!"

"Very well," said Tom Merry, his lips tightening again. "I think you're acting very badly, Frayne. That's all."

He turned away. Frayne opened his lips to speak, but he closed them again. What could he say? He could not clear himself in Tom Merry's eyes without betraying Langton—and that was not to be thought of. It was not only that he did not want to betray the prefect, but Langton had made him promise to say nothing. Langton's name was not to pass his lips; that was understood. This disconcerting discovery had not been foreseen, of course. It was cruelly hard upon Frayne that he should be forced to allow himself to be mis-

understood by his best friend and benefactor—but what could he say?

The chums of the Shell walked away, leaving Frayne standing, miserably enough, under the elms. Tom Merry's face was set hard. Manners and Lowther looked surprised and worried. They liked Joe Frayne, and they took an interest in the little waif—and it was a shock to them to think that he was going to the bad.

"It's rotten," said Manners, breaking a long silence. "I should never have thought this of Frayne. Perhaps he's been led into this by some older chap—I think that's very likely."

Tom Merry nodded without speaking. He was bitterly disappointed in Frayne, but he felt that there was nothing to be said. When he encountered Frayne again, he averted his glance, and the little waif's face clouded miserably. But he did not speak a word. There was nothing he could say.

CHAPTER 9.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy is Shocked.

It was a half-holiday that afternoon at St. Jim's, and the last footer match of the season was due, between the juniors of the School House and the New House. After dinner Tom Merry's thoughts were all given to the footer, and he had no more time to think about Joe Frayne. Tom Merry was the junior captain of the School House, and Blake & Co., of Study No. 6, and Kangaroo and Glyn, and the Terrible Three themselves, were all in the team.

Figgins & Co. came over from the New House to the junior football ground. Among the crowd of juniors who watched the match Joe Frayne could be seen, standing with his hands in his pockets, and looking glum enough. He was in disgrace with Tom Merry, and he felt it very deeply.

Levison and Mellish of the Fourth strolled past the ground, and looked on at the game as it started with sneering faces. Football was not much in their line. Smoking in the woodshed or out in the field was more to their taste.

"Blessed asses, fagging about after a ball on a warm afternoon!" yawned Levison. "Let's get out, Mellish."

"Right you are!" said Mellish.

And the cads of the Fourth Form walked down to the gates. Joe Frayne glanced after them. Levison and Mellish were what Tom Merry suspected him of being, and he sighed as he thought of it. He started as he was clapped on the shoulder, and looked round to see Wally. Wally gave him a cheerful grin.

"I've been looking for you," he remarked.

"'Ave you?" said Frayne.

"Yes. Where were you last night?"

"Oh, do let that drop, Master Wally!" said Frayne. "I ain't got nothing to say. Please don't ask me about it."

"It wasn't a jape, then?"

"No," said Frayne.

"You don't mean to say that you've been up to any rotten tricks, like Lumley-Lumley?" asked Wally, staring at him.

Frayne shook his head.

"And you won't explain?"

"I can't!"

"Oh, rats! Never mind—keep your rotten secret, if you want to!" said D'Arcy minor huffily. "Are you coming to play footer?"

"I—I'd rather not just now."

"Feeling seedy, I suppose, after missing your beauty sleep," said Wally sarcastically. "Well, you can go and eat coke for all I care."

And Wally stalked away.

Frayne walked away towards the School House. Langton of the Sixth had just come out, and Frayne wanted to speak to him. He had not had an opportunity that morning, and he was anxious to know how the senior had fared.

Langton gave him a friendly nod. He had had time to think over the matter, and to realise what a terribly narrow escape he had had, and he was grateful to the fag.

"Hallo, kid!" he said kindly. "I haven't had a chance of thanking you for what you did last night. But I haven't forgotten it."

"That's all right, Master Langton," said Joe. "Did it go off all right?"

Langton nodded, his face clouding a little. The falsehoods he had told weighed very heavily upon his mind still.

"Yes, kid!" He lowered his voice as he spoke. "I got in as we arranged, on the stroke of a quarter-past—and I suppose you kept Kildare at his window all the time—at all events, he didn't spot me."

"I shuffled my feet on the gravel," said Joe. "He heard me—I saw 'im looking out of the window—but he didn't see me—it was too dark in the quad. I'm jolly glad it worked out all right, Master Langton."

"They believed that I had been in my room asleep all the time," said Langton, flushing. "I am very grateful to you, Joe. You saved me. And—and I shall take jolly good care

nothing of the sort happens again. That's my last visit to the Green Man."

"I'm werry glad to 'ear you say that, Master Langton."

"I mean it, Joe. I don't mean to have a scare like that a second time—and I don't know that I ever cared for that sort of thing much, anyway. If it hadn't been for another chap, I shouldn't—" Langton paused; he wouldn't lay the blame of his own misdeeds upon another. "Never mind; it's all over now, anyway. And—and I don't think that the policeman last night could have known you were a St. Jim's chap, Frayne, when he spotted you in the lane. He hasn't been here."

"I was afraid he would come," said Joe slowly.

"Well, even if he does come, he can't have recognised you—and you must keep a stiff upper lip, and say nothing," said Langton.

"Yes, I s'pose so."

"Mind, mum's the word."

"Yes, certainly, sir!"

Langton walked away.

Joe remained alone; he did not feel inclined for company just then. He had been in a state of terror all the morning lest P.-c. Crump should come up to the school. If the constable came, and informed the Head that he had seen a St. Jim's boy in the lane at between ten and eleven o'clock at night there would certainly be an inquiry.

How could Joe face it?

True, the constable could hardly have recognised him in that instant of sight. He had had his cap pulled down over his face, and the bullseye lantern had gleamed upon him only for a moment.

The most the constable could have known, surely, was that a St. Jim's junior had passed him, running—and if he came to St. Jim's, how was he to pick the culprit out amongst hundreds of boys.

Joe felt that he was in little danger—and yet he was uneasy—unquiet. In the old days, in the London slums, he had often felt that dread of a policeman—and it was strange to feel it returning upon him now.

He threw himself upon a bench under the elms, alone, thinking despondently enough. He had stood by Langton in the hour of need, trying to repay many kindnesses he had received from his fagmaster. He had not guessed that it would bring all these difficulties upon him—though he would not have faltered, even if he had foreseen all. But it was cruelly hard that he should have fallen in Tom Merry's good opinion—that he should be burdened with a secret that he could not tell even to his nearest chum, Wally of the Third.

He was plunged in gloomy thought, and he did not hear footsteps approach him. A hand dropped upon his shoulder from behind the seat, and he started with a cry of terror. It seemed to his startled imagination for the moment that it was the hand of P.-c. Crump.

"It wasn't me!" he gasped. "Leggo! It wasn't me!"

It was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy who stood there, with his eyeglass screwed into his eye, regarding the waif of St. Jim's in blank amazement. The football match was over, and Arthur Augustus had changed again into his usual attire.

"What's the mattah with you, Fwayne?" he demanded.

"Oh!" gasped Joe.

"I certainly did not mean to thwow you into a fluttah. But I weally fail to see why you should be fwightened in this way by a tap on the shouladah!"

"You—you see—"

"You have been wuinin' your nerves by stayin' up late," said the swell of St. Jim's severely. "If you had gone to bed when I told you last night, and stayed there, you would be all wight now."

"Yes, I dessay, Master D'Arcy!"

"Have you explained to Tom Mewwy where you were last night?"

Joe groaned. It was beginning over again. He wondered whether he would ever hear the end of it.

"No, Master D'Arcy," he said.

"I suppose you are weservin' your explanation for me?"

"N-n-no!"

"Do you mean that you wufuse to explain?" demanded Arthur Augustus, with his most stately air.

"I wish you wouldn't ask me, Master D'Arcy."

"Vewy well; Fwayne; but I must wemark that I do not considah your conduct quite cwicket," said Arthur Augustus.

"I considah that you are playin' the gidddy goat. I am shocked at you, Fwayne!"

"I—I'm sorry, Master D'Arcy—"

"Pway don't mention it!" said D'Arcy, with great dignity.

And he walked away with his aristocratic nose at a higher elevation than usual. Joe Frayne flung himself down upon the bench again in a gloomy mood. It seemed as if he were fated to be misunderstood and suspected by every fellow at St. Jim's whose good opinion he cared for.

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CHAPTER 10.

Caught in the Act.

"GOT a match?" said Levison.

Mellish felt in his pockets. The two black sheep of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's were in the village street, and just turning into the lane leading back to the school.

Levison had taken a cigarette from his pocket with a swaggering air.

"Better chuck it here," said Mellish. "Wait till we're out of the village."

"Oh, rot!" said Levison. "It's all right. We're not likely to be spotted by a prefect here, I suppose?"

"It's not safe."

"Rats! Gimme a match!"

"Oh, here you are!"

Levison took the match, and struck it upon his boot with quite an experienced manner. He put the cigarette into his mouth and lighted up. It was bravado more than anything else on Levison's part, and it was destined to cost him dear. He blew out a puff of smoke with a great air of enjoyment.

"Have a fag?" he said.

Mellish shook his head.

"Not here."

"Rats! Don't be a funk."

"I'm not funking, but—"

"Well, light up, then."

Mellish hesitated, and then accepted the cigarette. He was about to light it, when there was a sudden exclamation, and a portly figure swooped out of the hedge.

"Caught you, have I?"

Mellish dropped the cigarette and ran as if for his life.

Gladly enough Levison would have followed his example; but he could not, for the heavy grasp of Police-constable Crump was upon his collar.

Levison wriggled in the grip of the portly policeman.

P.-c. Crump grinned with satisfaction. It was not often that he was able to make an arrest of any sort. There were no burglars to speak of in Rylcombe, and although there were poachers in the woods, they never ran any risk from the efforts of P.-c. Crump to effect their capture. A smoking schoolboy was better than nothing; all was grist that came to the mill of P.-c. Crump.

"Got you!" he remarked, with a grin of satisfaction.

"Ow! Leggo!"

"Not much!" said Mr. Crump. "Don't you know that smoking is agin the lor?"

"Gr-r-r! Leggo my collar!"

"I'm goin' to take you up to the school," said Mr. Crump severely. "You can thank your lucky stars that I don't take you to the station." He held Levison at arm's length, and scanned his face closely. "You're the same young rascal, I don't doubt."

Levison stared at him.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said sulkily.

"You're the feller!"

"What do you mean?"

"Course, you don't know!" grinned P.-c. Crump. "You didn't run by me in the lane last night—ho, no!"

"I certainly didn't," said Levison savagely, "and you'd better let me alone. There's no harm in smoking a cigarette."

"It's agin the lor!" said Mr. Crump.

"Blow the law! I—I mean, look here, take this bob and call it square."

"Tryin' to bribe and corrupt the perlice, are yer?" said Mr. Crump, who was pretty certain that the Head of St. Jim's would reward him with a larger gratuity than a shilling if he took the trouble to report the delinquent at the school. "You'd better be careful wot you say, young man, or it will be used in evidence agin yer. Kimmerlong!"

"Look here, Crump—"

"Kimmerlong!"

And with P.-c. Crump's heavy hand upon the shoulder, and the half-burnt cigarette in the constable's other hand, to be produced in evidence against him, Levison was marched along the lane.

The cad of the Fourth was white with alarm now.

He pleaded, expostulated, and struggled as P.-c. Crump led him to the school; but all was thrown away on the constable; he was quite obdurate.

"You're the young rascal who was outer bounds last night," said Mr. Crump. "I reckernize yer agin now."

"I wasn't!" howled Levison.

"You can tell that to the 'Ead," grinned the policeman.

"I tell you—"

"Nuff said!" interrupted Mr. Crump. "Ere we are!"

There was a general exclamation from the fellows in the quadrangle of St. Jim's as Levison, of the Fourth, was marched in, with the policeman's hand upon his shoulder. The junior was white with rage and humiliation.

"What's the matter, Crumpy?" asked Monty Lowther, as

a crowd gathered round, and marched with the policeman and his captive towards the School House. "What has he been doing?"

"Yaas, wathah! What twicks has he been up to, Cwump, deah boy?"

"What's the horrid crime?" asked Lefevre, of the Fifth.

"Smoking!" said Mr. Crump, in tones of horror. "I caught 'im smoking in the hopen street. 'Ere's the cigarette."

"Awful!" said Blake, of the Fourth. "What do you mean by smoking in the hopen street, Levison?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And that's the rotter who talks about young Frayne being a disgrace to the school," ejaculated Wally, in disgust. "I hope he gets a licking."

"Not much doubt about that," grinned Kangaroo.

Levison was marched into the House, and right into the presence of the Head. Dr. Holmes looked in astonishment at Mr. Crump and his prisoner.

"What ever is the matter, Crump?" he exclaimed.

"Caught, sir, in the hact!" said Mr. Crump solemnly.

"What—what?"

"Smoking, sir, in the hopen street."

Dr. Holmes turned a frown upon the wretched Fourth-Former.

"Levison, how dare you?"

"I—I—I was only just trying how it tasted, sir," stammered Levison. "I—I've never smoked a cigarette before, sir."

"Nonsense! I cannot believe that statement, Levison. You will be handed over to your Housemaster to be severely caned."

"That ain't hall, sir," said P.-c. Crump, with due solemnity. "That ain't hall, sir. While I wasn't on dooty last night, sir, about near midnight it was, a feller passed me in the lane, running 'ard. It was one of your boys, sir."

"What!" exclaimed the Head.

"It's jest as I say, sir, and I thought it my dooty to report the circumstance to you, but I wasn't sure about which boy it was. I only seed 'im for a flash. But now I feel purty certain that it was this feller, this Levison, now I come to think of it. I make no doubt he was going for tobacco or something, sir."

"Were you out of bounds last night, Levison?"

"No, sir."

"Can you assure me that this is the boy, Mr. Crump?"

"To the best of my belief it were, sir," said Mr. Crump. "'E was suttinly the same size; and since I've caught this young rip, sir, in the hact of breakin' the lor—"

"Quite so. It is presumptive evidence, Mr. Crump. Pray wait a moment." Dr. Holmes touched a bell, and Toby, the House page, appeared. "Request Mr. Railton to step here, please."

"Yessir!"

Mr. Railton entered the study in a couple of minutes. He glanced in surprise at the portly, important constable, and the pale and trembling Levison. Levison had been caught for what he had done, and he was in great danger of being punished for what he had not done, and he realised that there was only one way to save himself—by betraying Frayne. But that would be sneaking; and Levison, though he had no inward objection to sneaking, knew how heavily such a thing would be punished by his Form-fellows when they came to hear of it afterwards.

The cad of the Fourth was in a decidedly difficult position, and he wished very fervently that he had not lighted up that unlucky cigarette that afternoon.

"Kindly repeat to Mr. Railton what you have told me, Mr. Crump," said the Head.

The police-constable did so.

Mr. Railton listened with evident interest to the statement that a boy who undoubtedly belonged to St. Jim's had passed the policeman in Rylcombe Lane late the previous night. The thought of Arthur Langton came to his mind at once.

