Every Thursday.

Complete Stories for All and Every Story a Gem.

STAGE-STRUCK!

A New, Long, Complete Tale of the Terrible Three at St. Jim's.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.

Lowther Has His Own Way.

MONTY LOWTHER came into Tom Merry's study, in the Shell passage, with a frown upon his brow. He flung himself into a chair, and stretched out his legs with his hands in his trousers' pockets, and stared at Tom Merry gloomily.

Tom Merry did not look up for a moment. He was writing busily, and as he was writing a leading article for "Tom Merry's Weekly," he could not be expected to notice for the moment that Lowther was out of sorts. His pen scratched away busily.

Monty Lowther grunted.

Still Tom Merry continued to write. But another grunt, more emphatic than the first, caused him to look up. Then he observed the deep wrinkle in his chum's brow.

"Hallo!" said Tom Merry, laying down his pen. "Anything wrong?"

Lowther grunted for a third time.

"Yes."

"What's the row?"

Grunt!

"Haven't you done your contribution for the 'Weekly'?"

"Blow the 'Weekly'!"

"Oh, draw it mild!" said Tom Merry indignantly. "What are you grousing about? Just been bowled for a duck's egg?"

"Oh, blow the cricket!"

"Linton given you an impot?"

"Blow Linton!"

"Blow everybody and everything, if you like," said Tom Merry. "But what's the matter? Wherefore that worried brow?"

"Kildare's a beast!"

"Oh, it's Kildare, is it?" said Tom Merry, in surprise. "What do you mean by calling him a beast, you ass?"

Tom Merry spoke rather warmly. Kildare, of the Sixth, the captain of St. Jim's, was the most popular captain the old school had ever had, and he was the greatest of heroes in the eyes of the juniors.

"Because he is one," growled Lowther.

"Oh, rats!"

Lowther glared.

"He won't give me a pass out," he condescended to explain.

"What do you want a pass out for?"

Lowther snorted.

"I want to go to the theatre at Wayland—the Theatre Royal, you know. There's a London company there, doing the 'Counter Girl'—musical comedy. I want to see it. And Kildare says a chap ought not to want to see that rot. Cheek!"

Tom Merry laughed.

"I shouldn't wonder if Kildare is quite right," he said. "Anyway, it's no good backing up against our respected skipper, Monty; so you'll have to grin and bear it."

"That's just what I'm not going to do," said Monty Lowther determinedly.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm going all the same."

Tom Merry's face became very grave.

"You can't do that, Monty," he said seriously. "If the skipper says you're not to go, you can't go. You can't ignore him."

Lowther grunted again.

"I'm not going to be bossed. I want to go, and I'm going. What I want to know is, will you come with me?"

Tom Merry shook his head.

Next Thursday:
"BOUGHT HONOURS!" AND "THE SCHOOL UNDER CANVAS!"

"Don't be an ass, old man. You can't go without Kildare's permission, since you've asked him. Going out without a pass is breaking bounds. There will be trouble. I'm not going to let you go."

"I'm going!" growled Lowther.

"You're not!" said Tom Merry cheerfully. "Not if I have to hold you back by the ears, old man. I'm not going to see you make an ass of yourself. Besides, what do you want to see a musical comedy for?"

"Br-r-r-r-r!"

"That's not an intelligible answer, old man. You can't go."

"I'm going."

"Rats!"

"I'm going, I tell you!" roared Lowther.

"Rot!"

Monty Lowther rose to his feet, and with a frowning brow stamped out of the study. Tom Merry jumped up.

"Lowther, old man! Monty!"

There was no reply from the Shell fellow. He went down the passage with heavy footsteps, evidently in an excited state of mind. Tom Merry's brow wrinkled. He glanced at the valuable literary work he had been engaged upon, and hesitated whether to follow his chum and remonstrate with him further. He was thinking it out when Manners came into the study with a roll of films in his hand.

"Got the scissors here?" asked Manners.

"Blow the scissors!"

"Ass! I want to cut these films. What's the matter?" asked Manners, noticing the troubled frown on Tom Merry's boyish brow.

"That ass Lowther. He says he's going over to Wayland to the theatre, and Kildare has told him he can't."

"Well, he can't, then. Where's the scissors?"

"But he says he's going all the same."

Manners whistled.

"There will be trouble if he does. This is what comes of your blessed Amateur Dramatic Society!" said Manners. "Monty seems to be simply stage-struck lately. Look at all that rot he's been sticking up here!"

Manners waved his hand towards the walls of the study. On almost every available space of the walls were stuck pictures and photographs belonging to Monty Lowther. They were portraits of actresses and actors in various stage costumes—some of them in somewhat scanty costumes. One especially large one was a picture of Miss Kitty Skitty, the leading lady in the "Counter Girl" musical comedy. The lady was represented dancing the famous "Counter Girl" Waltz, with a gentleman evidently under the influence of drink.

Tom Merry and Manners had both raised strong objections to the addition of that picture to Monty Lowther's theatrical art gallery, but they had given way on the point to please their chum. Monty Lowther had lately taken the stage fever, and taken it badly. He did not want to play Hamlet or Othello, like so many youthful aspirants for histrionic honours; his "line," as he explained to his chums, was musical comedy, and lately he had confided to Tom Merry and Manners that he was really wasting his time at St. Jim's, and that there was a big world for him to conquer on the stage. And he had become quite huffy when his chums roared with laughter at the idea.

Tom Merry frowned at the photographs with which the study walls bristled.

"Rot!" he growled. "Fancy old Lowther being such an ass! I shouldn't be surprised at it in D'Arcy, of the Fourth; but one of us ought to have more sense."

Manners nodded, and walked over to the window. The sun was setting on the old quadrangle of St. Jim's, and the fellows were coming in from the cricket-field. Manners caught sight of Monty Lowther in the quad. Lowther was walking quickly in the direction of the school gates, which were not yet closed, though Taggles, the porter, had come out to close them.

"He's going out," said Manners, frowning.

"The ass! Look here, Manners, we'd better stop him. Better than letting him get a ragging from the Head."

"Yes, rather!"

"Come on, then!"

Tom Merry ran out of the study, with Manners at his heels. The bond of friendship that united the Terrible Three was very strong, and any member of that select band would have done anything for the others. And Tom Merry and Manners felt that it was "up" to them to keep Lowther from kicking over the traces in this way.

They ran out into the quadrangle, just as Blake, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy, of the Fourth, reached the School House, coming in with their bats under their arms. The four Fourth-Formers lined up in front of the Shell fellows, and Blake raised his hand.

"Halt!" he said.

"Rats!" said Tom Merry. "Don't play the giddy goat now—we're in a hurry."

"Halt!"

"Bosh!"

Tom Merry and Manners rushed on; and the four Fourth-Formers closed in upon them, and in a moment there was a wild struggle in progress.

"Can't be allowed!" panted Blake, as he whirled round in a terrific wrestle with Tom Merry. "Lowther's asked us—— Oh!"

Bump!

Jack Blake went heavily to the ground, with Tom Merry on top of him. He clung to the Shell fellow, and they rolled over together.

"Oh!"

"Ow!"

"Bai Jove!"

"You asses!" roared Tom Merry. "Let us go! Lemme gerrup, Blake, you chump!"

Blake gasped.

"Can't be did! We've promised Lowther! Groo!"

"Yaas, wathah! Hold 'em, deah boys!" gasped Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Let me go!" yelled Manners.

"Wats!"

"Look here——"

"Sit on 'em!" said Blake cheerfully. "Now, keep still, you Shell bounders."

The Fourth-Formers, being two to one, easily obtained the upper hand. Tom Merry and Manners were rolled on their backs, and Blake and Herries and Digby proceeded to sit upon them. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy dusted down his flannels breathlessly.

"Got 'em!" said Blake. "Now, be quiet! Lowther told us you were after him, and asked us to stop you, and we're doing it. Order!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"You fathead!" roared Tom Merry.

"Sh'sh! Take it calmly!"

Tom Merry struggled under the weight of Blake and Digby. He had told Lowther that he would stop him from breaking bounds, and Monty had evidently taken his precautions against being stopped. The chums of the Fourth had been only too willing to oblige Lowther in such a little matter as bumping a couple of Shell fellows.

"You ass!" Tom Merry gasped. "We want to catch Lowther——"

Blake chuckled.

"I know you do!" he said. "That's why Lowther asked us to stop you, I suppose, and we said we would. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"What's the trouble?" asked Digby. "What are you after Lowther for? Family troubles?"

"Disagreement in the family circle, I suppose," said Blake sadly. "We can't encourage study rows among you Shell fellows. Must keep you in order."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"It's not a row, you chumps!" snorted Tom Merry. "Lowther's going to break bounds, and we're going to stop him, or he'll get into trouble. That's what it is."

Blake whistled.

"Oh, I see! Why didn't you tell me that at first?"

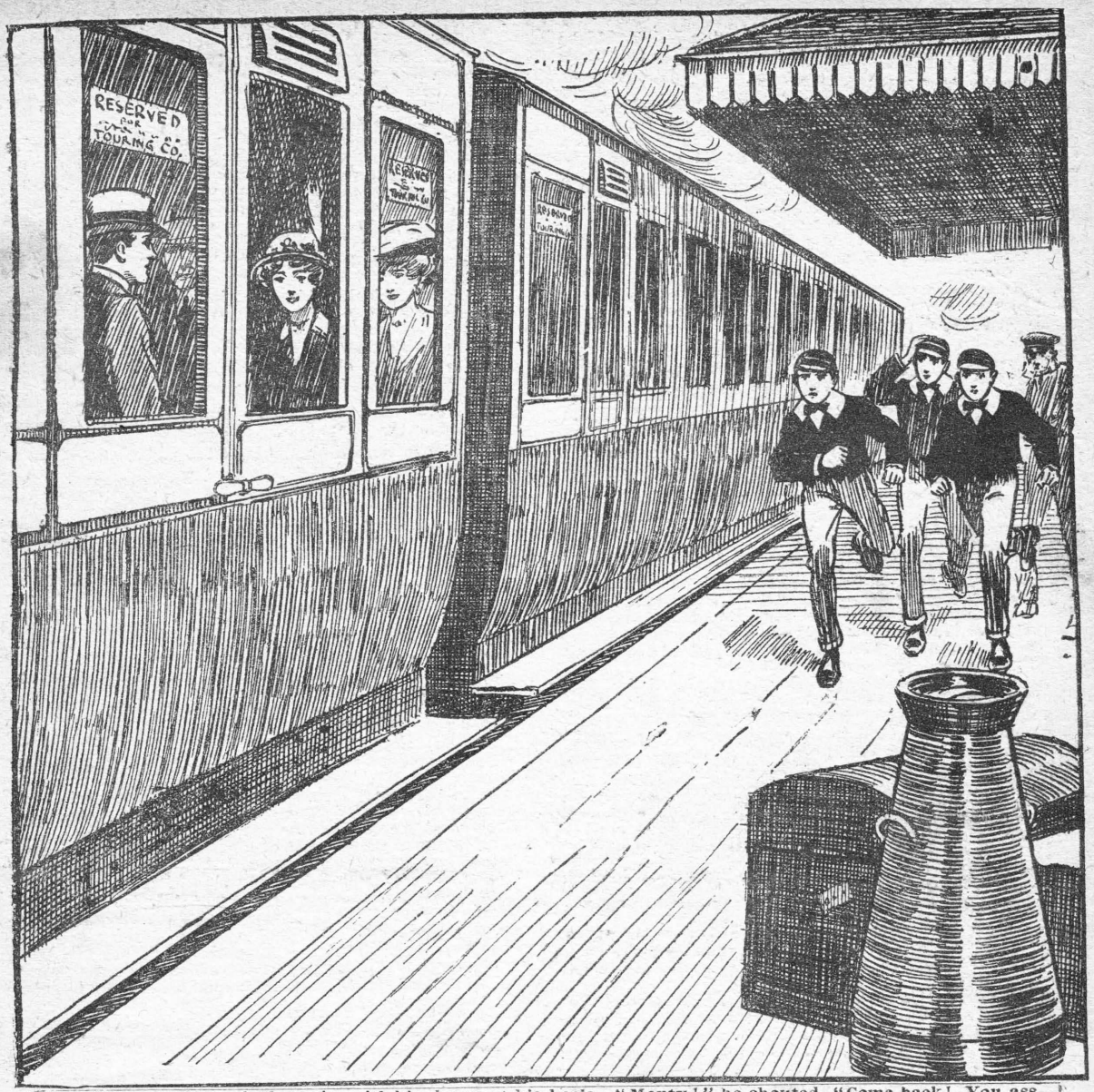
"Did you give me a chance?" yelled Tom Merry, exasperated.