"Levison denies the accusation, and Mr. Crump cannot positively declare that it was him," said Dr. Holmes. "What do you think, Mr. Railton?"

"Are you sure that it was a junior boy?" asked Mr. Railton, addressing the constable. "It was not a senior—one of the Sixth Form?"

Mr. Crump shook his head.

"Suttinly not, sir; he wasn't big enough for that. In fact, I almost think that it was a bit smaller feller than Master Levison, only I think he was the feller."

"It was a smaller fellow than I, sir," blurted out Levison.

"What do you mean?" asked the Head. "Do you mean to say that you know who it was?"

"Yes, sir."

"Indeed! Who was it?"

Levison hesitated and turned red.

"I know who it was, sir, and a good many other fellows in the School House know, too," he said. "But if I tell you, the fellows will call it sneaking, and I shall be ragged by the whole House."

"There is something in that, sir," said Mr. Railton quietly. "But this may be a cunning trick of Levison's to blind our eyes. He is not a truthful boy."

"I swear—" began Levison.

"Silence!" said the Head. "This matter must be investigated. Mr. Crump, you declare that to the best of your belief this was the boy who passed you in the lane last night?"

"Yes, sir."

"But you cannot positively assert it?"

"Well, no, sir," said Mr. Crump hesitatingly. "You see, it was very dark, and I got the bullseye on 'im only for a second before he dodged and ran."

"Quite so! Quite right of you to hesitate to affirm if you have any doubts whatever," said the Head. "But you are certain that it was a boy belonging to this school, and a junior boy?"

"Oh, quite certain, sir!" said Mr. Crump confidently. "He wore a St. Jim's cap, sir, I know that; and he was in Etons, and he was too small to be a senior boy."

"Thank you, Mr. Crump!" said the Head, slipping something into the policeman's practised hand. "I am very much obliged to you. You may leave the matter in our hands now."

"Thank you, sir!" said Mr. Crump.

And he bowed himself out.

CHAPTER 11. The Blow Falls!

DR. HOLMES fixed his eyes upon Levison. The good old doctor's face was usually most kindly and benign in its expression; but it had grown very stern now. Dearer to the Head than almost anything else was the honour and reputation of St. Jim's. A fellow who did anything to disgrace the old school had little to hope from the mercy of the Head.

And more than once, of late, rumours had reached Dr. Holmes's ears of St. Jim's fellows being seen at night in the village. He could not forget that he had expelled a senior once for having connections with the set of betting rascals at the Green Man. More than once he had had reason to fear that something of the sort was still going on, and he had lately cautioned both Housemasters and prefects to be on the alert. It looked as if the culprit had been caught at last—at least, one of the culprits.

And if Levison's guilt was proved, there was but a short shrift for him. He would be given justice—strict justice. But once the charge was proved, he would be publicly and summarily expelled from the school.

The cad of the Fourth shivered under the stern gaze of the Head. He felt that he was in for it now. To save himself, he was ready to "sneak," but he shrank from that alternative if it could possibly be avoided. Mr. Railton was also looking hard at Levison, and wondering. The thought had crossed his mind that Langton might have lied the night before—that it might have been the senior whom Mr. Crump had seen. But the policeman, upon whatever other point he might be doubtful, was at least certain that it was not an Upper Form boy whom he had seen. He could hardly have mistaken the stalwart Langton of the Sixth for Levison of the Fourth, who was not even a well-grown lad for his age.

Mr. Railton acquitted Langton in his mind. Whether Langton had been out of bounds or not, it was not he whom the policeman had encountered in the lane; and that was the question which had to be settled now.

Levison waited in miserable anxiety for the Head to speak. Dr. Holmes broke the silence at last, and his tones were very deep and stern.

"Levison!"

"Ye-e-es, sir."

"You deny that you were out of bounds last night?"

"Yes, sir."

"You declare that some other boy was?"

"I know at least one was, sir."

"Senior, or junior?" asked Mr. Railton.

"Junior, sir—a fag in the Third Form."

"The Third Form!" repeated the Head, in amazement.

"A mere child! Take care what you say, Levison!"

"It's the truth, sir. A dozen other fellows know it."

"Give me some of their names."

"Merry, of the Shell, sir, and Manners and Lowther—and Blake and D'Arcy, of the Fourth—and D'Arcy minor, of the Third—and a lot more, sir."

"Very well! Call in some of the boys he has named Mr. Railton, please."

"Certainly, sir!"

Mr. Railton stepped from the study. Dr. Holmes's glance was very penetrating as he fixed it again upon Levison, but it was less stern. He began to believe that the wretched junior was telling the truth, in this instance at least.

Mr. Railton returned in a few minutes, and he brought with him three juniors, Tom Merry and Jack Blake and

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Arthur D'Arcy. The trio were looking a little alarmed. They did not yet know what was the matter, but they had a natural diffidence about entering the Head's study. That apartment had many painful associations for them.

"You may be at ease, my boys," said the Head kindly. He easily read the thoughts of the juniors. "I have merely sent for you to ask your evidence upon a certain matter."

"Yes, sir," said Tom Merry, considerably relieved. "I have received some startling information from P.-c. Crump," said the Head. "He informs me that while on duty last night in Rylcombe Lane, at a very late hour, a junior belonging to this school passed him."

Tom Merry and Blake and D'Arcy all started. Their looks were enough to betray them, and they realised it the next moment, and turned very red.

"Mr. Crump states that to the best of his belief, the boy he saw was Levison. But he is not prepared to affirm this with certainty, and Levison emphatically denies it. It appears, however, that he is aware that a certain junior of the school was out of bounds, and he declares that you are acquainted with the fact. If this be so, you are bound to speak, in fairness to Levison. Levison is now to be caned for smoking; but if it is proved that he was guilty of breaking bounds at night, his punishment will be more severe. You will see, then, that it is your duty to your schoolfellows to speak."

The juniors were silent.

"I will ask you first, Merry, as the eldest. Do you know whether a boy of the Third Form was out of bounds last night?"

"I—I think so, sir," stammered Tom Merry.

"And you, Blake and D'Arcy—you believe so?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know whether Levison was in the House between ten and eleven last night, Blake? He was in your dormitory."

"He was in, sir. I can prove that for him," said Blake. "We were woke up in the night, some of us, sir, and I know Levison was there."

"Indeed! And what woke you up?"

Blake hesitated.

"Pray be frank, my boy," said the Head, kindly enough.

"It was a row of knocking downstairs, sir, and Levison got up to see what it was. There was no harm in his doing that, sir, was there?"

"Well, no."

"I can explain the circumstance of the knocking, Dr. Holmes," said Mr. Railton quietly, and he concisely explained the circumstances of his visit to Langton's study.

Dr. Holmes nodded.

"Thank you, Mr. Railton. It appears certain from Blake's evidence that Levison was in the house at the time."

Levison drew a deep breath of relief, and for a moment he felt almost grateful towards Jack Blake.

"I can corroborate Blake's statement, sir," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I was awake at the time, too, sir."

"Then Levison is acquitted of having broken bounds last night," said the Head gravely. "But it is undoubted that some boy did so—Mr. Crump's evidence is unmistakable on that point—and it appears that it was a boy in the Third Form—the portion of that Form belonging to the School House. And you boys are aware of his identity?"

The juniors were silent.

"I will not ask you to give the name," said the Head gently. "But the matter will be thoroughly investigated. You may go, my boys. Mr. Railton, will you kindly order all the boys of the Third Form belonging to the School House to come here?"

"Very well, sir."

Tom Merry and Blake, D'Arcy, and Levison, quitted the study. Levison turned an anxious glance upon the chums of the School House in the passage.

"I—I say, don't think I've sneaked about young Frayne!" he muttered. "I—I haven't said a word. Old Crump spotted him in the lane, and it was his own fault."

"I dare say you haven't sneaked, for once," said Blake gruffly.

"Look here—"

"Oh, go and eat coke!" said Blake, turning his back on the cad of the Fourth. "I say, this is rough on young Frayne, you fellows. If the Head examines the whole crowd of them, it is bound to come out."

Tom Merry nodded.

"I suppose so," he said slowly. "Well, Frayne has only got himself to thank; he shouldn't do these things. If he has done anything to disgrace the school, he ought to be punished for it."

"Ye-e-es; but—"

"As a matter of fact, dear boys, I can't think that Frayne has done anything of the sort," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy thoughtfully. "I regard that kid as being the wight stuff. You can always depend upon the opinion of a fellow of tact and judgment, you know."

Tom Merry was silent.

The juniors moved restlessly about the passage while the Third-Formers, in a state of unconcealed alarm and trepidation, were marched into the Head's study. It was impossible for them to convey a word of warning to Joe Frayne—Mr. Railton took care of that. They saw the little wight going in with the rest, and they could read the alarm in his face. Joe Frayne's alarm was not only for himself, though they were not aware of that.

Frayne had seen P.-c. Crump come in—he had known that he was with the Head—and he felt that the blow had fallen. The fact that he was not called in immediately, and individually, showed that the policeman was not certain of his identity; but the fag knew that the whole of the Third were to be questioned now; and he felt a miserable conviction that he would not be able to maintain an air of indifference under the stern eyes of the Head and the School House master.

But whatever happened to himself, he was determined to keep his word, and not to utter a syllable to incriminate Langton. To keep his word—to keep faith and never to speak—that much he had learned from Tom Merry, and he would show that that lesson had not been lost upon him. But his heart was very heavy as he entered Dr. Holmes's study.

CHAPTER 12.

The Culprit!

A CROWD of Third Form fags gathered in the room, with alarmed faces. Most of them had seen P.-c. Crump arrive at the school, but they did not connect that visit with themselves. Joe had told no one but Langton of the Sixth, of his meeting with the policeman in the lane on the previous night. The Third wondered what was up; and as most of them had plenty of little sins to answer for, they all felt extremely uneasy. What surprised them most was the fact that only the School House portion of the Form had been sent for. Whatever was the matter, it was evident that it was something which did not concern the portion of the Third that boarded in the New House. The fags were cudgelling their brains for an explanation as they filed into the Head's study, and crowded there, in an ink-fingered, anxious swarm. There was a frown upon the doctor's face, and that frown struck more terror to the fags than the Head himself realised.

Dr. Holmes was a kindly old gentleman, and he never quite knew what a truly awful personage he was to the little fags of the Second and the Third.

Mr. Railton followed the dismayed fags into the study, and closed the door, and stood by it. Just as if he was afraid some of them would bolt, as Wally whispered to Curly Gibson. Wally was almost the only one who was keeping perfectly cool. So far as Wally was aware, none of his latest peccadilloes could have come to general knowledge, and none was serious enough for a calling together of the Form in this way.

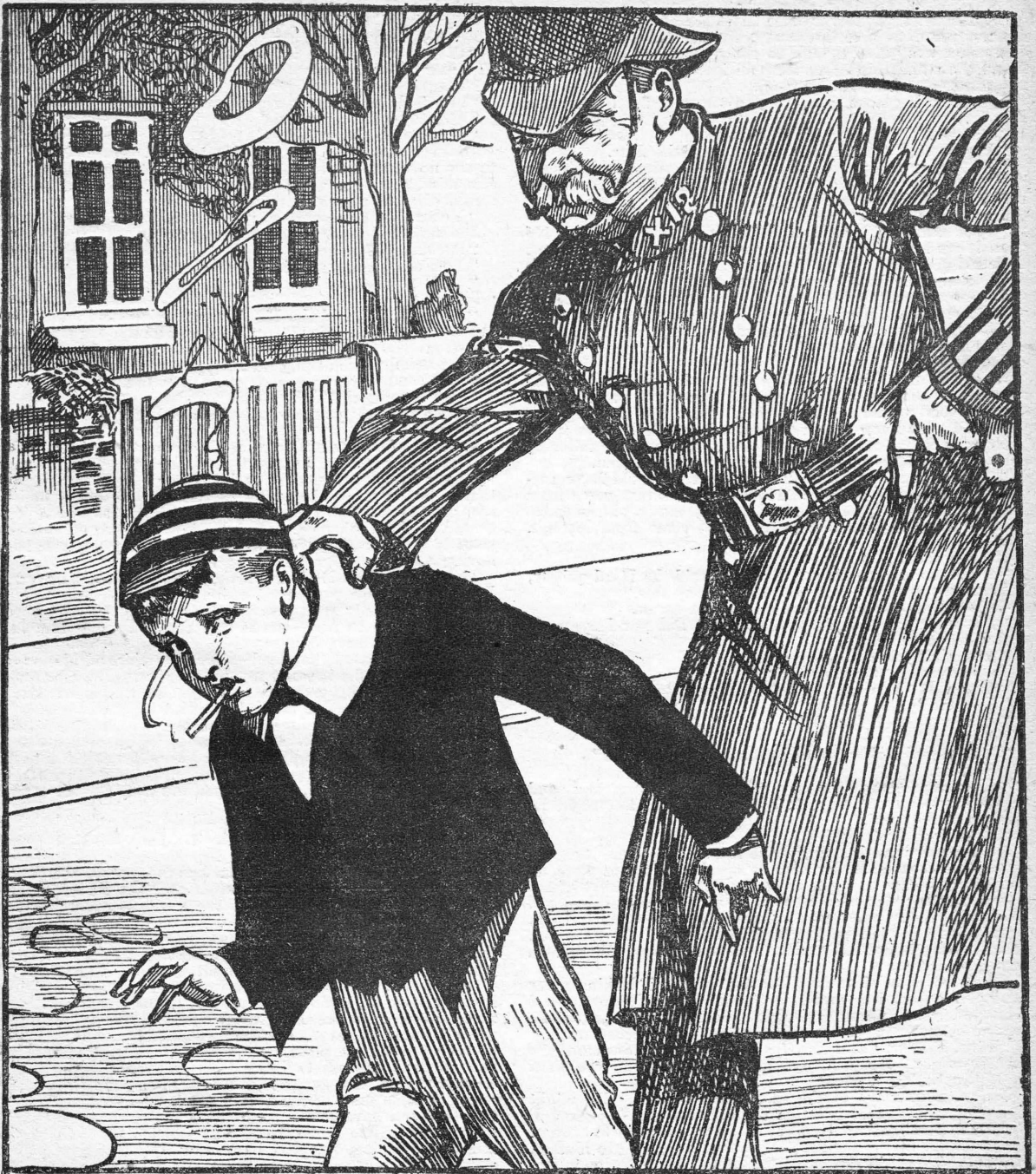
"My boys," said Dr. Holmes, as the Third stood before him, with flushing faces and downcast eyes, "I have sent for you for a most important purpose. I have a question to put to you, which you must answer frankly. One of you was out of bounds last night."

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A portly figure suddenly swooped out of the hedge, and the heavy grasp of Police-constable Crump was upon Levison's collar. "Caught you, have I?" exclaimed Mr. Crump with a grin of satisfaction, "Kimmerlong!" (See Chapter 10.)

"Oh!"

It was a general murmur from the fags. They knew what was the matter now. Every eye turned involuntarily upon Joe Frayne, and Frayne flushed crimson.

Mr. Raiton's eye met the Head's. They did not need to look much further for the culprit.

The Head's voice grew sterner as he went on.