"No, perhaps I didn't," grinned Blake. "That alters the case, though. Shall we let the Shell-fish off, you chaps?"

"Imposs., deah boy!" said D'Arcy. "We pwomised Lowthah."

"Yes, but——"

"Lowthah has wathah taken us in in the mattah," said D'Arcy thoughtfully. "He didn't say anythin' about bweakin' bounds. But a pwomise is a pwomise. We said we'd stop them if they came out."



Tom Merry ran towards the train, with his chums at his heels, "Monty!" he shouted, "Come back! You ass, Monty!" Monty Lowther was with the theatre company in the train, and the train was moving out of the station! Tom Merry & Co. were too late! (*See Chapter 6.*)

"Quite so!" said Herries.

"Leggo!" roared Tom Merry. "Gerroff! Rescue, Shell!"

Kangaroo and Clifton Dane and Bernard Glyn, all Shell fellows, had come running up to see what the disturbance was about. At Tom Merry's yell they piled in cheerfully. The question whether Blake & Co. should release their victims was quickly settled. The charge of the Shell rescuers sent the Fourth-Formers flying, and Tom Merry and Manners, considerably rumpled and dusty, scrambled to their feet.

Leaving their friends to deal with Blake & Co., the two juniors dashed down to the gates. Taggles, the porter, had just closed them and locked up.

"Has Lowther gone out?" gasped Tom Merry.

Taggles nodded.

"Yes, Master Merry."

"Open the gates, then; we want to fetch him back."

"'Ave you got a pass out, Master Merry?"

"No; but——"

"Then I can't hopen the gate for you," said Taggles, with dignity. And he retired into his lodge.

Tom Merry and Manners looked at one another blankly.

"Well, he's gone!" said Tom Merry.

"He'll be missed at calling-over——"

"And there'll be a row!"

"Exactly!"

"Well, we've done all we could," said Tom Merry. "It's all the fault of those Fourth-Form duffers."

"Lowther asked them——"

"Oh, rats! Let's go and bump them! I feel like bumping somebody!"

"Good!" said Manners, laughing.

The chums of the Shell hurried back to the School House, and lent a hand in bumping Blake & Co., which was a great solace to themselves, if not to the heroes of the Fourth.

But the bumping of the Fourth-Formers did not bring Monty Lowther back, and when Lowther's name was called at roll-call, he was not there to say "Adsum." And the expression upon Kildare's face was sufficient to show that there was trouble in store for the missing Shell fellow when he returned.

CHAPTER 2.

At the Theatre Royal.

THE Theatre Royal, Wayland, was not full.

The posters about the town, and the big bills outside the theatre, announced that Mr. Splodgers's company was appearing there for one night only—positively one night only—in a performance of the renowned London success, "The Counter Girl." It was the chance of a lifetime for the

Wayland folk to witness that work of art, which would be withdrawn, perhaps for ever, from their gaze after that single performance.

Yet the Wayland folk did not roll up in myriads.

The big pictures on the hoardings, representing Miss Kitty Skitty in all sorts of impossible attitudes, attracted many glances, but then glances could be had free of charge, while to see the real Kitty Skitty at the Theatre Royal required the payment of certain coins of the realm, which, to the sober folk of the country town, it seemed might be better spent.

Consequently, when the orchestra of seven struck up the overture, the house was not more than half full, and the opening chorus of "The Counter Girl" was sung with plenty of space to re-echo the voices.

But there was one extremely keen spectator, at least.

It was Monty Lowther, of the Shell Form at St. Jim's.

Monty Lowther had taken a stall—stalls at the Theatre Royal, Wayland, were not prohibitive in price—and he had a wide and uninterrupted view of the stage.

The opening chorus of the musical comedy represented the shopgirls and shopmen and shopwalkers in the great stores of Bulkeley's engaged in choric singing in the silk department—which, of course, was a very natural occupation for the employees of a great London stores.

The absurdity of the scene did not seem to strike the Wayland audiences any more than it generally strikes London audiences, and Lowther least of all.

Monty Lowther was suffering from a very bad attack of stage fever, and anything stagey seemed to him at that time beyond mere criticism.

The hero of the piece was a handsome young Oxford gentleman, the son of the wicked proprietor, and on falling in love with the Counter Girl the young Oxford gentleman proceeded to reorganise the business on lines more convenient to the employees. That was the plot of the piece, so far as it had any plot, and it seemed to Monty Lowther, as he watched, that he was eminently fitted to take the part of the young Oxford gentleman.

The wicked proprietor, Bulkeley, was played by Mr. Splodgers himself, but the great attraction was Miss Kitty Skitty, supposed to be a London actress of great success and renown, who condescended to tour the provinces apparently from sheer good-nature.

Lowther watched Miss Kitty with glued eyes.

The lad was too young to take any special note of the paint that was laid on almost in cakes, of the old, old face that looked through the powder and the mechanical smile.

To him Miss Kitty was the embodiment of youth and grace and art, and the terrible strains of "The Counter Girl" Waltz were music to his ears, since Miss Kitty Skitty was dancing to them.

Monty Lowther sat entranced.

The stage-struck junior had forgotten time and space—he did not think of school, of calling-over, or angry prefects.

The world was lost for him as he sat with his eyes glued upon the stage.

When the first act was over, and the wheezy strains of the orchestra had died away, Monty Lowther drew a deep breath, like a fellow awakening from a day-dream.

"Oh, ripping!" he murmured, aloud.

The thought of St. Jim's returned to his mind then.

It was already nine o'clock, and ere long it would be time for the juniors of St. Jim's to be in bed.

Monty Lowther frowned angrily at the thought.

He was determined to see the musical comedy to the finish, at whatever cost, but he knew very well that there would be trouble if he did not return to the school till past eleven o'clock.

He snapped his teeth angrily.

It seemed to him that he was wasting his time at the school, grinding weary Latin that would never be of any use to him in the great world, and mugging up mathematics that had only made his head ache, when there was the stage, all the glorious and undiscovered region behind the footlights, calling and beckoning to him, offering him admission into an unknown world of romance.

"If a chap only had a chance!" he murmured. "I'd take anything—even call-boy—to begin! If a chap only had a chance! My hat! I'd cut St. Jim's if I could get into that!"

"Monty, you ass!"

He had spoken aloud, and an unexpected voice replied. He turned his head quickly, and found Tom Merry at his side.

He stared at his chum in amazement.

"Tom! You here, old man!"

Tom Merry frowned.

"You ass! Yes. Come back with me now. Look here, I've broken bounds to bring you back, Monty, and paid for admission to this show, too. I knew I should find you here. Come out with me before the next act begins."

Monty Lowther shook his head.

"I'm not coming," he said.

"We shall only just have time to get back before bed," urged Tom Merry.

"Well, buzz off, then!"

"Not without you."

"I tell you I'm not coming."

"Look here, Monty, it won't do. You must come! You've come out without permission, and if you're out at bed-time, there will be awful trouble."

Monty Lowther's lips set obstinately.

"I don't care, Tom. I'm not coming."

"The Head will know about it."

"Let him know."

"You may get a flogging."

"I don't care."

Tom Merry looked at his chum in uneasiness and amazement. He had never known Monty Lowther like this before. During the last vacation, Lowther had been very keen on private theatricals, and of late he had shown many signs of being stage-struck. But Tom Merry had never expected the glamour of the footlights to seize upon his old chum in this way.

He was perplexed, and did not know what to do. He could not drag Lowther out of the theatre by force, but to let him remain, and to remain himself, was to expose both of them to serious trouble at St. Jim's.

"You'd better go," said Lowther shortly. "I don't want to get you into a row, and you don't care for this, anyway."

"Well, I'd like to see it through," said Tom Merry. "But there will be awful trouble if we don't get back much before midnight."

"Leave me here, then."

"I'm not going without you," said Tom Merry decidedly.

Lowther made an impatient gesture.

"You were an ass to come," he said. "It's no good both of us getting into a row. I'm going to see it through, and that's flat."

"Look here, Monty, old man, don't play the giddy goat. You must come back."

"I won't!"

"I tell you——"

"Shut up; they're beginning."

The orchestra had been playing a selection of "Old English Airs with Variations"—so variated that their own composers wouldn't have known them. But that discordance died away, and some bars of the great "Counter Girl" Waltz were struck up as the curtain rose again. Monty Lowther's eyes were glued upon the stage at once, and Tom Merry relapsed into indignant and worried silence.

The second act would last till ten o'clock, and by that time all the juniors at St. Jim's would be in bed. Lowther and Tom Merry would be missed, and a wrathful prefect would be waiting up for them.

But it was evidently useless to speak to Lowther now, and Tom Merry was not inclined to leave his chum. So he sat there in troubled spirits, while the second act of the "Counter Girl" commenced.

It opened with the extremely probable scene of the Counter Girl herself dancing with the head shopwalker, who was the leading comedian, while the other employees and the fashionably-dressed customers stood round and sang in chorus.

This was the great Waltz Scene.

"Blessed rot!" murmured Tom Merry, in disgust. "Besides, they're playing out of tune. Listen to that cornet!"

"Oh, cheese it!"

"And the 'cello—it's bars behind."

"Shut up!"

Monty Lowther was deaf to such criticisms.

All he saw was Miss Kitty Skitty dancing the celebrated

waltz, and he was keenly interested when the young Oxford gentleman rushed upon the scene, jerked the shopwalker from his partner, took his place, and danced on with the Counter Girl without any interruption of the waltz. They waltzed round the comic shopwalker, who lay on his back kicking up his feet, to the intense amusement of the audience.

Tom Merry was young enough to be amused and pleased by the play, absurd as it was, if he had not been worried about the flight of time.

He looked at his watch as the curtain fell after the second act. It wanted but a few minutes to ten.

He tapped Monty Lowther on the shoulder.

Lowther seemed to come to himself with a start. He turned a glowing face upon the captain of the Shell.

"Isn't it ripping?" he exclaimed.

"Well, the cornet is," said Tom Merry. "I wonder it doesn't rip the roof off. The player is as full of beer as he'll hold."

Monty Lowther shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"If you're going to talk rot——" he began.

"I'm not talking rot," said Tom Merry. "I'm listening to rot!"

"Oh, rats!"

"Let's get out, Monty. You've seen enough."

"I'm staying till the finish."

"It won't be over till eleven."

"I know that."

"What do you think the prefects will say when we get in?"

"I don't care."

"Well, I do," said Tom Merry. "I don't want to be caned and gated for a month."

"Buzz off now, then."

"Not without you."

"Look here, Tom, it's no good your staying. I'm sticking it out till the finish, but you needn't. If I could get a job with that company, I wouldn't go back to St. Jim's at all."

Tom Merry stared at him.

"Well, you've got it bad, and no mistake," he remarked.

"I want to be an actor," growled Lowther. "I've asked my uncle about it. He snorted."

"Well, if I'd been your uncle, Monty, I fancy I should have snorted too," said Tom Merry. "You ass, what about St. Jim's?"

"Blow St. Jim's!"

"Ain't you rather young to start as an Irving?" asked Tom Merry.

"I don't want to start as an Irving. Musical comedy's my line," said Monty Lowther enthusiastically. "That part of the Oxford chap is just cut out for me. I could make myself up to look twenty, and I'm taller than that chap. It would suit me down to the ground."

"Br-r-r-r-r-r!"

"There goes the curtain."

It was the third act. In the course of the act, the young Oxonian completely revolutionised the business, and the wicked proprietor became very good, apparently converted to better ways by means of the unlimited use of the "Counter Girl" Waltz; and in a grand finale, the proprietor of Bulkeley's Stores, and his son, the young Oxford gentleman, and the Counter Girl, and the Comic Shopwalker, and everybody else, joined in a dance and a tableau, and, apparently, lived happily ever afterwards, when the curtain was down for the last time.

"All over!" said Monty Lowther, with a sigh.

"Yes, you ass!" growled Tom Merry. "Now let's get back."

And Monty Lowther allowed himself unwillingly to be led from the theatre.

CHAPTER 3.

A Very Valuable Acquaintance.

TOM MERRY kept a tight hold upon Monty Lowther's arm as they passed out with the throng. He was half afraid that Monty might give him the slip, and decline to return to the school even then. Monty Lowther was in a very strange mood, under the influence of the music, the scenery, the dancing, and the excitement. Tom Merry hardly knew what to make of him. This was not the Monty Lowther he had always known—the Lowther of the study, the Form-room, and the cricket-field. It seemed to be an entirely new Lowther, with whom Tom Merry was hardly acquainted.

"Come on, kid," said Tom Merry, as they left the theatre, and the fresh air of the evening blew in their faces.

"No hurry," said Monty Lowther.