"One of you left the Third Form dormitory, and left the school, and went to Rylcombe last night. P.-c. Crump has given me information."

Dead silence.

"I call upon the boy who was guilty of this conduct to step forward and own up to the truth," said the Head. "Mr. Crump is doubtful about identifying the boy. But if not otherwise discovered, I shall parade the Third Form before him, and ask him to pick out the boy. I think that in that

case he will be able to resolve his doubts. And a most searching investigation will be made; it is impossible for the culprit to escape detection. I call upon him to speak up."

There was no reply.

Some of the boys were crimson and trembling now, from sheer nervousness lest suspicion might be turned upon them; and a detective, probably, would have found ample signs of guilt in half a dozen of them who were perfectly innocent. Frayne, however, had grown so pale and troubled that his state of mind could hardly have escaped notice, even if the masters' attention had not been already drawn to him.

"I shall now question you separately," said the Head. "Frayne, you will come first. Stand forward."

Frayne's limbs almost refused to obey him. But he dragged himself cut from the ranks of the Third, and stood before the Head.

Dr. Holmes's glance ran over the faces of the fags. They did not mean to give Joe away, by any means; but their expression was quite enough to show the Head that he had found the culprit, and that they all knew it. The fags were not adepts at hiding their thoughts.

The doctor's glance grew very stern as it fixed upon Joe Frayne.

"Frayne!" he said, in his deep voice.

"Ye-e-essir," faltered Joe, his eyes on the floor.

"I am going to put to you a direct question, and beware how you answer it. Did you leave the Third Form dormitory in the School House last night?"

Frayne was silent.

"Poor old Joe!" murmured Wally. "It's all up! No good lying to the Head—and he can't lie for toffee, either! Poor old Joe!"

The silence in the study was oppressive.

Frayne seemed to be struggling for his words, but they would not come. His lips moved, but no sound was uttered.

"Come, Frayne," said the Head. "I am waiting for an answer to my question."

Joe trembled.

What was he to say? Before that awful glance, he could not lie—even if he had thought of answering untruthfully, the falsehood would not have come under the stern eyes of the Head. He knew that if he spoke, he would have to speak the truth; if he told a lie, it would be a miserable, faltering one that would have no chance of carrying conviction.

But Joe would not have lied, even if he could have succeeded in deceiving thereby. He had learned that much from Tom Merry, to tell the truth and face the music. If he spoke now, it was only the truth that would come from his lips. But—

He was silent.

"If you do not answer me, Frayne," said the Head quietly, "I can only conclude that you cannot deny this."

Joe's lips moved again, but he did not speak.

"I command you to answer, Frayne. Did you leave your dormitory last night?"

"Yes, sir."

Frayne's voice was almost a whisper.

"You did! You left the School House?"

"Yes, sir."

"You went to Rylcombe?"

"Yes, sir."

"You passed Police-constable Crump on the road?"

"Yes, sir."

"You were, then, the boy whom Mr. Crump saw, and whose absence from the school at a late hour last night he has reported to me?"

"Yes, sir."

Joe's words were barely audible now.

The fag seemed hardly able to speak. His eyes were on the floor; his face was pale as chalk; he felt the glance of the doctor burning upon his face, as it were, but he dared not meet it. Every reply was extracted from him, as it were, against his will; but he felt forced to answer. Of what use, indeed, was silence? His guilt was clear enough, whether he answered or not.

There was a brief pause. The fags were all looking sorry enough for Joe, but greatly relieved that their own ordeal was over. They pitied the culprit; but they were glad there was no chance now of the wrong fellow being picked upon.

"Now, Frayne," said the Head. "You have answered me frankly so far. You will now kindly tell me why you went to Rylcombe last night?"

Joe's tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. He might have known that that question would follow—in fact, he had known it, and that was a question he was not able to answer. He could not betray Langton. Whatever happened to himself, he could not betray his protector in the Sixth Form to disgrace and ruin! It needed only a word from him to bring the reckless prefect before the Head, to be condemned, expelled from St. Jim's, sent home with the brand of black disgrace upon him. Frayne knew that well! And he would never have spoken the word, if he had been tortured to utter it.

"Answer me, Frayne."

"I can't, sir."

The Head's look became very ominous.

"You cannot tell me why you went to Rylcombe last night?"

"No, sir."

"Why not?"

Joe was silent.

"You went to some place, I suppose, Frayne?" asked Mr. Railton.

"Yes, sir."

"If it was a place of a harmless character, you will not suffer by telling Dr. Holmes. It will make matters better for you."

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"Certainly," said the Head.

Frayne did not speak.

"Give Dr. Holmes the name of the place you went to, Frayne?"

No answer.

"Was it by any chance a public-house?"

Silence.

"Was it the Green Man?"

Joe started a little, but he did not speak. He had resolved to say no word, lest he should inadvertently betray Langton. His mind was in a whirl of dread and dismay, and he was afraid of what might pass his lips.

"You refuse to answer, Frayne?" said the Head at last.

Joe muttered something indistinctly.

"Speak up, Frayne."

"I—I can't tell you, sir."

"Why not?"

Silence.

"Very good!" said the Head, compressing his lips. "You are aware, Frayne, of course, that if you do not tell me where you went last night, I can only conclude that it was some place specially forbidden, and that you were engaged in disgraceful conduct that you dare not report to me."

"I—I wasn't, sir."

"Then why did you go—and where did you go?"

Silence.

"That senior boys of this school have sometimes been guilty of irregular conduct, I know," the Head went on gravely. "I have expelled a senior for it. That is bad enough, but that a junior should be guilty of such faults—and a junior, too, only in the Third Form—is extraordinary as well as disgraceful. I am ashamed that such a boy has ever entered the walls of this school. I feel that the blame is partly mine for having allowed such a boy to enter."

The Head's voice faltered a little. The fag stood silent, and Joe Frayne's face went very white.

He could hardly realise that these scornful, cutting words were addressed to him—words that cut and stung him like lashes upon the bare skin.

He had venerated the Head—almost worshipped him as an awesome being of a superior mould—and it was the Head who was now delivering sentence upon him in words that made him shiver and tremble under the lash.

The Head despised him—regarded him with contempt and disgust—and he had not a word to say in his own defence. The lips that he had tightly set were as white as chalk now: his eyes were on the carpet, and he dared not raise them. He felt that he was lost; he only prayed inwardly for the ordeal to be over. When would it end?

The Head's voice was going on—deep, wounding, lashing. The fags were as silent as the culprit. They felt that it was all deserved. If Frayne did not like it, he should not have done what had provoked it. What had he gone to the Green Man for, if not to disgrace himself and the school he belonged to? Even Wally felt that there was no excuse for the little waif he had always, hitherto, defended.

"I should have known," the Head was saying, "that a boy trained, or, rather, allowed to grow up like a wild animal, as you have been, was not fit to enter a school like this. I should not have made the experiment. I can see now that it was a mistake, but I hoped that the influence of good and manly boys—boys like Tom Merry and D'Arcy—might make you understand what a decent life was, and give you a chance of taking a decent place in the world. Instead of making you good, it appears to have made you only hypocritical. You have made a good impression upon me—upon the masters—upon most of the boys, I think, and now suddenly I find that you have remained addicted to the worst habits of the slums—to late hours, to visiting public-houses, to gambling and drinking, for all I know—for why should you visit a low public-house at night, otherwise? I cannot excuse you by saying that you knew no better, for since your training at St. Jim's, you do know better. You have sinned with your eyes open. You have chosen the wrong path deliberately, knowing that you were disgracing yourself, and bringing your school to shame."

Frayne writhed.

"Oh, sir!"

"You will leave St. Jim's," said the Head, his voice rising a little. "If it were any other boy here, I should flog him, and expel him in public. I make allowances for the vices of your early training. I shall expel you from the school, but I shall make some attempt to save you from the life of vice and crime upon which you seem determined to enter. The gentleman who has befriended you, who pays your fees at this college, will be communicated with, and arrangements made for your future. The future that might have been yours you have sacrificed; but you will be given a chance elsewhere to learn a trade, and to grow up to be useful and honest, if you choose. But at St. Jim's you cannot remain. You are a disgrace to the school. Go!"

Joe tried to speak, but his lips were trembling, no words would come. He turned silently to the door, and left the study.

The rest of the fags filed out.

Dr. Holmes was left alone with the Housemaster. The Head's face was sombre.

"An experiment that has utterly failed, Mr. Railton," he said.

The Housemaster nodded, and slowly followed the fags from the study, and the Head of St. Jim's was left alone.

CHAPTER 13. Under Sentence!

ALL St. Jim's knew it within ten minutes.

Frayne, of the Third, had been discovered breaking bounds at night, and visiting a low public-house. Frayne had been sentenced to be expelled, and was to leave St. Jim's as soon as arrangements could be made for sending him away.

That was the news that thrilled through the School House. It excited great comment.

Many were the fellows who declared that they had expected something of the sort all along. What was to be expected of a boy dragged up from the slums and placed in a public school among decent fellows?

Levison and Mellish and Crooke, and other fellows of the same kidney, made no attempt to disguise their satisfaction. They had always been down upon the little waif, and now they seemed to be justified by events. They had been in the right all along, and they were proud of their superior knowledge and wisdom.

A good many of the Third took the same view. Hobbs and Fane and many others said that it served the young blackguard right; and, indeed, Hobbs proposed ragging him before he went, just to show him what the Third thought of him. Wally soon put a stop to talk of that kind. He told the would-be raggers that if Joe was touched there would be a liberal distribution of thick ears, and Hobbs & Co. decided to drop the idea. But they were loud in their denunciation of the boy who had disgraced the Third, and disgraced the school.

It was a shock to Tom Merry. He was silent while the fellows were discussing it. Blake & Co., and Manners and Lowther were frankly sorry for Frayne, but they had to admit that he deserved to be sacked. Figgins & Co., of the New House, came over to hear all about it, and they said they were sorry; but it could not be controverted that the Head had acted quite rightly in "sacking" a boy who had acted as Frayne had done.

"You see, there's no doubt about it, Tommy," Monty Lowther remarked, as they talked it over in Blake's study. "He doesn't deny it—doesn't even spin any yarn to account for going to the Green Man. He doesn't seem to have tried even to make any defence, from what Wally says. He ought to be sacked."

"No doubt about that," said Blake. "But one can't help feeling sorry for him. He never had a chance of being decent till he came here, and you can't expect a kid to lose all his old ways in a term."

"Poor little wretch!" said Kangaroo. "He was brought up among blackguards, and pubs., and betting men, and that kind of thing. It's in his bones, I expect. Besides, he's not going to be sent back to the slums. He's going to be provided for somehow."

"I think I'll go and see him," said Tom Merry abruptly.

"Anybody know where he is?"

"In his dorm., I think."

Tom Merry made his way to the Third Form dormitory. He was in a mood of deep despondency. He had hoped very much from Joe Frayne, and this was a bitter disappointment to him. Why had the kid played the fool in this way? Tom Merry remembered the boy's wretched life in the slums from which he had saved him. The poor lad had never had a chance! Yet—yet the hypocrisy he had been guilty of, for up to now he had kept up appearances of being quite in line with the best traditions of St. Jim's!

Tom Merry opened the door of the Third Form dormitory. The sunset was glimmering in at the window. It showed a diminutive figure sitting upon a half-packed box.

Joe Frayne was alone.

The boy did not look up as Tom Merry entered. He seemed buried in thought, and two tears were rolling down his cheeks.

"Joe," said Tom Merry quietly.

Frayne started. He turned a haggard look upon the Shell fellow.

"It's you, Master Tom!" he muttered.

"Yes, Joe."

"Oh, Master Tom!"

"It's all come out, it seems," said Tom Merry.

"Yes, Master Tom."

"Why did you go out last night, Joe?"

Frayne did not speak.

"Is it true, Joe, as the Head thinks, that you were acting like a rotten young blackguard—that you have been taking us all in, all this time?" asked Tom Merry.

"No, Master Tom."

"But you went to the Green Man?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I can't tell you."

"Why not?"

No answer.

"Joe, if there's any explanation you could make, you ought to make it. It's due to me, and to my uncle. Don't you know that it will be rotten for him? He sent you here."

"I know," said Frayne, in a low voice.

"And for me, too," said Tom Merry, his voice shaking a little. "I was the cause of your coming here. You promised me always to play the game. I've always stood up for you to the fellows. I've fought more than one chap for being down on you. Now you have gone back on me like this!"

Frayne burst into tears.

"I—I haven't gone back on you, Master Tom!" he sobbed. "I—I can't tell you 'ow it was, but—but I 'aven't done wot you think."

"Then why don't you tell the truth?"

Joe sobbed.

Tom Merry started, as a sudden thought struck him. He came closer to the little fag, and laid a hand upon his shoulder.

"Joe, kid, does this mean that you're afraid of somebody—that somebody's been bullying you, and you daren't give him away?" he asked. "Were you forced to go there by some rotter in the Sixth—Knox, or some fellow like that?"

Joe shook his head.

"It wasn't that?" asked Tom Merry, his new hope dying away as soon as it was born.

"No, Master Tom."

"And you've got nothing to say?"

"No, Master Tom."

Tom Merry sighed.

"Well, you will have to go, then—and I'll try to think of you as well as I can," he said. "I'm sorry, Joe, but, under the circumstances, it's best for you to go."

And he quitted the dormitory.

Joe Frayne looked after him with haggard eyes. The sound of the closing door was like a knell in the ears of the wretched boy.

"E don't believe in me, neither!" whispered Joe. "Even Master Tom! But 'ow could 'e—'e can't know 'ow it was! 'E's ashamed of me—they're all ashamed of me! They won't never know, and if I was to tell them, they'd think me a rotten sneak—and I should be a rotten sneak, too! I went there of my own accord, and I got to stand the racket now. But it's 'ard—it's 'ard!"

Joe manfully dried his tears, and went on packing his box.

CHAPTER 14.

A Terrible Alternative.

ARTHUR LANGTON, of the Sixth, came into the gateway of St. Jim's in the red sunset with a very cheerful expression upon his face.

A fellow who had escaped a great danger, and was determined that he would never run the risk again from which he had so narrowly escaped, had a right to feel cheerful.

Langton's heart was light.

He had done with Mr. Jolliffe and his crew for good. That mad night had been his last, and he would never go near the Green Man again. His debt to Mr. Jolliffe could be paid off a little at a time, and he would not even see the man to pay him, but would send the money by post. That part of his life was sealed for him now—he had turned down a leaf upon the past.

He had been a fool—an utter fool! He realised that clearly. Knox had led him into this—Knox, unscrupulous and cunning—for his own purposes. Langton could see now that he had been the dupe of the cad of the Sixth, who had not even the decency to stand by him after bringing him into the danger of utter ruin. Knox had known that Kildare was watching for him that night, and Knox had gone quietly to bed, and left him to get out of the difficulty as best he could. A deep contempt and dislike for the rascal of the Sixth was in Langton's heart; he never intended to speak to Knox again. The fellow would make excuses—he was never in want of them—but nothing could alter the fact that he had taken care of himself, and left his dupe to his fate. But for little Frayne, of the Third—a mere fag whom the prefect had befriended in a careless way—but for Frayne he would have come unsuspectingly back to St. Jim's, and would have fallen into the hands of justice—indeed, he would

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probably have stayed at the Green Man so late that he would have been searched for, and Mr. Railton and Kildare would have found him there, with the cards, the drink, the cigars—and Jolliffe and Banks! Langton shuddered as he thought of it. He owed everything to Frayne, and he had treated him brutally when he came to the Green Man, too! Well, he would make it up to him. Joe Frayne should never want a friend, after this!

The prefect was thinking such thoughts as he strolled into the old quad. As he crossed towards the School House he observed that the fellows were standing in knots, discussing some matter or other, but he took no particular notice of it. Knox met him in the quad, and Langton frowned, and would have passed his former friend without even a nod. But Knox stepped into his path and stopped him. They were under the elms, and there was no one within hearing, which was why Knox had met him there. Knox did not want other ears to hear what he had to say to the prefect.

"Langton!" he began.

Langton stopped sharply, and fixed a grim, uncompromising look upon Knox.

"I don't want you to speak to me," he said. "Do you understand? I've done with you, and done with your friends yonder, and I shall be obliged if you won't recognise me any more in the future."

Knox flushed. Contempt, as the Oriental proverb says, will pierce even the shell of the tortoise, and even Knox was not quite so thick-skinned as a tortoise.

"What's up?" he asked with a sneer. "You were friendly enough yesterday."

"That was before you left me in the lurch."

"Oh, you mean about last night?" said Knox. "I couldn't warn you. Kildare was watching, and if I'd tried to give you the tip he would have been down upon me at once. He was all ready to call Railton into the matter."

"So you left me to shift for myself!" said Langton, with a scornful curl of the lip. "It was like you, and exactly what I might have expected."

"I don't see that I had any choice in the matter," said Knox sullenly. "If you got sacked, it was no good ray getting sacked as well, was it?"

"You know jolly well that if the cases had been reversed I shouldn't have left you to chance it," said Langton. "I should have thought we ought to sink or swim together—especially if I'd got you into the scrape, as you did me."

"You were jolly willing to be got into the scrape, I fancy!"

"Perhaps I was. I was a fool—I know that. But it's all over now, and I'm done with them and done with you!"

"Thank you," said Knox, with a sneer. "You seem to have got out of the fix all right, as far as I can see. You managed to sneak into your room and make them believe that you had been there all the time."

"No thanks to you!"

"You must have had the tip from somebody," said Knox.

"Perhaps."

"Look here, Langton, you'll have to be jolly careful now! Did young Frayne come to the Green Man to give you the tip?"

Langton started.

"How do you know?"

"Then he did?" asked Knox.

"Yes, he did, which was more than you would have done."

"Never mind that. He's got into trouble over it," said Knox. "I'm warning you, so that you can be ready. Not that I run any risk in the matter. If you rounded on me, I should deny the whole story, all along the line, and you couldn't prove anything."

Langton's lip curled contemptuously.

"I dare say," he assented. "You're too deep for them, but you'll come a cropper one of these days, all the same, if you don't chuck up your precious friends. But what do you mean by young Frayne being in trouble? He hasn't blabbed out about being at the Green Man, has he?"

"No; he had too much sense for that, but it's come out."

Langton changed colour.

"Come out?" he repeated.

"Yes. It seems that Crump, the bobby of Rylcombe, saw him in the lane. He didn't recognise him, but he reported the matter to the Head, and there was an inquiry. Frayne was bowled out, and he admitted breaking bounds last night."

"Good heavens!" Langton's face was wild with anxiety.

"He's given me away? Oh!"

"No," said Knox; "that's the curious part of it. The young ass hasn't said a word—I don't know why. I suppose he's afraid of your licking him. When I heard about it, I guessed at once that he had got on to Kildare watching for you, and had come to give you the tip, as he's your fag. I expected when he was hauled up before the Head that he would make a clean breast of it."

"And hasn't he?" cried Langton.

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"No."

"Then—then they don't know—about me?"

"Not a word!"

"Thank goodness for that!" breathed Langton.

"But you need to be on your guard," said Knox. "He may blab out something; it's only to be expected that he will—he's sacked."

"Sacked?"

Knox shrugged his shoulders.

"Yes. There was a scene in the Head's study. What do you expect? The Head would hardly let him stay here, after that! He's found guilty of breaking bounds at night, and visiting a public-house, and he's sacked. The fellows are awfully down on him—poor little beast! But it stands to reason that he will give you away, and so I warn you to be on your guard, and have some yarn ready. I don't know what you can say, but you'd better be ready with something, unless you want the push instead of Frayne. It will be your word against his."

The quadrangle, the elms, the old buildings, seemed to reel round Arthur Langton for a moment. Only a few minutes ago he had been congratulating himself upon his safety, upon being well out of the terrible scrape, and now—

"Good heavens!" he muttered huskily. "What—what shall I do?"

Knox sneered. A minute ago Langton had spurned him and his friendship, and now he was asking him for advice.

"I don't know," said Knox. "Better see young Frayne, and try to persuade him to keep his mouth shut. Promise him something—anything—to keep him quiet till he's left St. Jim's, then he can't talk. Only keep his mouth shut till he's safe out of the school, and you're all right."

"I—I suppose so," muttered Langton.

"If he speaks out, you must deny every word. Say that he's heard about what happened last night, and is making up a yarn on it. Jolliffe and Banks will stand by you, if they should be asked—I'll give them the tip. Denounce him as a rotten young liar, and stick to it, only be careful what you say, and don't put your foot in it. If you've got the nerve it will go all right, and he'll be kicked out all serene—they'll think he's a slanderer, as well as a young blackguard."

"You—you villain!"

"I'm advising you for your own good."

"After—after what he did for me!" said Langton huskily.

"After he came and warned me! I—I—I couldn't do it!"

"What rot! It's him or you, I tell you. The Head is fairly on the war-path, and he'd be harder on a prefect than on that whelp from the slums. They're going to do something for him after he's left the school—he won't get it in the neck as you would."

"I—I suppose not!" muttered Langton.

"If you prefer to be sacked, you can own up to the Head!" said Knox satirically. "If you want to be expelled from the school, and to face your people—"

"Don't!" muttered Langton hoarsely. "You—you know I dare not! Anything but that! You know I dare not do it!"

"Then you will have to discredit young Frayne if he talks," said Knox quietly. "But he hasn't talked yet, and he may be prevented. I dare say he's held his tongue till he sees you, to make terms of some sort. It may be a question of money. If you can bribe him to hold his tongue, it will be worth while to do it."

"Yes—yes!"

"You'd better see him. Go into your study, and I'll send him to you. He's your fag, and it's only natural that you should take an interest in him, and speak to him about this. Keep your face straight, for goodness' sake! If the fellows see you looking like that, they'll know there's something wrong," said Knox irritably.

Langton tried to collect himself.

"All—all right!" he muttered. "Send the kid to me."

"I—I'll see him, anyway."

He went into the School House and into his study.

CHAPTER 15.

The Scapegoat.

JOE FRAYNE tapped timidly at Langton's door. Langton's voice bade him enter. Knox had told the fag that Langton wanted to see him, and Frayne could guess what uneasiness his fagmaster was feeling at that moment. He had come at once to the study.

Langton was walking restlessly up and down the room, his face pale and disturbed.

"Shut the door, kid!" he muttered.

Frayne closed the door, and stood waiting.

Langton came to a halt.

"It's all out, it seems!" he exclaimed.

(Continued on page 20.)

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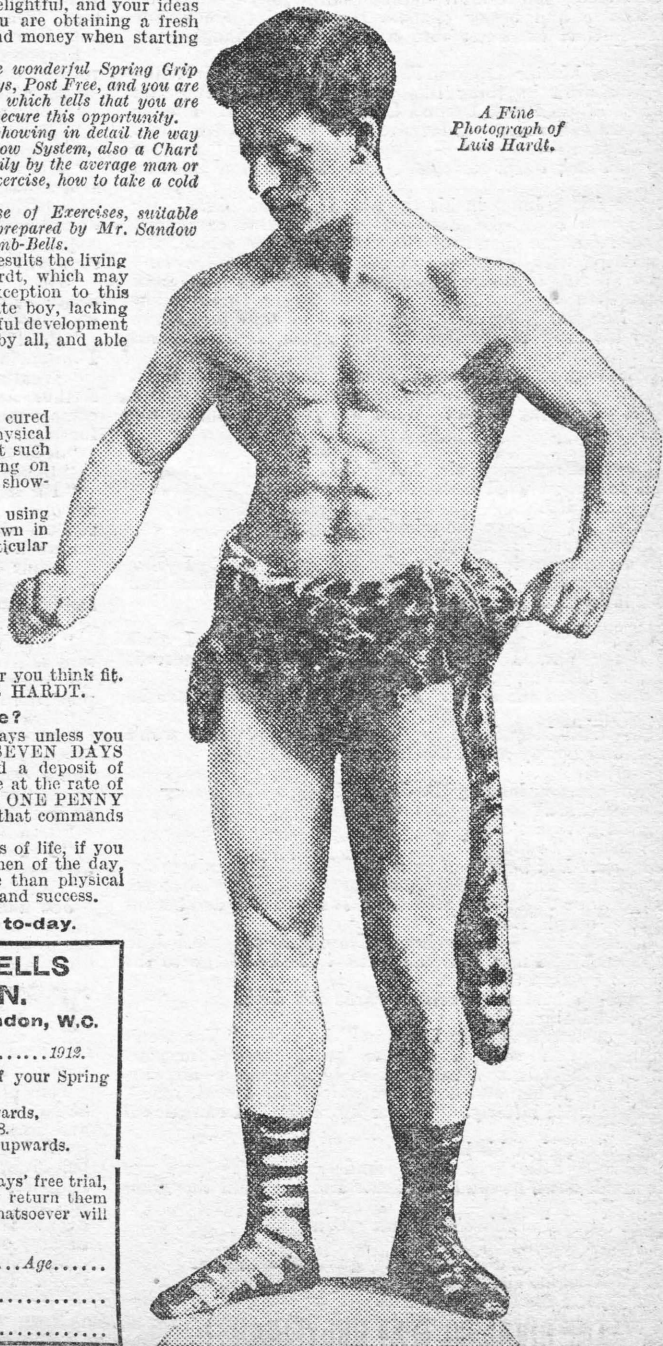
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A DISGRACE TO THE SCHOOL.

(Continued from Page 13.)

Frayne nodded.

"They know you were at the Green Man last night?"

"Yes, Master Langton."

"And you haven't given me away?"

Joe did not notice the selfish fear in the words, the tone, the face. Langton was thinking only of himself, not of the poor lad who had sacrificed himself to save him, and was going bravely on to the end.

"No, Master Langton."

"You haven't said a word?"

"Not a word, sir."

Langton drew a breath.

"You're not going to say anything, Frayne?"

"I ain't, sir."

"Honour?"

"Honour bright, sir."

"I'll make it up to you, Joe," said Langton eagerly.

"You're—you're a decent little fellow! I don't care where you come from, you're more decent than a jolly good many chaps who've had better chances than you! Knox, for instance"—then he burst into a hard, bitter laugh—"or myself."

"Not you, Master Langton!" said Joe. "You ain't like Knox—you ain't anything like 'im, you ain't! But you needn't be feared that I won't keep my word, sir. I know what a promise means—I learned that from Master Tom. 'E's down on me now—" Frayne's lip trembled. "They're all-down on me; but it can't be 'elped. I ain't goin' back on you, sir."

Langton felt a lump in his throat. He hated himself for what he was doing—he despised himself. But expulsion, disgrace, ruin, the shame of the sack from the school, the grim meeting with his people at home afterwards—he could not face all that! Better anything! Better any degree of baseness than that! Better let this brave little fellow suffer! But was it better? How would he ever be able to hold up his head in the light of day again, if he did this thing?

"You're a good little chap, Frayne!" he muttered huskily. "By heavens, I never dreamed you had this in you! But what are you doing it for? What are you standing by me like this for?"

Frayne stared.

"I give you my word, sir, and I ain't a sneak, anyway!"

"But you know what it means?"

Frayne nodded.

"You've got to leave the school in disgrace."

"I know, Master Langton."

"I'll make it up to you, Joe—by Heaven, I will! I—I've got no money now—I'm stony; but my people are rich, and—and I'll see that you never want!"

Joe flushed.

"I don't want your money, Master Langton. I ain't doing it for that. I come out last night of my own accord, and I ain't blaming you. It's orl right."

Langton paced the study. It was some minutes before he spoke again.

"But—you'll keep it up to the end, Frayne? You won't weaken, and betray me at the last moment?"

"Never, sir!"

"When are you leaving St. Jim's?"

"To-night, sir."

Langton gave a start.

"So soon? To-night?"

"Yes, sir. I'm bein' sent to a 'ome," said Joe, miserably "I'm going to stay there till Tom Merry's uncle is written to, to decide wot's to be done with me. It's 'ard! I don't want to go to a 'ome! But—"

"Oh, what a cur—what a hound I am!" Langton cried, in utter misery. "I'm a cowardly brute! I—I—I'll go to the Head and own up this minute!"

He made a wild movement towards the door.

Joe looked alarmed.

"No, you won't, Master Langton!" he said. "You won't do nothing of the sort! It ain't so 'ard for me as for you! I ain't got friends and relations to be disgraced—anyway, there ain't a father and a mother waitin' for me at 'ome," said Joe, a little bitterly. "Better let me go! I can stick it orl right!"

Langton clenched his hands.

"You're a little hero, Joe! And—and you're sure you won't break down at the last minute and blurt out the whole story?"

It was that miserable selfish fear again!

"You can depend on me, sir."

"I—I can't let you do it, kid!" groaned Langton.

"It's orl right, sir."

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"But—but—"

There was a tap at the door, and Kildare, of the Sixth, came in. Langton's voice broke off at once. He turned a little, so that his back came to the light from the window. Kildare glanced at him and at Joe.

"I wanted to speak to you, Langton," he said, "about the cricket; but if you're busy—"

"No," said Langton, speaking calmly with a tremendous effort. "I've about finished, Kildare." He felt that some explanation was necessary. "I—I've been talking to Frayne about—about what I've just heard. It seems that the kid has been kicking over the traces."

Kildare's brow darkened.

"He's been acting like a rotten young blackguard, and disgracing the school!" he said. "Is that what you mean by kicking over the traces?"

"You can cut, Frayne!" said Langton, flushing.

"Yes, Master Langton."

Joe Frayne left the study, the tears very near his eyes. It was only natural that Kildare should be down on him like all the rest; but it was hard. He admired Kildare almost more than any other fellow at St. Jim's, and Kildare despised him. Truly, the way the boy had chosen for himself was a very thorny one.

Frayne came down the passage, and there was a buzz of voices from a group of juniors.

"Here he is!"

"Look at the giddy Don Juan!"

"Had a time on the tiles, Frayne?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I always told you fellows what that kid would come to!" said Levison. "I was against his being here from the very first. Ripping idea, to bring a brat from the slums into a decent school—I don't think!"