The Shell fellow still showed a strong desire to linger near the theatre. He drew Tom Merry round to the side of the building to get a view of the stage-door. Many of the performers were already leaving, some of them muffled up, and with the paint still visible on their faces.

A cab was in waiting for Miss Kitty Skitty, and as she came out, Monty Lowther raised his hat with a very respectful, indeed, almost worshipping manner, and the lady deigned him a little nod in response.

"Do come away, for goodness' sake," urged Tom Merry. "Do you know, it's past eleven o'clock, you champion ass!"

"I haven't seen Curll come out yet."

"Who on earth's Curll?"

"Chap who plays Bulkeley junior—the Oxford chap, you know."

"What do you want to see him for?"

"Oh, rats!"

Mr. Curll came out a few minutes later. In the light of a street lamp, with his collar up about his ears, and the grease-paint still on his face, Mr. Curll did not look quite so handsome as on the stage. Indeed, the young Oxford undergraduate of the comedy was a gentleman of at least forty in private life.

"That's the chap!" said Monty Lowther, breathlessly.

Mr. Curll heard the enthusiastic words, and he glanced round. Monty Lowther raised his hat, and Mr. Curll raised his bowler in response.

"I've just seen you act, sir," said Monty Lowther, much encouraged by the graciousness of Mr. Curll's manner.

Mr. Curll ran his eye—a very keen eye—over Monty Lowther and his companion. The eager look upon Lowther's face betrayed the stage-struck boy, and Mr. Curll smiled. If he had tried to remember, he might have recalled similar feelings in his own breast about twenty-five years earlier. But Mr. Curll had been long enough on the stage to have lost all sense of the glamour of it. To him it meant hard reality, and not fairyland; it meant keeping on his legs when he would much rather have sat down, it meant compressing into reasonable limits a figure which had a natural disposition towards stoutness, it meant forcing his voice up into a register beyond the limits intended by Nature; and it meant, as a rule, hard work and short commons. And at this time, Mr. Curll was in very low water indeed; for Mr. Splodgers had not paid his company for three weeks, and the takings at Wayland Theatre Royal did not justify any expectation on the part of his company that he would be able to liquidate the arrears at an early date. Mr. Splodgers, indeed, had only saved his tour from untimely death, on two occasions, by taking into his company eager young actors who were provided with more money than brains, and who were willing to pay for the privilege of being allowed to appear upon a real stage with a real company, hoping to use the Splodgers Co. as a stepping-stone to greater things in the metropolis.

"Oh, you've seen me in front, have you?" said Mr. Curll kindly.

"Yes, sir. It was splendid—especially your solo, sir—'The times we have at Oxford,'" said Monty Lowther eagerly.

Mr. Curll smiled with appreciation.

In his talk he was accustomed to affect a great superiority to his part, and to bewail the public taste which kept him in musical comedy when Nature had given him all the endowments necessary to make his mark in grand opera—Mr. Curll hadn't any doubts whatever about those endowments. But praise is sweet, and like most professional men in the theatrical line, Mr. Curll could take praise in large quantities and swallow it quite comfortably. It was something to feel that his transcendent abilities had shone through all disguise even in a musical comedy.

"Oh! You like that?" he said.

"It was ripping, sir."

"I'm glad I've met you," said Mr. Curll. "It's encouraging to meet with appreciation, and with enthusiasm, in these days. Are you walking my way?"

"Yes," said Monty Lowther, without the slightest idea which was Mr. Curll's way. But whatever way it was, Monty Lowther intended to go that way, to gain the inestimable honour and advantage of the actor's company.

Tom Merry tugged his arm.

Lowther shook off his grasp angrily.

"You cut off, Tom," he whispered. "Let me alone now—if you bother me there'll be a row, and that's flat."

And Monty Lowther walked down the street with Mr. Curll.

Tom Merry stood alone.

He was amazed, and he was hurt. He felt inclined to run after his chum, and drag him away by main force; but he refrained. Monty Lowther was in a mood to quarrel with his best chum just then; his brain was on fire with the wild ideas that were surging in it, and if Tom Merry had interrupted him now, there would have been, as he said, a row. But Tom Merry did not know what to do. He was unwilling to return without his friend; and yet it was quite clear that Lowther would not return. Tom Merry stood in troubled indecision, while Lowther and Mr. Curll strolled

away together. Mr. Curll did not seem to notice the separation of the two schoolboys. He was busy talking—about himself, of course—a subject of never-ending interest to most gentlemen who follow the stage.

Monty Lowther listened entranced to the pearls that dropped from Mr. Curll's lips. They reached Mr. Curll's lodging in a little street off the old High Street of Wayland, and Mr. Curll asked Lowther if he would like to step in. There was nothing in the universe that the junior desired more; and he followed Mr. Curll up a rickety stair, into a small room in complete darkness. Mr. Curll struck a match and lighted an unshaded gas jet, and gave Lowther a cheery smile.

"Excuse the quarters," he said. "These country towns—you understand!"

"Oh, I understand," said Lowther.

Certainly Mr. Curll's quarters were not palatial. There was a bed in the corner of the room, and a ricketty table in the centre; a washstand, with dirty water still in the basin, and a chair that had seen better days, and seen them long since. On the table was a glass with the dregs of beer in it, and a couple of dead flies floating in the dregs.

"You'd like to see some of my notices," said Mr. Curll.

"Yes, indeed," said Lowther.

"Sit down—by the way, what did you say your name was?"

Monty Lowther hadn't said that his name was anything, but he gave it now. He did not mention that he was a schoolboy absent without permission from his school. That was not a circumstance likely to interest Mr. Curll.

"Sorry I can't offer you any refreshment, Mr. Lowther," said Mr. Curll. "If we were in town, instead of these rotten provinces, I'd ask you to come round to supper at the Troc. But here——" Mr. Curll made a gesture implying his boundless scorn and contempt for the rotten provinces. "You'd like to see my notices. Here they are! Hardly know why I've kept the things, but friends like to see them."

Considering that Mr. Curll hardly knew why he had kept his Press notices, they were preserved very carefully, cut out and arranged and dated. They were chiefly extracts from such powerful organs of public opinion as the "Slocum Gazette," the "West Somerset Times," "The Little Puberton Sentinel," and so forth. But they certainly gave glowing accounts of Mr. Curll. Indeed, the "Mudbank-cum-Clayhole Gazette" expressed an opinion that if Mr. Curll entered grand opera, Caruso would have to look to his laurels. Monty Lowther dimly realised that nobody was suffered to enter Mr. Curll's quarters without reading those Press notices, and he read them manfully. After all, a little harmless vanity was excusable in so great a man as Horatio Curll.

"I'd like to go on the stage," said Monty Lowther, bashfully, coming to the darling thought of his heart as he finished the press notices. Mr. Curll had lighted a big sixpenny cigar, which was certainly not calculated to improve his wonderful tenor voice—though for the protection of his valuable throat he wore a silk muffler up to his ears.

Mr. Curll smiled.

"Of course, I should have to learn a lot," said Lowther, modestly. "I shouldn't expect to be able to do what you do, Mr. Curll. But I wish I had a chance.'

Mr. Curll shook his head.

"It needs money to get on, nowadays," he said, with a sigh. "Look at me!"

Monty Lowther looked at him.

"You'd hardly believe that I've been in musical comedy for ten years—ever since I was twenty, in fact," said Mr. Curll, "without a chance of getting into what I was born for—grand opera."

Monty Lowther would have imagined that more than ten years had passed since Mr. Curll was twenty, but he was too polite to say so.

"But what you do is splendid, sir," said Lowther. "I wish I had a chance—I don't ask for anything better than musical comedy."

"Even that needs capital," said Mr. Curll. "Mr. Splodgers takes beginners, and puts them on the stage, for a premium."

"Does he?" exclaimed Monty Lowther eagerly.

"Yes, it costs money, you know. I've had my successes," said Mr. Curll, with a sigh. "You can see that from the few notices I've kept out of the hundreds. But you'd hardly believe it; at the present moment I should be thoroughly glad of the loan of a half-sovereign."

Monty coloured a little. He happened to be in funds, and he would gladly have contributed a half-sovereign, or a whole one, to the needs of a follower of the glorious Thespian art. But he shrank from seeming to take Mr. Curll's remark as a hint, and he only said:

"Indeed?"

"Yes," said Mr. Curll. "Indeed! By the way, if you——" He paused.

It was plain enough at last, and Monty Lowther's hand went into his pocket.

"Might I—I offer——" he stammered.

"Thank you," said Mr. Curll, slipping the half-sovereign into his waistcoat pocket. "I'll send you a cheque for this. So you're thinking of going on the stage."

"If I could get a chance."

"Your people like the idea?"

"I'm under my uncle's charge," Lowther explained. "He wouldn't be sorry to get rid of me—I know he'd be glad if I didn't cost him anything."

"Then you're free to do as you like?"

"I only wish I could get a chance."

"Well, as far as that goes, I could help you," said Mr. Curll. "I've taken a fancy to you—I shouldn't wonder if I used my influence with Mr. Splodgers, if he could find you an opening in the Co.—how would you like to be my understudy?"

Monty Lowther's eyes danced.

"Oh, sir!" he gasped.

Mr. Curll laughed.

"You'd like that, eh?"

"Oh, sir!"

"Well, it could be fixed," said Mr. Curll. "You couldn't get a better opening than in a touring company like the Splodgers Co." Mr. Curll thought of the salary unpaid for three weeks, and of the extremely probable prospect of the "Counter Girl" company going to pieces on the road, and of its members being left to get away as best they could, and he felt a momentary twinge of conscience. But conscience was too expensive a luxury for Mr. Curll to cultivate to any great extent, and he went on: "You see, in a touring company, you see life—you pick up stage knowledge—you get to know the ins and outs of the biznai. Then comes your chance. London managers often come down to see a provincial company, to pick up stars for the London stage—if there's anything in you, they spot you, and—there you are!"

"And—and you think you could work this for me!" exclaimed Lowther breathlessly.

"I think I could."

"Oh, sir!" gasped Lowther.

"Only Splodgers is a business man, you know—he takes on beginners on the usual terms," Mr. Curll explained.

Monty Lowther's joyful face fell a little.

"The usual terms!" he repeated.

"Certainly. You see, he's put to a great deal of expense over it, in one way and another. But if you've got the rhino—ahem! I mean if you are provided with the necessary capital——"

"I'm afraid I haven't very much," said Lowther gloomily, "I——"

"That's unfortunate."

"How much would be needed?" asked Lowther nervously.

Again Mr. Curll took a keen survey of the schoolboy.

"Well, Mr. Splodgers' terms generally are a hundred pounds down for an engagement for three months——"

Lowther's face went down to zero.

"But," continued Mr. Curll calmly, "if I used my influence with him, and I will, my boy, I've no doubt that he would make a special arrangement with you. Fifty pounds——"

Monty Lowther's face remained at zero.

"Or twenty-five——"

Lowther brightened up.

"Twenty-five would do it," said Mr. Curll. "I should have to talk to Mr. Splodgers, and explain that it was a personal friend of mine whom I specially wished to oblige, and I have no doubt that he would see it in the proper light."

"I don't know how to thank you," said Monty Lowther gratefully. "I've got thirty pounds in the bank; it was put there for me, you know, by an aunt, and I can draw it out if I like. My uncle's a bit skinny with the cash, you know, and this was for me to use if I needed money badly—my aunt's a good sort. I've not touched it so far, but for a reason like this—well, I don't think I could put it to a better use."

"Thirty pounds!" exclaimed Mr. Curll. "My dear chap!"

He looked as if he were going to embrace Monty Lowther for a moment. But he restrained himself.

"The trouble is, we're leaving to-morrow, by the afternoon train," he remarked. "Could you come over and see Splodgers in the morning?"

"Yes," said Lowther recklessly.

"Good. Get here say at twelve."

"I'll come."

"And you'd better bring the money, and then the whole matter can be settled right away," suggested Mr. Curll.

Lowther hesitated.

"I—I can't do that," he said, "my aunt put it in the post-office savings bank for me, and it takes two or three days to get it out."

"Quite simple," said Mr. Curll cheerfully. "Bring the bankbook with you, just to show Mr. Splodgers as a proof of good faith. Of course, I take your word absolutely, but Splodgers doesn't know you; and he's devilish keen on forms in business matters. You have to send in a notice or something, don't you, to get money out of the post-office?"

"Yes; a withdrawal notice."

"I don't have money in that kind of bank myself," said Mr. Curll condescendingly. Mr. Curll might have added with perfect truth that he did not have money in any other kind of bank, either. "But that seems to me all right. You send in this—er— notice, asking for the money to be paid to you at a post-office in Abbotsford—that's the next stopping-place of the company—and you can draw it out there and hand it over to Mr. Splodgers. It will be quite simple."