Joe Frayne moved past the sneering juniors with heavy steps and a heavy heart, his face flushed and downcast.

"Oh, let him alone!" said Digby. "Never mind what he's done; he sacked for it, and that's enough. Don't hit a chap when he's down!"

"Rot!" said Mellish. "He's a disgrace to the school, and I think, for one, that he ought to be told so! I—"

"Weally, Mellish, I must wequest you to shut up!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Fwayne does appear to have come a muckah, but when a chap's down isn't the time to go for him! Hold your wotten tongue, you cad!"

"Rats!"

"If you say wats to me, Mellish—"

"I'll say what I like to that slum cad!" said Mellish savagely. "I say he's a rotten guttersnipe, and a disgrace to St. Jim's, and— Ow!"

Smack!

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's knuckles crashed into the face of the cad of the Fourth, and Mellish sat down with great suddenness upon the floor, with a roar.

"Ow! Yow! You rotter!" he howled.

"Now you can get up and have some more, you wottah!" said D'Arcy, pushing back his cuffs with a businesslike air.

"I regard you as a sickenin' cad, and I shall have gweat pleuah in givin' you a feahful thwashin'!"

"Hear, hear!" said Blake.

But Mellish did not get up. He sat where he was till D'Arcy, with a sniff of contempt, walked away. Joe Frayne was already gone. The little waif met Hobbs, of the Third, in the dormitory passage. Hobbs drew aside to let him pass, as if he feared contamination from the touch of the fag.

"Don't speak to me!" he said loftily.

"I—I wasn't going to speak to you, Master 'Obbs," said Joe.

"Well, don't, then!" said Hobbs, with a sniff.

Joe went into the dormitory.

CHAPTER 16.

At the Eleventh Hour.

TOM MERRY was very miserable and restless that evening.

The fate of the waif of St. Jim's weighed upon his mind. Joe was going. In a few hours the school would have seen the last of him.

Tom Merry could not help thinking of the old days, when he had been down on his luck himself, and had left St. Jim's; and in those days of poverty and trouble, Joe had been a good friend to him—as good a friend as he knew how to be. Tom Merry had repaid him as well as he could. He had brought the waif of the slums to St. Jim's, and a new life had opened before Joe Frayne. And now it was all over! It was by the boy's own act, and yet it was, as Tom Merry said, rotten!

His chums understood his gloomy feelings. They shared them. But they could say little to comfort him.

"He's brought it on himself, you know," said Monty Lowther.

Tom Merry nodded.

"I know that," he said. "But—"

"The poor little beggar isn't so much to blame—as any other chap here would have been," said Manners. "But then, he isn't getting it so thick, you know. Any other chap would have been publicly expelled, and very likely flogged." "I know. But— Well, I suppose it's no good worrying about," said Tom Merry restlessly. "But I can't help thinking that there's something wrong somewhere. Perhaps Joe is telling the truth when he said that he didn't go to the Green Man for any rotten reason. Yet he says he wasn't forced to go, or anything of that sort. I don't see how any excuse can be made for him."

"There isn't any," said Monty Lowther, with a shake of his head.

"I suppose not; but it's rotten!"

There was another fellow who felt worse about it than Tom Merry.

It was Langton, of the Sixth.

His first thought had been for his own safety. But his safety was secured now, and he had leisure to think of other matters.

He had leisure to think of his conduct—of the baseness of letting the boy sacrifice himself—and he groaned in spirit over it. He paced his study in miserable thought. He knew that he ought to speak out and save Frayne. He knew that he would despise himself for ever if he did not.

But he did not—he dared not. He could not face it. If the alternative had been less terrible, he might have taken it. But to be expelled in shame and disgrace, to go home and face his people—he shuddered at the mere thought.

He could not do it.

He tried to think that, after all, it would not be so bad for Joe—perhaps the kid was tired of the restraints of a school. He had been born in the savage freedom of the slums, and might be glad to be free again. But in his heart Langton knew that he was trying to deceive himself with mere sophistry.

In his heart he knew how bitterly Frayne was feeling this disgrace—as bitterly as he would have felt it himself.

"Poor little beggar!" muttered Langton, again and again. "Poor little beggar! But he will have to stand it now."

Langton left his study at last.

There was a crowd of fellows in the big passage in the School House—some of them fellows from the New House. Both houses of St. Jim's were keenly interested in this matter.

Langton observed the excitement, and he saw that Taggles, the school porter, was bringing a box downstairs.

The time had come.

"He's going?" Langton muttered, as he stood beside Darrel of the Sixth.

Darrel nodded.

"Frayne—yes."

"Poor little wretch!"

"I don't see it," said Darrel. "He brought it on himself. I'm sorry enough for any chap who's down, but no fellow need be a blackguard unless he chooses."

Langton winced. Darrel did not know how deeply his words cut the fellow he was speaking to.

"Yes, I—I suppose so," muttered Langton. "But I—I wish the Head would give him another chance."

"I don't!" said Darrel drily.

Joe Frayne came downstairs after the porter.

The waif of St. Jim's walked with a firm step, though his face was very pale. He did not look in Arthur Langton's direction.

Langton's face went very white.

The boy was going. Outside, in the gloom, the station cab was waiting, and Taggles, the porter, was to take him to the station, and go with him to his destination—the destination which poor Joe had described as a "ome."

Langton set his teeth hard.

He had to go through with it now. He wished he had stayed in the study.

There was a murmur from some of the juniors as Frayne appeared in the hall.

Wally came out from a knot of Third-Formers, and stopped him. Frayne looked at him mutely and miserably.

Wally held out his hand.

"Give me your fist, old son," he said. "I can't say I hold by what you've done, but I'm jolly sorry you've come a mucker. Give me your fist before you go!"

Joe's eyes clouded with tears as he pressed Wally's hand.

"Thank you, Master Wally," he said—"thank you! P'raps you'll find out some day that I ain't such a rotter as you think."

"Good-bye, Joe!" said Tom Merry.

"Good-bye, Master Tom!"

Joe walked after Taggles to the door.

It was then that Arthur Langton's better nature, long held down in thrall by miserable selfishness and craven fear, rose to assert itself.

He sprang forward.

"Frayne!"

Joe turned involuntarily.

"Stop!" said Langton, white to the lips. "Stop! You sha'n't go!"

"Master Langton!"

"You sha'n't go, I tell you!"

"What do you mean, Langton?" demanded Kildare sharply. "Of course he will go! Are you off your rocker?"

"He sha'n't go!"

"Don't be an ass. Get out, Frayne!"

"Stop!"

Langton's voice rang out sharply. Joe hesitated. He saw Langton's meaning in his face, and he shivered.

"Don't, Master Langton!" he said appealingly. "Don't! I can't stand it. Don't!"

"I will—and must!"

"Don't say a word!"

"Hold your tongue, Joe!" Langton was calm and cool now, with the coolness of despair, but he was glad that he had spoken. It was better than the mental torture he had endured for hours. "Taggles, you can put that box down. Master Frayne is not going to leave St. Jim's."

Taggles set the box down in sheer amazement.

"Are you dotty, Langton?" asked half a dozen voices.

"No," said Langton. "Joe Frayne isn't going to leave St. Jim's. I know why he came to the Green Man last night, and I'm going to tell the Head. Frayne isn't going to be sacked from St. Jim's. I am!"

"You?"

"What—"

Mr. Railton came striding forward.

"What does this mean, Langton?" he asked sharply.

Langton looked him full in the face.

"When you came to my room last night, sir, you found me there," he said; "but when Kildare knocked earlier, I was not there."

"What!"

"You lied, then?" said Kildare.

Langton nodded.

"Yes, I lied, like a coward as I was! I was at the Green Man!"

There was a sensation in the crowded hall.

Joe gave a groan.

"E's done it now!"

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Mr. Railton, aghast. "Are you aware of what you are saying, Langton?"

"Yes, sir," said Langton steadily.

"You were at the Green Man?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you deceived us?"

"Yes, sir; I deceived you. I came in by the back way, and crept into my room and locked the door, and pretended to be asleep when you knocked. I should have come straight back, and been found out, only—"

"Only what?"

"Frayne came to the Green Man to warn me."

"Oh!"

"Good heavens!" muttered Tom Merry. "Joe—Joe, why didn't you tell me?"

"Bai Jove!"

"Frayne came to the Green Man to warn you?" repeated Mr. Railton, as if he could hardly believe his ears.

"Yes, sir," said Langton firmly. "Don't blame him for doing that. He knew I was in a horrible fix, and he's my fag, and he felt bound to do it. And—and the little chap thought he ought to do it because I've been kind to him at times. Poor little beggar!"

"Frayne, is this true?"

"Yes, sir," muttered Joe.

"Why did you not tell us?"

"'Cause I ain't a sneak, sir!"

There was a murmur.

"Bai Jove! Didn't I tell you all along that he was a wogulah wippin' chap?" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Silence! Frayne, you did wrong in leaving the school after lights out, but if this was your motive—"

"It was his motive, sir," said Langton. "He wasn't going to say a word, and—and I wasn't going to, either. Only—"

"And why have you spoken now?" demanded the House-master.

"Because—because I—I couldn't see him go!" said Langton desperately. "I couldn't be such an awful rotter! I couldn't do it. I know this means—the sack for me, but I shall have to stand it." He groaned. "It's better than ruining that poor kid, and having my conscience hammering at me all my life. I—I suppose I'd better go and pack my things!"

Mr. Railton looked steadily at him.

"You had better come in and see the Head first," he said quietly. "Whatever your conduct has been, Langton, this action, at least, is a noble one, and you cannot be all bad. As for Frayne, I think I can undertake to say that the Head will pardon him—and certainly he will not be expelled. Come, Langton!"

The prefect, with bowed head, followed the Housemaster to Dr. Holmes's study.

As soon as the Housemaster was gone, there was a roar in the hall. Fellows crowded round Joe Frayne from all sides.

Wally was the first, and he seized Joe's right hand, and worked away at it as if it were a pump-handle. Tom Merry secured the other, and shook it and shook it again. And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy clapped him on one shoulder, and Blake on the other. Shouting and cheering juniors swarmed round him.

"Bai Jove! Isn't he wippen'?"

"Plucky little beggar!" said Kildare. "You ought to be licked for interfering in matters that don't concern you, Frayne; but—but you're a plucky little hero."

"Hurrah!"

"Didn't I say he was true blue all along?" roared Wally.

"No; you jolly well didn't!" said Hobbs.

"Shut up, Hobbs! He's worth fifty of you!" said Wally belligerently. "Let me hear anybody say anything against him, that's all."

"Yaas, watah! I should give such a person a feahful thwashin'."

"You little ass!" said Tom Merry, almost with tears in his eyes. "If you ever get into a scrape like this again, Joe, I'll hammer you. But—but I'm proud of you, kid; and I think the whole School House will be proud of you."

"Oh, Master Tom!" gasped Joe.

"And the New House, too!" said Figgins. "Hurrah!"

Joe Frayne was almost overcome with the ovation. Certainly he had very little breath left by the time the juniors had finished shaking his hands and clapping him on the back. And while that scene was proceeding in the hall, Arthur Langton, with bowed head and despair in his heart, had followed Mr. Railton into the Head's study.

Dr. Holmes heard what Mr. Railton had to tell him in amazement, and when the Housemaster had explained, the Head turned a very grave look upon Langton.

"You know what this confession means, Langton?" he said.

Langton nodded wretchedly.

"Yes, sir. I know I shall be expelled, but—but I couldn't see that kid sacked in my place. Will you get it over as soon as possible, sir? I feel as if I can't face the fellows again."

The Head was silent and very thoughtful.

"You spoke out like this simply to save Frayne, Langton?" he said.

"I had to, sir."

"Yes. Knowing what it meant to you?"

"I don't know that I stopped to think. I didn't mean to speak out, but I did it, somehow."

"Because you were not so bad as you had supposed yourself to be, I think," said the Head gravely. "It is a great shock to me, Langton, to make this discovery regarding your conduct. Yet the way in which it has come to light reflects so much credit on you that I cannot help thinking there is much good in you. Were you led into this? Have you had an associate in these reckless actions?"

Langton was silent.

"I will not press that question," said the Head, kindly enough. "If I were to give you another chance—"

Langton gasped.

"Oh, sir!"

"Could I expect you to play the game, Langton—to have no connection with anything of the sort in the future?"

"Oh, sir! I had already resolved that it was all over, anyway. I had broken off with it—after last night. The scare was enough for me. I had never realised clearly what it meant till then. Then—" He broke off.

"Very well," said the Head quietly, "I shall give you another chance, Langton. You will stay—nothing more shall be said about this—and I will trust you to keep your word."

Langton tried to speak, but he could not. He burst into tears.

Langton did not leave St. Jim's, and Joe Frayne remained Langton's fag, and from that day no one was likely to think that Tom Merry's protege would ever be a Disgrace to the School!

(Another splendid complete tale of the juniors of St. Jim's next Thursday, entitled: "Gussy's April Fools," by Martin Clifford. Order your "Gem" Library in advance. Price One Penny.)

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DON'T MISS "THE RIVAL CO.'S AT GREYFRIARS!" The Splendid, Long, Complete School Story appearing in This Week's Number of the "MAGNET" LIBRARY, 1^d.

Our Grand Serial.

WINGS OF GOLD!

The Story of the most Terrible and Amazing Journey ever made by Man.

Edited from the Notes of Maurice

. . . Fordham, Esq. . . .

By SIDNEY DREW.

CHARACTERS IN THIS GRAND STORY.

MAURICE FORDHAM and LANCE MORTON—Two healthy and wealthy young Britons, owners of the yacht Foamwitch, and the wonderful aeronef, Wings of Gold.

PROFESSOR LUDWIG VON HAAGEL—The famous German scientist, also noted for his clumsiness.

CROOKS—The ship's cook.

JOSEPH JACKSON or SHOREDITCH JOSE—A Cockney member of the crew, whose constant companion is a game bantam named the Smacker.

TEDDY MORGAN—Ship's engineer.

WILLIAM TOOTER—The hairy first mate.

The Foamwitch is on an expedition with the object of exploring the strange land which is believed to lie beyond the barrier of eternal ice near the South Pole.

As soon as the first land is reached the construction of the aeronef, Wings of Gold—which has been carried in pieces on the Foamwitch—is proceeded with, and in it begins a wonderful voyage into the heart of the Antarctic.

Fearful creatures, thought to be extinct since prehistoric times, are encountered when the adventurers reach a mysterious mountain country never before trodden by the foot of man.

Once the aeronef is wrecked; but, by dint of much ingenuity and hard work, is repaired, and her head is turned towards the North. A terrific wind, however, springs up, and Wings of Gold is forced through a ravine in the mountains, and the crew find themselves flying over a large inland lake, surrounded by the vast, unknown mountains. They encounter such fearful creatures here that they decide to go back and return to the Foamwitch; but investigation reveals that the ravine is now blocked up, and they are prisoners in that vast enclosure.

(Now go on with the story.)