Mr. Curll rose, and Monty Lowther rose also. The Shell fellow of St. Jim's shook hands with Mr. Curll, and thanked him in trembling tones, with a depth of gratitude which made Mr. Curll feel an uncomfortable inward twinge again.

Then he took his leave, and walked out of the lodging-house with an airy step; with the footlights flashing before his mind's eye, and the strains of music in his ears, and all London at his feet.

CHAPTER 4.

Monty Lowther Makes up His Mind.

"MONTY!"

Monty Lowther started.

In the deep interest of his talk with Mr. Curll, he had forgotten Tom Merry's very existence; and the voice of his chum brought him back to realities with a start.

"Hallo, Tom! I—I thought you'd gone back!"

"I've been waiting for you," said Tom Merry quietly.

"I'm sorry, Tom. We'll get off now."

"Time we did!" said Tom Merry grimly. "Twelve's just gone from the church."

Monty Lowther did not reply, and they walked away in silence. The last local train for Rylcombe had gone long since, and there was nothing for it but to walk back to St. Jim's. They took the short cut through the wood, and walked on in silence for a long time."

It was Monty Lowther who broke the silence at last, as they came out into the road that led to the gates of St. Jim's.

"It must be half-past twelve, Tommy."

"Quite!" said Tom Merry.

"There'll be an awful row."

"Have you only just thought of that?" asked Tom Merry sarcastically.

"I'm sorry, Tom. But you shouldn't have come for me."

"Rather late in the day to think of that now," said Tom Merry. "How was I to know that you would be such an awful ass?"

Lowther was silent.

"What did you stay with that chap Curll for?" demanded Tom Merry.

"He's going to help me get on the stage."

Tom Merry stopped short.

"What?"

"You heard what I said," answered Monty Lowther doggedly.

"Are you dotty, Monty?"

"Oh, rats!"

"Help you get on the stage!" Tom Merry repeated. "You must be rocky. Are you thinking of leaving St. Jim's, then?"

"Yes."

"My hat!"

They walked on in silence again. Tom Merry felt that Lowther, in his present mood, was not to be argued with; the stage-struck schoolboy was past reasoning with. And Tom Merry was far from suspecting the arrangement Lowther had made with the obliging Mr. Curll, and Lowther did not tell him.

The two juniors reached the gates of St. Jim's. It was useless, of course, to think of disguising the fact that they had been out, so Tom Merry rang the bell. It was five minutes before Taggles came down to the gate, and the light of his lantern gleamed through the bars.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" he said, blinking at them.

"Yes. it is," said Lowther crossly. "Open the gate, and don't jaw."

"Ho!" said Taggles indignantly.

He opened the gate, and the juniors entered.

"You're to report yourselves to Master Kildare," said Taggles. "He's a-waitin' up for you. Nice goings hon, I must say!"

The juniors crossed the shadowy quadrangle towards the School House.

A light was burning in the hall, unaccustomed at that hour. The juniors found the door unfastened, and they entered. Kildare was sitting in the hall, reading. He rose as they came in, his brow very stern.

"Oh!" he said. "You've come in?"

Tom Merry flushed under the accusing eyes of the captain of St. Jim's. Monty Lowther looked dogged.

"Yes," said Tom Merry, "we're sorry, Kildare."

"You've broken bounds."

"Yes."

"And stayed out till a quarter to one."

"The last train was gone from Wayland, when—when——"

"When you came out of the theatre," said Kildare grimly, "I suppose that's where you've been."

"Yes," said Tom Merry, flushing again.

"I told you, at least, Lowther, that you were not to go there."

Lowther was silent.

"I'm not going to deal with you," said Kildare. "It's too serious for that. The Head asked me to wait up for you, and you're to go and see him immediately after prayers in the morning If you get expelled, it will serve you right."

"You can leave Tom Merry out of it," said Lowther, breaking his silence. "He came over to fetch me back, and only stayed because I wouldn't come. He's been hammering at me all the evening to come back."

Kildare's face relaxed a little.

"Well, that puts a different complexion on the matter, so far as you are concerned, Merry," he said. "You'd better tell the Head that, Lowther. Go to bed now, both of you."

The juniors went up to the Shell dormitory; and Kildare locked up the house and retired to his own room. Tom Merry turned on the light in the Shell dormitory, and two or three of the fellows opened their eyes.

"Oh, here you are!" said Manners.

"Yes," said Tom Merry, "here we are!"

"What's the time?"

"Nearly one."

"Phew, there'll be trouble!" said Kangaroo. "Lowther was a fathead to go, and you were a bigger fathead to go looking for him, Tommy, my son."

"Yes, rather," said Gore; "you'll get the order of the birch for this."

"Oh, rats!" said Monty Lowther.

The two juniors turned in. Tom Merry was soon fast asleep, but to Monty Lowther the dark hours were wakeful ones. He was thinking—or trying to think—what was to be the outcome of his visit to Wayland Theatre Royal, and the acquaintance he had made with Mr. Curll.

It was not till he was in bed in the sleeping dormitory that he was able to review what had passed quietly in his mind, and think of what it meant to him.

He realised that he had promised Mr. Curll to join "The Counter Girl" Company, and to pay Mr. Splodgers twenty-five pounds for an engagement with that company.

He realised that this meant that he would leave St. Jim's. And as he certainly would not get his uncle and guardian's permission to leave school and go on the stage—he smiled as he pictured the horror his uncle would feel at the mere idea—there remained nothing for him but to run away from school.

Run away from school!

He shivered a little at the thought. It was a startling idea, and yet there was nothing else to be done, unless he was to abandon this wonderful opportunity which had opened out before him like a glimpse of fairyland.

And there was the punishment, too, on the morrow—he could save Tom Merry from that by explaining how matters stood; but himself—he could scarcely expect anything less than a flogging for so flagrant a breach of the school rules and such defiance of authority.

He had hardly realised the seriousness of it at first, but he realised it now.

It was long before Lowther slept, but ere his eyes closed his resolution was taken—to accompany "The Counter Girl" Company when they left Wayland on the following afternoon, and to take his chance upon the stage. And as he knew very well that his own chums, as well as the masters, would prevent his flight if they could, he resolved to say nothing upon the subject before he departed. He fell asleep at last, and dreamed that he was dancing "The Counter Girl" Waltz with Miss Kitty Skitty to thunders of applause from an enthusiastic London audience.

CHAPTER 5.