With Fate Against Them—Crooks Goes Overboard—In the Clutch of the Plesiosaurus—Crook's Peril.

Morgan brought round the ship without another word, and let her churn lazily through the air. Tooter whistled despairingly. Misfortune seemed to be always with them now. Lance tried to look cheerful, and to talk cheerfully, and succeeded fairly well.

"Buck up, boys!" he said. "It was lucky for us we weren't going through when that ravine fell in. We've got to find another way out, that's all. The professor will be happy. Stick your bristles up, William, and grin. We're still alive and kicking. I hate people looking as humpy as two camels. By Jove, isn't that sublime!"

They had never seen such magnificent scenery. The slopes were covered with forest to the very rim of the lake. Morgan sunk the aeronef and brought her close to the ground. Although she floated forty feet above the lake, the tops of some of the feather trees were a hundred and fifty feet above the vertical columns.

What unknown monsters lurked in those vast, silent forests, these dark green aisles, where civilised man had never placed his foot? Blue, beautiful, and placid, the lake smiled at a fine sky. Not a fish rippled its surface, not a bird soared over it, not an insect buzzed anywhere. The heat was intense—so intense that the thinnest pyjamas were unbearable. It was the old damp heat, which makes vegetation run riot, and saps the strength of human beings.

"We're dentists," said Lance, "looking round for openings in a set of teeth. Is it warm?"

"It was torrid. Why not?" growled Crooks, fanning him.

self with a handkerchief as large as a small rug. "I was perspiring, and so was Jackson."

The good-natured cook had rigged up a hammock for the invalid, and invented a kind of punkah to fan him with. Just then Von Haagel, blowing like a bellows, came on deck, beaming and happy. He was fond of bright colours, and his silk pyjamas might have been cut out of a few yards of rainbow.

"Ach!" he grunted. "Der weather was tropical. Dear lads, I am sorry I should be angry mit you und Morgan, and so I shall apologise und shake hands all round. I am ein great—vat you say?—ein pig vathead!"

"And why not?" growled the cook. "Many heads was fat, but all heads was not pig. It was just in this spot, and I axes why not—which is verse—"

"Though it's rot!" added Lance.

Von Haagel shook hands all round, and then seized his great field-glasses. Wings of Gold glided under an overhanging tree, and then even Jackson joined in the cry of wonder.

A mighty valley ran inland for miles, and a river roared as it tumbled between green banks covered with moss and lichens.

On either hand the forest spread out, terrible in its vastness, silence, gloom, and mystery. Reeds covered the few swamps, but there was no sign of animal, beast or bird.

"We'll water here," said the practical engineer.

A touch brought the vessel round and sent her gliding up the valley.

Lance dashed for his camera. The hose splashed overboard after the water had been tasted by means of a pail, and the pump clattered. The water was drawn from a seething, foam-flecked pool. It had what Mr. Tooter described as a faint odour of pickled onions. Von Haagel tasted it, and pronounced it wholesome, for it was only slightly tainted with sulphur. It went hissing into the tanks, and Crooks leant on the rail, cutting up tobacco and watching Lance, whose head was under the focussing cloth of the camera.

"Right! Haul in!" said Teddy Morgan.

Crooks turned, and clutched the hose with both his bony hands. He drew a few yards of it in, and then he paused, his eye fixed on the pool.

The next instant he shrieked. A snake-like thing shot up from the eddy, and gleaming teeth closed upon the hose. Crooks did not realise it in time. There was a powerful jerk. With the cry on his lips, Crooks was dragged violently against the rail. He caught at it, but missed, and went headlong overboard. The tumbling, frothing water closed above him, and the steel-ribbed, rubber hose snapped like thread.

"Crooks is over!" screamed Tooter.

They were all scared, though they had seen nothing. The shriek had terrified them. Crooks was a fearless and intrepid swimmer. A fall of twenty feet of water would not have drawn such a cry from him.

Fordham lifted a coil of rope from a hook and unwarped it. They sprang to the side. Always calm and cool, the engineer slowed the suspensory screws and brought the little aeronef closer to the water.

Where was the cook?

The water seethed and boiled in the pool, and great masses of yellow foam danced round; then their blood froze. Out of the tossing depths leapt a long, shining neck, a bird-like head, and a great, crimson mouth lined with rows of shining teeth. There was a hiss. The horrible head darted forward, and shot through the rail halfway across the deck.

Shrieking, Fordham sprang back. The head swung sideways, and the writhing neck caught against his legs and coiled round them. Maurice was flung upon his back. He seized the brute's neck with both hands. The open jaws snapped at him, and he felt his fingers slipping; then he was dragged against the rail, and his was uppermost.

There was a flash of something bright before his eyes, and he went rolling across the deck in a pool of blood. Down in the eddy the monster, an axe still embedded in its horny skull, was lashing the water into a froth of foam. Morgan had struck just in time. He had struck a death-blow, and lifted the aeronef.

Silently they watched the end. Hissing and screaming, the dreadful monster plunged and tossed and thrashed the water with its paddles and neck. It was a plesiosaurus. The end came at last. It rolled, and the current washed it down. At once Wings of Gold sank.

With the rope in his hands, Morgan peered down. Then the rope whizzed away into one of the clusters of froth. A human arm rose and fell, and a few seconds later Crooks was shaking himself, and winking the water out of his eyes.

"It was me. Why not?" he growled. "I was wet also, and I believe I was—"

"What?" asked Morgan.

Mr. Crooks put his own hand behind him, and edged back until he found the engineer's.

"Feel," he said, in a hoarse whisper. "Was I? But don't let hon! Why not?"

Morgan felt his pulse. It was perfectly steady and even. The cook was a man of iron.

"Feel mine," said the engineer.

It, too, was as steady as a child's.

"We was men," growled Mr. Crooks, shaking the engineer's hand. Nothing could unnerve him. "Why not? I was glad we was here, you and me. We must look arter 'em. Why not? Kids must have nurses."

Then he winked his great, glowing eye and chuckled. He seized a bucket and mop, and began to wash the blood from the deck.

"By thunder!" thought Teddy Morgan. "If I had six men like that I'd steer this boat to the moon!"

Maurice was only bruised.

"You're a brick, Teddy," he said. "I fancied I was a goner. If you hadn't—"

The rest was lost, for Von Haagel had one of his short, fat arms round Maurice, and was shedding tears of joy and remorse.

"Ach, dear lad," he wailed, "and I haf you safe! I do not vant to see der ichtyosaurus. Let us go—let us go! I do not gare if I nefer see him! I will go mit you now, dear lad—dear lad! Ach, let us go!"

Von Haagel did not know what had happened. He had gone to sleep over his Shakespears. They did not tell him that to return the way they had come was impossible.

Poor Jackson was more sick than ever. Crooks changed his clothes, and carried him below. Then the cook went into the cold storage-room and procured frozen beef-tea. Something was amiss. His nose detected it at first, and then his eye. The ammonia pipes, instead of looking white with powdery ice, were damp and shiny. The carcasses of sheep and masses of beef that hung in rows encased in cloth looked all right, but the fish laid on the slabs of slate had a moist appearance.

Crooks sniffed.

"Something has turned," he growled. "This was not the smell of scent. Something was bust. Why not?"

The stench was awful. Crooks looked round, and went out holding his nose. He was whistling when he arrived on deck, though he was aware that he had met with the most terrible calamity of all.

All their meat and fish had turned bad with the exception of their tinned food. Crooks had not tried that. He remembered, and sauntered away again, with his hands in his pockets, to open tin after tin. Salmon, tongue, lobster, corned-beef, tinned peas, apricots, peaches, French beans, rabbit, soups, bloater paste, anchovies—all were bad.

"Why not?" growled the chef. "This was lively."

He watched his chance, and told the dreadful news to Morgan. Teddy did not even wince.

"Feel it," he said, for Crooks to try his pulse.

"And feel that!" growled the cook. "We was men. Why not? But," he added thoughtfully, "that won't cook no dinner. The grub was poison. The flour was all right, and the biscuits was ditto. There was tea and coffee and cocoa, and the potatoes were prime. Why not?"

The engineer shook his head and pointed to the water.

"Fish, Crooks."

"An ikky-what-is-it?" grinned the cook. "Why not? where's the hooks?"

And Crooks went fishing, and caught a splendid ganoid pike on a shark hook baited with a piece of beef. There was no meat for dinner that night. Crooks said he felt too tired to cook—why not?—after his spill. All the same, the smell spoke for itself, and the truth came out.

At dusk they threw every scrap of the rancid fish and meat overboard with the exception of a few sides of bacon. Again the moon was surrounded by many luminous circles.

"Teddy," said Lance, "tell us what you think; tell us the whole truth."

"Well, sir," said Morgan. "I'm not afraid. By thunder! There's plenty of fish, and we've got flour, rice, tea, coffee, and cocoa. We can live without meat. We can— S-sh!"

He held up his hand. A sound came quivering through the night, and trembling through the water. They peered towards the wooded shore.

"What was it, sir?"

"A stag of some kind, I should think," said Lance quickly.

The moon was bright and vivid, and a stretch of gravel gleamed against the background of the wood. The drum and r-r-r of the screws was nothing to them. Their ears had been trained until they hardly heard them as they revolved and droned.

Morgan passed the glasses over, and they listened intently.

"Look!"

Five bulky shadows suddenly darkened the shining gravel. Lance uttered an exclamation.

"Elk!" he muttered.

They were elk, indeed, but such elk. They were gigantic, with mighty spreading horns. They were the elk of long ago, and in comparison, the biggest-moose that roams the Northern American wastes of snow is a mere dog to them.

"They've come down to lick the salt," said Lance, who had shot many an elk.

"It's food," said Teddy Morgan, "and you've got to shoot it, sir."

Lance took down the big elephant gun and loaded it.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes," said Lance, with beating heart.

He propped the gun over the rail. Morgan as cool as an icicle caught the lever. The aeroplane dashed ahead.

They had little hopes of coming close enough to the elk for an easy shot. The aeroplane could not be hidden. Even the great elk, though so strong and powerful, would naturally be timorous creatures, for they had such grim and terrible foes to battle with as the plesiosaurus, and other great lizards. Lance expected them to take flight and go lumbering away into the woods.

"How far will that gun carry?" asked Morgan.

"Oh, the dickens of a way, Teddy; but I couldn't swear to hit it at more than a hundred yards! This gun was made for stopping elephants at close quarters. Oh, dash it, my hand wobbles! I think it would be best to stop here and let them get used to her."

Morgan took the advice. The glass showed the elk gazing more in wonder and curiosity than alarm at the aeroplane. What atom of brain those vast brutes had, was very slow and dull. Morgan could see their eyes, their masses of hair falling from the shaggy neck, and wide-notched horns. As if carved out of brown stone they kept their positions.

"They seem fascinated," said the engineer. "I'm going on very gently. Ah, they are getting nervous!"

One of the males uttered a bell-like sound of warning. The antlered heads swung round. It was touch and go. Lance pulled the trigger and the guns roared.

"Missed!" growled Morgan, gazing through the thin veil of smoke. "No, by thunder, he's down—he's down!"

"What is dot? What do you fire?" shouted Von Haegel's voice.

"Is anything wrong?" shouted someone else.

Lance brandished the gun above his head. He had not hit the brute he had aimed at, but he had not wasted a shot. All the elks had fled, except one, which came rolling and kicking back down the slope, its spine shattered by an explosive bullet.

"Why not?" chuckled the cook. "Stag was wenison, and wenison was not bad prog."

"Wait till you taste it, cooky," said Lance, "it may be as tough as corrugated iron."

"It was suplime, dear lads, it was glorious!" cried the professor. "Ach, I had such a pain in der inside of me when I dink dot perhaps we haf to shoot and eat der pterodactyl or der plesiosaurus. Ach, it did make me veel vunny!"

"Grilled ichthyosaurus and Labyrinthodon sauce—ugh!" said Maurice. "By Jove, what a giant!"

The elk lay on its side quite dead. Lance had made a remarkably lucky shot. Morgan dropped the rope ladder, and Crooks whetted his butcher's knife.

"I was going to talk to him. Why not?" he remarked. "I have cut up some carcasses, but never a chap like that! Why not? We live and larn. There was more 'air on his neck than on Tooter's. If not, why so? Gimme the saw and my ball-costume."

Crooks donned his blue smock, and stepped down on to the body of the elk. It was not pleasant work. The musky smell was disagreeable. However, the work had to be done. Lance helped, and so did Tooter. Maurice had too weak a stomach to become an amateur butcher, and Professor Von Haegel was seized with an attack of that tired feeling which compelled him to retire and amuse Jackson.

Nearly a ton of coarse, dark-looking meat was brought aboard, and transferred to the cold-storage room, which Fordham had managed to put to rights. The meat was anything but tempting. The workers had a bath afterwards, and they needed it.

"It looks horrible stuff," said Lance; "but it's better than—ugh—pterodactyl. I hope it will keep. We can't expect to be so lucky very often, I only hit that chap by a fluke."

There was bacon for breakfast as usual, the night having passed without any alarm. Crooks pickled the elk's tongue, and bravely shut himself up in the galley to taste the venison. Crooks seemed unusually pallid later on. He said the meat resembled linoleum boiled in paraffin, but that it might improve with keeping.

"Blackbirds!" said Tooter. "You don't mean to say you tasted it?"

Crooks rubbed both his hands over his waistcoat and moaned.

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"I have, and why not?" he growled. "It was not all joy. The human stummick was a grand machine, but I have bust the works of mine. Why not? I must have him repaired with a dose of salts and senna."

Morgan spent most of the morning in the engine-room. Von Haegel wrote up the log, and chatted to the invalid, but he flatly declined to come on deck. The sight of the untrodden forests maddened him. He was wild to go ashore and examine the trees and geological formations. But Morgan, who was really in command, said "No," again, and Lance and Maurice unkindly, from Von Haegel's point of view, backed him up in his refusal.

Once more the heat was almost unbearable. Tooter and Crooks foolishly put up an awning. It was quite useless. The heat did not come from the sun, which was pale and hazy. It came from the land, from the lukewarm water, from the air itself. It was volcanic heat beyond question. Columns of smoke or steam rose in many directions; the summits of the mountains were hidden by dense masses of vapour.

Fordham estimated the size of the lake as roughly eight or nine hundred square miles—that is, he guessed its length to be about fifty, and its width something less than forty. No bottom was found at sixty fathoms. Wings of Gold remained in her old position, while a very delicate and dangerous piece of work went on in the cold storage-room, where Lance was compounding more of the explosive used in recharging the cylinder with liquid air.

"Which way, gentlemen?" asked Morgan. "I am at your service. Which way?"

"Right, left, ahead, or astern?" said Lance. "You're talking through your headgear, Teddy. We can only do good by going in a circle, and it doesn't matter a farthing dip which way. Push her along, and let's find a gap."

New beauties revealed themselves in swift, bewildering succession. At one place a torrent flung itself down over a thousand feet, throwing up a wall of spray.

The salt lake was again perfectly calm. The heat increased towards the afternoon, and then the professor, in a limp and clammy state, crawled up the ladder with a damp towel round his head, and fan in each hand. At the top of the ladder the cook was peeling potatoes.

"Der whole place is ein redhot ball. Shaf! Pooch! Pah! I do melt like ein lump of butter."

Von Haegel flopped down beside Crooks, and fanned himself.

"I would like a bath myself," growled the cook. "Why not? Bathin' is out of the question, there was too many ikky things. Why not?"

"Ach, it was derrible!" puffed the professor, blowing his nose. "There will be none of me left soon. Phew! I pant, and I blow, and der perspiration soak me. Pegone! You shall not laugh at me, teufel of ein bird! Go away!"

Jackson's bantam hopped over the grating and leered at the professor, with its cunning head on one side. He did not seem to understand Von Haegel's Japanese fans, and it had no affection for the professor.

"Go away mit you!" repeated the professor. "Haf you not already enough mischief done? Haf you not trod in mine ink and walked over mine book? Haf you not already stolen mine sbectacles? Go along mit you, teufel of ein fowl! Is dot enough not for a little few hours?"

"Craw!" said the bantam. Professor Von Haegel dipped his hand into the pail and selected a small potato.

The bantam knew exactly what the professor was going to do. It prepared for a sudden departure as it watched the German's arm creep back ready to discharge the missile.

"Pegone!" roared the professor. "Shoo!"

He hurled the potato, but his aim was wild. The bantam dived low, with a shrill cackle of disgust, and alighted on the head of Maurice, who ascended.

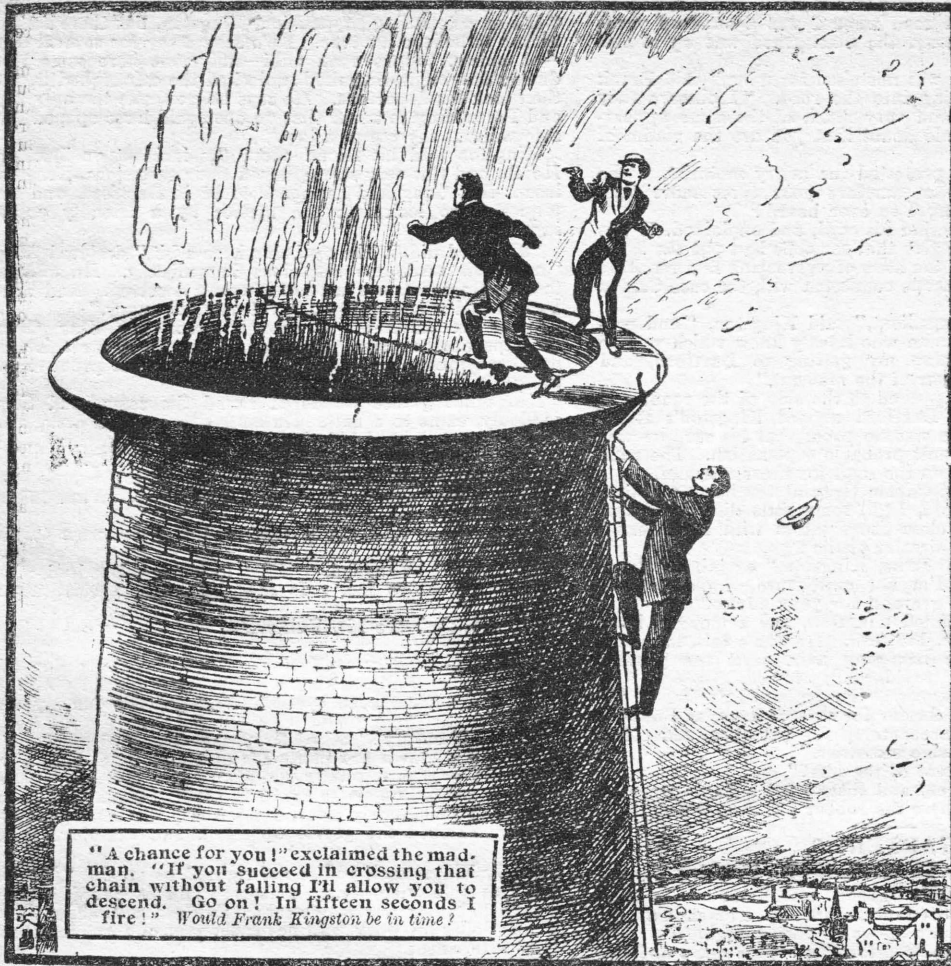
The potato, however, was not wasted. It skimmed off the grating, cannoned against a column, and hit Tooter exactly between the eyes.

The hairy man had a pail of water in one hand, and in the other a mop, and he was just walking forward, deep in thought, just close to the hatch. The arrival of the unexpected gift scattered his thoughts. With a grunt and a scream, Tooter staggered and scattered the water right into the professor's handkerchief pocket.

The professor fell back, and the mop circled round, and took the cook under the chin.

Crooks fell back also, and as he fell he kicked the pail containing the water and the potatoes violently into the air. It turned over, and fell upon Von Haegel's foot, smothering the learned man in tubers, skins, and moisture, bounced up, went bumping down the ladder just in time to give Fordham a blow on the chest, and to scare the bantam almost out of his senses.

(A splendid instalment of this thrilling serial again next Thursday.)



"A chance for you!" exclaimed the madman. "If you succeed in crossing that chain without falling I'll allow you to descend. Go on! In fifteen seconds I fire!" Would Frank Kingston be in time?

CHAPTER 1.

A Wire from Carson Gray.

YES, Dolores. I believe it will prove a very pleasant evening, and I shall be delighted to come with you," exclaimed Frank Kingston, as he lolled back in an easy chair before the fire at No. 100, Charing Cross.

"That's splendid, Frank!" cried Miss Dolores O'Brien, his fiancée, her large eyes alight with pleasure. "I was so afraid you would be too busy to come. I shall want you to call for me not later than three o'clock this afternoon, you know."

"Very well, little girl," smiled the great detective, "I'll be there prompt to the minute."

Dolores had just arrived, and had called to ask Frank Kingston if he could spare time enough to take her to a social gathering—organised by some of her friends—at Twickenham that evening. As it happened, Kingston had no important work on hand, and instantly acquiesced.

"Perhaps it would be better—" commenced Dolores; but she was interrupted by a tap at the door. The next moment Tim Curtis appeared, and in his hand he held a buff-coloured envelope.

"Telegram, sir," he announced.

"Oh, Frank, I'll be bound that's a message to take you somewhere right the other side of England!" cried Dolores disappointedly. "What a nuisance!"

"Not so far as that, Dolores," smiled Kingston, looking up from the wire. "Dartford, as a matter of fact. It's very unfortunate, but I'm afraid I must go. Just as we had made the arrangement, too! Look at this!"

Dolores took the telegram with a slight puckering of her pretty lips—for she was keenly disappointed at this spoiling of their plans. The telegram was from Carson Gray, Frank Kingston's firm friend—a detective who, until Kingston commenced practice, had been considered the smartest in London.

"Rather puzzling case. Would interest you," the wire ran. "Can you come at once? Your advice would be welcome.—CARSON GRAY."

"There's no help for it, I'm afraid," said Kingston ruefully. "Gray would not like it if I didn't go, and he found I'd been to a social gathering. Besides, his message rather interests me."

Dolores did not complain in the least; she resigned herself to the situation, and declared she would go to the party with another lady. Twenty minutes later Kingston's consulting-room at No. 100, Charing Cross was empty. Dolores had returned home, and her famous lover was well on the way to Dartford, in his powerful Rolls-Royce landaulette. Fraser was at the wheel.

The day was a bright one in March, and the roads were in fairly good condition. All went well until Bexley was reached; here, on account of the Crayford road being under repair, it was necessary to turn off and complete their journey via Dartford Heath.

Half-way across this stretch of common, Fraser could see another motor-car at a standstill, right in the middle of the road, which was not exceedingly wide. Fraser grunted.

"What's up with the silly ass?" he muttered to himself. "I should think anybody would have more sense than to stop the car bang in the centre, without leaving any room—Hallo!"

The driver of the stationary car had walked forward a few paces, and was standing right in the path of the Rolls-Royce, his right-hand raised. Fraser put the brakes on and brought the car to a standstill.

"What's up?" he inquired. "Anything wrong?" "Wrong!" exclaimed the other, evidently a gentleman, "Great Scott, I've never experienced such a thing in all my life. Three tyres punctured, and I can't move a yard! Look at the road!"

He pointed downwards, and Fraser's eyes opened wide as he saw several huge large-headed nails dotted about among the moist earth. Then his eyes travelled to the deflated car, and he noticed that three of its wheels had deflated tyres.

"It was done purposely!" fumed the motorist. "These confounded nails were covered with sand, and I knew

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nothing about them until I ran over them. I saw somebody doing something on the road when I was a hundred yards away, but I never guessed the blackguard was up to this game!"

"I'm afraid your car was mistaken for mine," said Frank Kingston quietly, stepping into the road. "I observe they are both landaulettes, and very much of the same appearance. There can be little doubt that you are the victim of a mistake."

"But, my dear sir," protested the angry motorist, "who on earth should want to puncture your tyres more than mine? It beats anything I've ever heard!"

Kingston handed the other his card, and explained. It was very evident to the detective that someone had put the large nails across the road, in the hope of preventing him reaching Dartford—evidently someone connected with the case Carson Gray had wired about.

"It was an absurd expedient," said Kingston, "and presumably the work of a man who hardly knew which way to turn. He wanted to stop my getting to Dartford, and thought of this on the spur of the moment."

The disabled car was pushed to the side of the road, and its owner conveyed to Dartford aboard Kingston's Rolls-Royce. Of course, there was no proof that his surmise was correct, but it was the most probable explanation. The nails might have been placed on the road for sheer mischief.

Frank Kingston found Carson Gray at the large premises of Messrs. Gerald Fullford, Ltd., some little distance out of the town. He was in close conversation with Mr. Gerald Fullford, the managing director of the firm.

"It's decent of you to come, Kingston," exclaimed Gray, as he shook hands. "I'm not quite sure of one or two points, and I should be grateful for your advice."

"I'll do my best," replied Kingston, and a moment later he was introduced to Mr. Fullford. He was a tall, big man, clean-shaven, and with iron-grey hair. At the present moment he was looking considerably worried.

"It's robbery, Mr. Kingston," he explained anxiously. "I have been away in Manchester for several days, and during my absence a burglar has entered the premises, and rifled the strong-room of valuable securities."

"What is the full extent of the loss?"

"£25,000, Mr. Kingston, and there's not a single trace to show who did it, and where the robber has disappeared to."

CHAPTER 2.

Kingston Investigates—The Culprit—An Exciting Chase.

FRANK KINGSTON listened attentively while Mr. Fullford placed the facts before him. The safe, a very large one, was let into the wall in the managing director's office. It appeared to have been forcibly broken open, and the securities annexed, together with about £50 in gold, which had been lying in one of the drawers.

The police believed it to be the work of a well-known burglar, who was suspected of other robberies in the district.

"The only thing I am afraid of, Mr. Kingston," said the head of the firm, "is that the robber will have disposed of his booty before he is captured. It is a most unfortunate circumstance, but the securities are quite untraceable; therefore, they are equally as valuable to the thief as actual money."

"Quite so," agreed Kingston. "It is, indeed, a pity the securities are so easily to be disposed of. I suppose, Gray, you have not got on the scent yet?"

"Well, I won't say that exactly," replied Carson Gray, who was closely examining the safe, "for I've got a suspicion it's the work of a certain American cracksmen. The manner in which he has forced this safe is reminiscent of other cases. Come and look for yourself."

Kingston did so, and Mr. Fullford left the two detectives to themselves. He was a busy man, and had other matters to attend to. For ten minutes Frank Kingston examined the battered door of the safe; then he straightened himself, and looked at his companion with his usual calm, immobile expression.

"Well?" asked Gray eagerly.

"I believe you have come to the same conclusion as myself, my dear fellow," drawled the famous detective, with a smile. "That safe was never forced open by your American friend, if I'm any judge."

"That was mere bluff. But what's your opinion?"

"My opinion is that the door was first unlocked, and the battering done afterwards," declared Kingston quietly. "It has been cleverly faked, but I don't think I'm mistaken."

"That's my conclusion entirely," said Carson Gray, with keen satisfaction. "Look here, Kingston, I don't know whether I'm mistaken or not, but I've a firm conviction I could place my hand upon the thief in a very few minutes."

"You mean, of course, Mr. Fullford himself?" said Kingston quietly.

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"By Jove, you've guessed it as well, then!" cried Gray. "It's an astounding supposition, Kingston, but there's every reason to believe it's true. He's been away for several days—of course, to prove an alibi—and came here some time during last night, disguised, unlocked the safe, faked it, and then took his departure. He says he possesses the only key, and I'm willing to swear that no one could have opened that safe without the use of a key."

Kingston told his friend about the incident on Dartford Heath, and this only strengthened their suspicions. Kingston learnt that Gray had happened to be in Dartford, and was requested to look into the matter by a friendly police-inspector.

"Fullford didn't like me being here a bit," declared Gray, "and that made me suspicious immediately. He affected to be delighted to see me, but I wasn't deceived. And when I suggested wiring for you, he almost got angry."

"But we haven't got enough proof, my dear Gray. Perhaps another man would be willing to swear this safe had been broken open. What we want is real proof—some thing Fullford can't deny."

Kingston's glance wandered round the room, and then, suddenly, came to a halt. He crossed to a small desk, and, picking up a pair of kid gloves, examined them closely.

"Well, upon my soul," he murmured, "this is a lucky find, indeed! Mr. Fullford doesn't appear to be quite such a cautious man as I gave him credit for being. What do you make of them, Gray?"

Carson Gray took the gloves, and moved across to the window.

"Nothing," he replied. "They look like a hundred other pair of gloves to me. Is there anything special about them?"

"Yes, if they are Mr. Fullford's."

"They are."

"Then we need go no further, Gray. On those gloves is clear proof of Fullford's guilt. You can't see it? Well, I suppose my extra keen eyesight is responsible for my discovery."

"What discovery?" asked Gray eagerly.

"On those gloves are thousands of minute steel filings—so fine, that they are totally hidden to the eyesight of the ordinary person, unless he knows of their presence. My own vision being singularly clear, I saw the filings at a glance."

Gray snatched the gloves up again and examined them afresh.

"Gad, Kingston, if you're not right!" he cried. "You've got eyes like magnifying glasses! This is proof, man—enough to satisfy any magistrate. Fullford used these while he was doing his work, and never thought of throwing them away afterwards."

"Of course. The whole affair has been carried out in a most amateurish fashion, clearly showing that our man is not a professional criminal. He has made several slips, though the error of not destroying the gloves is excusable. I don't suppose he ever thought of the matter. At all events—"

"But the motive?" interrupted Gray. "What on earth should he want to rob his own safe for?"

"That's a question I cannot answer," reported Kingston. "All I know is, we are quite justified in arresting Mr. Fullford without proceeding further with the inquiry. The thing has been absurdly simple—though I realise why you requested me to come down."

"I didn't like to take such a drastic step merely on my own initiative. But now we'll soon have Mr. Gerald Fullford under lock and key. Whether amateurish or not, he's possessed of any amount of audacity."

Frank Kingston and Gray continued talking for some minutes, and neither of them noticed that one side of the private office was merely matchboarding, papered like the rest of the room. But it was so, and behind it stood the managing director himself, pale and agitated. A wild light shone in his eyes, and he looked a very different man now to what he had done when he shook hands with Kingston.

"The interfering busybodies!" he snarled under his breath. "They've found me out already, before I've had a chance to prepare for flight. Good heavens, and I thought I was absolutely secure! If neither of these detectives had come on the scene, I should never have been suspected!"

He paced up and down the other room with jerky stride.

"Hang them!" he muttered. "They've ruined the whole game. I must go at once if I'm to stand any chance of getting clear away! Ah, there's a train goes in ten minutes time—a non-stop to London. Can I catch it? I could disguise myself in the train, and— Yes, it's worth trying."

Fullford came to his decision, and, donning his overcoat and hat, he grasped a small handbag and left the premises. He was in an unenviable position. To all intents and purposes, he was a rich man, head of the firm of Gerald Fullford, Ltd., and in a fine position.

But the real facts were very different. For years he had

been in the habit of paying visits to London, and gambling for heavy stakes. He was a bachelor, and so could go when and how he liked. During the last ten months his luck had been of the very worst, and now his debts had grown to enormous proportions. His creditors refused to wait longer, and ruin stared him in the face.

Then it was that Fullford thought of a daring scheme—to rob his own safe of £25,000 worth of securities, which really belonged to the firm, and pay his debts. In this way he would clear himself, and be able to start afresh. How his scheme succeeded has been seen. If he had taken his time and arranged the coup with greater care, there is little doubt that he would have been quite successful. But he was inexperienced, and did not consider the details.

Now ruin stared him in the face. But there was a chance of escape; he still had £8,000 of the stolen money in his possession, and this would enable him to get to the Continent or America and start afresh. The question was, could he give Kingston and Gray the slip?

He strode along the street quickly, and took a short cut to the station. His hopes rose as he saw that the train was signalled. Meanwhile, Frank Kingston and Gray had decided to boldly confront Fullford, and give him the option of going to the police-station quietly.

With this object in view they left the private office, and made their way to the general office, where the managing director had been working that morning. This was adjoining the works, which were extensive.

"Mr. Fullford?" repeated the head clerk, in reply to Kingston's inquiry. "Why, he went out about five minutes ago. Had his bag and stick with him."

"Do you know where he was going?" asked Kingston quickly.

"No; somewhere in the town, I suppose."
"He'll give us the slip, Gray, if we're not sharp," declared Kingston, when the two got outside. "Look here, you rush off to the station, and I'll go to his private house. They're both about the same distance, and we don't know whether he'll make a bid for liberty by train or motor-car—that is, if he possesses a motor."

A minute later the two had parted. Carson Gray hastened with all speed to the station, and as he hurried up the approach, he heard a train rumble in. He broke into a run, and burst into the booking-office just as the guard blew his whistle.

Past the barrier he went, then gave a cry of triumph as he observed Gerald Fullford just scrambling into a first-class compartment. In two bounds Carson Gray was across the platform, and before Fullford realised what was happening, he found himself grasped by strong hands.

CHAPTER 3.

Up the Shaft—The Black Chasm.

"T'S no good, Mr. Fullford," exclaimed Carson Gray sternly. "Will you come quietly, or—"

"Be hanged to you!" snarled Fullford furiously. In one second he had lost all his self-possession. The knowledge that he would be captured after all had momentarily turned him into a maniac. His chagrin was too much for him, and it was transformed into uncontrollable fury.

His grasped hold of Carson Gray with powerful arms, his eyes aflame with passion, and his breath coming in short gasps. The compartment door was still open, and the train, which had commenced moving out, came to an abrupt standstill. At the same second Fullford exerted all his strength, and Carson Gray pitched backwards out of the carriage. He landed in a heap, and before he could rise—partly on account of a blow on the ankle—the guilty man sprang out and raced up the platform.

"Stop him!" cried Carson Gray. "Great Scott, can't somebody—"

He saved his breath in the middle of a sentence, for Fullford had leapt over a low wall, and was racing along a bare piece of land. There was nobody there to stop him, and he rushed on unchecked, Carson Gray coming behind him at practically the same speed. But the fugitive had gained a good start and, keeping close to the railway, he continued his flight. For the time being, he had lost possession of his reason, his only thought being to escape the crowd behind him, for in his terror he imagined a whole host of pursuers were following him.

But Carson Gray was alone. He had outpaced the railway porters and other people long ago, and was slowly but surely closing up with Fullford.

"Where's he going?" he gasped to himself. "Well, I'm hanged!"

Fullford had dashed across a piece of meadowland to a huge factory—his own works. But this was not the reason for Gray's sudden exclamation of astonishment. Instead of dodging round the building Fullford had stopped at the foot of the massive chimney-stack, which was two hundred

feet high. An iron ladder led right to the top, and the fugitive had commenced clambering up this with reckless speed.

"He's mad!" thought Gray, as he came to a halt at the foot of the ladder. "We've got him now without any further trouble. As soon as he recovers his senses, he'll realise that, and come down. Whew! It was warm work!"

The detective stood there watching. He did not notice a hurrying figure a good distance away, in the opposite direction to the station. It was Frank Kingston; he had seen the chase, and was hurrying to Gray's assistance. Suddenly Gray caught his breath in. At the very top Fullford had slipped, and now hung with only one foot and one hand.

"Help!" he cried faintly. "Help!"
Without a second's hesitation Carson Gray commenced the ascent. Up he went quickly, although he realised that if Fullford's hold gave way he, himself, would probably be knocked flying off the ladder. But at last he reached the top, and attempted to assist Fullford.

"Hold on tight!" he exclaimed breathlessly.
"Yes, I'll hold on tight!" came a rasping voice from the other. "Up you come! I tricked you nicely, eh? Ha, ha, ha!"

The laugh made Carson Gray's blood run cold, and before he could move from his precarious position, he was grasped by the temporary madman and dragged upwards! The strength displayed by Fullford was amazing, and the next moment he and Carson Gray were staring at one another, face to face.

They were standing on the ledge which ran round the top of the chimney-stack—a ledge no more than two feet wide, on one side was the ground, two hundred feet below, and on the other a black, yawning chasm, from which a thin, hazy and warm vapour was rising. Gray's position was a terrible one.

"Now, my friend, we'll see who's got the upper hand!" cried Fullford jeeringly. "You and your friend Kingston thought to arrest me, eh? We'll see! Now, then, stand up!"

Something glittered in his hand, and Gray saw that it was a revolver. He realised that he had better do exactly as he was told. Otherwise, with Fullford in his present condition, he would be sacrificing his life uselessly. Suddenly, the infuriated man's eyes lit up cunningly, and he pointed to a loose, sooty chain which was fastened across the mouth of the chimney, a distance of nine feet.

"A chance for you," he exclaimed with a chuckle. "If you succeed in crossing that without falling, I'll allow you to descend in safety. But you've got to do it with your feet—walk across, you understand?"

Gray looked round him hopelessly, his face pale and set. What could he do but comply? It seemed certain death either way. Then his eyes lit up with hope. Behind Fullford a form was gradually appearing. It was Frank Kingston, coming to the rescue.

"Go on!" ordered Fullford sharply. "In fifteen seconds I fire!"

Gray made a pretence of commencing the impossible journey, to gain time, then his heart leapt as he heard a scream issue from Fullford's lips. Kingston had snatched the revolver from his grasp, and flung it into the chasm. Next second Fullford was upon him, snarling like a tiger cheated of its prey.

"You, too!" he shouted. "I'll kill you both!"
Carson Gray watched with a sick feeling at his heart as Frank Kingston and his assailant struggled on the two-foot ledge. To help them was impossible in that confined space. All at once Fullford slipped, and he fell backwards, Kingston on top of him. The scoundrel's head struck the brickwork, and he lapsed into unconsciousness. Gray moved cautiously towards Kingston, hardly able to speak.

But Kingston was as unfurried as ever.

"Upon my word, my dear Gray," he exclaimed coolly, "I really believe this is the loftiest capture we've ever made! But I vote we get down; these fumes aren't exactly pleasant, are they?"

Half an hour later Kingston and Carson Gray were standing before the former's Rolls-Royce, pulling on their gloves. Fullford was not hurt, and the doctors declared he would completely recover his health and reason; which had only been lost through sheer fury. He was now in charge of the police.

"Well, Gray," Frank Kingston observed, "when I got your wire I hardly expected to complete the case in so short a time. Quick work, eh?"

"Well, rather," replied Carson Gray with a laugh. "It's barely two-thirty now."

Kingston's eyes lit up.
"Is that all?" he exclaimed gladly. "By Jove, I shall be able to take Dolores to that social gathering, after all! Fraser, drive like the very dickens, and get home by three!"

THE END.

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Next Thursday's Grand, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co.:

"CUSSY'S APRIL FOOLS!" By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

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OUR SPECIAL WEEKLY FEATURE

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The subject is an old one, but the incidents connected therewith in this splendid story are decidedly new and lively. The one and only Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gets a little of his own back, and fairly has his chums "on toast" this time.

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Back Numbers Wanted.

Would any reader care to exchange either "The Inventor's Rival" or "Bound by Honour" for one of the three following—"Tom Merry's Slave," "Tom Merry & Co.'s Downfall," or "His False Chum," with D. Nanson, of 45, King Alfred Street, Derby?

J. Bullen, of Langton Matravers, Dorset, wishes to buy back numbers of THE GEM Library. Any numbers up to 118 (April 23rd, 1910) acceptable.

F. Stevens, 77, Brettenham Road, Walthamstow, wishes to obtain all the back numbers of THE GEM Library.

Can any reader supply F. Randall with the halfpenny issues of THE GEM Library? Address to 211, Monega Road, Manor Park, Essex.

Can any reader supply G. Wright, of 27, Plevna Street, West Hartlepool, free of charge, with any back numbers of THE GEM and "The Magnet" Libraries?

F. Bailey, 5, Broomfield Place, Newport, Salop, has 33 copies of THE GEM, three of which he will exchange for one copy of the "Boys' Friend 3d. Library."

E. Rose, 9, Ann Place, Holly Walk, Enfield, would like to hear from any reader who would be willing to exchange back numbers of THE GEM and "The Magnet" Libraries.

R. A. Irving, of Brier Hey, Heads Nook, Nr. Carlisle, is in need of back numbers—especially No. 172—of "The Magnet" Library. Would any readers care to supply them?

J. P. O'Mara, Orange, New South Wales, wishes to obtain Numbers 164 to 168 of THE GEM Library.

Replies in Brief.

Leila Stone (Ovenden).—Thanks for your letter and criticisms, and also for the suggestion you make in regard to the competitions, which I will bear in mind when planning out future competitions. Yes, Crawford is still one of Frank Kingston's assistants, though he has not been very prominent of late. Concerning your query about "Wings of Gold," the idea is that this story was written after the return of the expedition from notes supplied by Maurice Fordham, one of the adventurers who took part in the strange voyage.

Helena O. S., and Ethel J.—Thanks for your appreciative letter. Martin Clifford has written a few stories in the past outside those of Tom Merry & Co., which have appeared in THE GEM Library for so long, but all such are long out of print. The principal ones were several "Boys' Friend 3d. Library," which also dealt with the adventures of Tom Merry & Co., but the only way to obtain this is to insert a request for same under the "Back Numbers Wanted" Column on this page.

As you are so keen on Mr. Clifford's stories, I will insert a request for his "Boys' Friend 3d. Library" books in due course on your behalf.

A. B. (Ramsgate).—Thanks for your letter. Yes, you will find the characters you mention re-appearing from time to time in the St. Jim's tales. You must remember that it is impossible to make every one of the host of minor characters contained in this series prominent, except very occasionally.

The idea of a Harry Wharton & Co. 3d. Book has been proposed to me very often, and you may rely on my doing my best to get Frank Richards to write one as soon as ever the pressure of his work will allow. I will put your request for the halfpenny number of THE GEM in the proper column in a few weeks' time.

Hints on Forming an Amateur Dramatic Society.

At the request of many readers of "THE GEM Library," I am giving a few hints as to how to form an amateur dramatic society, and how to obtain the necessary articles, such as grease-paints, wigs, clothes, and scenery.

First of all, I will take the forming of the society. It is really only necessary, at first, to get a few boys and girls together who would be willing and able to stand before a few critical people and act any sort of part without being nervous or shy. Having obtained the number, it is advisable next to elect a kind of committee, comprising a stage-manager and business manager, and to hold a meeting to discuss the necessary preliminary arrangements, such as hiring a room or hall where the practices and rehearsals can be held. To save expense, the drawing-room or a large parlour of a member's house is very suitable.

Having discovered the room and the different values of the members as actors, the next thing to consider is the entertainment to be put before the audience. It is not worth while attempting a difficult piece at once, and it is sometimes advisable to learn at first a few pieces which can be given to a select party of friends, as trial pieces. At these trials can be selected the members who are most suited to play the leading parts. There are many theatrical firms who cater for amateurs, and who for a penny stamp will send their complete lists. Abel Heywood & Son, of 47 to 53, Lever Street, Manchester, are the publishers of many popular dramas, etc., and willingly send their lists. In London, Barr & Co., of 38a, Bow Lane, E.C., is a very popular firm. A. W. Gamage, of Holborn, London, E.C., also supply theatrical necessities.

When the piece is decided upon at a general meeting of the committee, the rehearsals should be entered into with a whole-hearted spirit, and efforts should not slacken, or the piece will be a failure.

The placing of the principal parts should be done only after very careful tests and consideration.

Now, with regard to the costume and properties that will be required. This will, of course, have to be left until the piece is chosen, but in most cases the clothes are not of a very expensive nature, and the scenery can nearly always be rigged up on the spur of the moment. The instructions as to clothing and scenery are always given with the piece. In some cases the "properties" can be made at home, especially the clothes, while in others it is wise to buy or hire the things from the local theatrical costumiers, who will nearly always quote special prices for the whole outfit. All the wigs that are necessary at first are really best bought. If, however, the concern is to be run as cheaply as possible, the following is a good way to make wigs: First of all get someone to cut the crown out of canvas to fit closely to the skull. Cover this with Spanish moss or curled horsehair. Cotton also looks very effective if properly arranged. Eyebrows, moustaches, or beards can be made of white or black cotton or horsehair, stuck or sewn on to coarse canvas. They are fastened to the face with a little mucilage. As grease-paint is not easily made at home, it is safest to buy it. It is not expensive.

Suitable pieces to begin with are supplied by such firms as those mentioned. The following two pieces, supplied by Barr & Co., if played properly, should prove very popular: "Circumstantial Evidence," for seven males and four females, and "Saved From Crime," for five males and four females.

"GEM" CORRESPONDENCE EXCHANGE.—A list of readers desiring to exchange Correspondence with fellow-readers will be found on the back cover of this issue.

THE EDITOR.