Before the Head.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY met the Terrible Three as they came down on the following morning. They were last down of the Shell, both Tom Merry and Lowther feeling sleepy enough after their unaccustomed late hours of the previous night.

The swell of St. Jim's jammed his eyeglass into his eye, and surveyed Monty Lowther with a very severe gaze.

"Lowthah," he began, "I wegard you as havin' failed to play the game."

"Hallo!" said Lowther cheerfully. "What's the matter with you, Gussy?"

"You twicked us into stoppin' Tom Mewwy and Mannahs last evenin' when they were twyin' to keep you fwom playin' the giddy goat."

"Go hon!"

"If we had known that you were goin' to bweak bounds we certainly should not have done as you wequested us."

"That's why I didn't tell you," explained Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah, I should wegard it as impewative to give you a feahful thwashin', but undah the cires. I will wefwain, because——"

"Because you might get hurt," suggested Lowther.

"Certainly not! Because the Head will most likely give you a feahful thwashin'. But I must wemark that you have failed to play the game."

"Oh, rats!"

"If you say wats to me, Monty Lowthah——" began D'Arcy, pushing back his cuffs in an extremely warlike way.

Jack Blake jerked his aristocratic chum back.

"Cheese it, Gussy!" he remarked. "Lowther's going through it quite enough this morning, without any trouble from us."

"Yaas, wathah! You're quite wight, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, unbending his brow. "I agwee with you. Howevah——"

"You must have been an ass, Lowther!" said Blake. "You surely didn't think you'd be allowed to go to a theatre and stay out past midnight without an awful row over it?"

"I didn't think much about it, anyway."

"Bai Jove!"

"You'll get it in the neck, I'm afraid," said Blake, with real concern. "The Head looked frightfully ratty about it last night."

Monty Lowther shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, I can stand it, I suppose?" he said.

"You might get sacked.

"I shouldn't care."

"Wha-a-at!"

"I shouldn't care twopence!" said Lowther. "If I were sacked, I should be free to go on the stage. It's the best thing that could happen to me."

"Well, my only hat!" ejaculated Blake. "You're hopeless! What you want is a ticket for the nearest lunatic asylum."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Monty Lowther yawned, and walked away. Blake looked after him, and then turned to Tom Merry and Manners in great astonishment.

"I've seen some kids stage-struck," he remarked—"I've been through it myself—but I've never seen any chap have it as bad as that before."

"Wathah not!"

"You'd better keep an eye on him, or he'll be bolting away from the school," said Blake. "I heard of a case like that."

"Oh, Monty wouldn't be such an ass as that," said Tom Merry.

"You never know!" said Blake.

After prayers that morning Tom Merry and Monty Lowther went to the Head's study together. They found Dr. Holmes with a very stern frown upon his brow. Tom Merry coloured as he met the doctor's eyes. He knew that there was no excuse to be offered for the happenings of the previous evening—it had been simply a flagrant breach of the college rules, without any justification whatever, unless Monty Lowther 's attack of stage fever could be taken as some sort of a justification.

"You two boys broke bounds last night," said the Head abruptly. "I hear from Kildare that it was considerably past midnight when you returned."

"Yes, sir," said Tom Merry.

"Such conduct is utterly unexampled," said the Head. "I am as perplexed as annoyed. It was not like what I know of you, Merry."

Tom Merry flushed more deeply.

"I am sorry, sir," he muttered.

Then Lowther spoke up.

"It wasn't Tom's fault, sir," he said. "He only left the school to come over to Wayland for me to fetch me back and save a row."

"Merry should not have left the school without permission, even for that object," said the Head. "However, if that is the case, I can excuse him, as his motives were good. But am I to understand that he tried to make you return, and you refused?"

"Yes, sir."

"And then Merry remained with you?"

"He wouldn't go without me, sir. It wasn't his fault."

"I am quite prepared to believe that," said the Head; "but this makes your conduct all the worse, Lowther. You not only broke bounds and went to a place you were forbidden to visit, but you obstinately remained there after your friend had come, at considerable risk to himself, to point out your duty to you. Have you any excuse to offer?"

Lowther was silent.

"I am waiting for you to speak, Lowther," said the Head. "Merry, you may go. I accept Lowther's statement concerning you, and you are excused."

"Thank you, sir."

Tom Merry lingered a moment; he was loth to leave his chum to face the music alone, but he could not stay. He quitted the study slowly and with a troubled brow. Monty Lowther remained alone with the Head.

"Well, Lowther, what have you to say?"

"I—I haven't anything to say, sir!" said Lowther desperately. "I—I suppose I've done wrong, sir."

"I hardly think you can have much doubt on that point, Lowther," said the Head grimly. "You cannot expect your action to be excused, I suppose? But what was your motive—why did you do this?"

"I wanted to go to the theatre," said Lowther. "I—I—I want to be an actor, sir. I—you won't understand, I know—but—but I——"

The Head looked at the boy's flushed face with keen, attentive eyes. The Head had had an experience of boys extending over twice as many years as Monty Lowther's whole life, and he understood them—he understood Lowther, perhaps, better than Monty Lowther understood himself.

He rose from his chair.

"Come with me, Lowther," he said.

"Yes, sir."

Monty Lowther followed the Head in wonder. Dr. Holmes went directly to the Shell passage, to Tom Merry's study. The other boys were in their Form-rooms now, and the passages were deserted. Dr. Holmes entered the study, and glanced round the room with a severe eye. He smiled grimly as he noted the theatrical pictures and photographs on the study walls.

"I thought so!" he murmured. "You may go in, Lowther. Take down those absurd photographs from the walls."

Lowther hesitated. But there was nothing for it but to obey. Dr. Holmes stood in the doorway, frowning, while Lowther pulled down the offending photographs.

"All of them!" said the Head grimly.

Lowther obeyed.

"Put them in the grate and set fire to them," said the Head.

Lowther flushed crimson.

"Oh, sir!"

"Obey me!" rapped out the Head.

Monty Lowther, with a crimson face, and his heart beating with suppressed wrath, obeyed. There was no choice in the matter. He crammed the pictures, photographs, and gaudy postcards into the grate, and applied a match to them. There was a flare, and Monty Lowther's art gallery was soon burning away merrily.

Lowther watched the fire with a heavy heart and a sullen face.

Not till the heap was consumed did the Head speak again. He fixed his eyes upon the Shell fellow's dark, gloomy face. He was still frowning, but when he spoke his voice was unexpectedly kind.

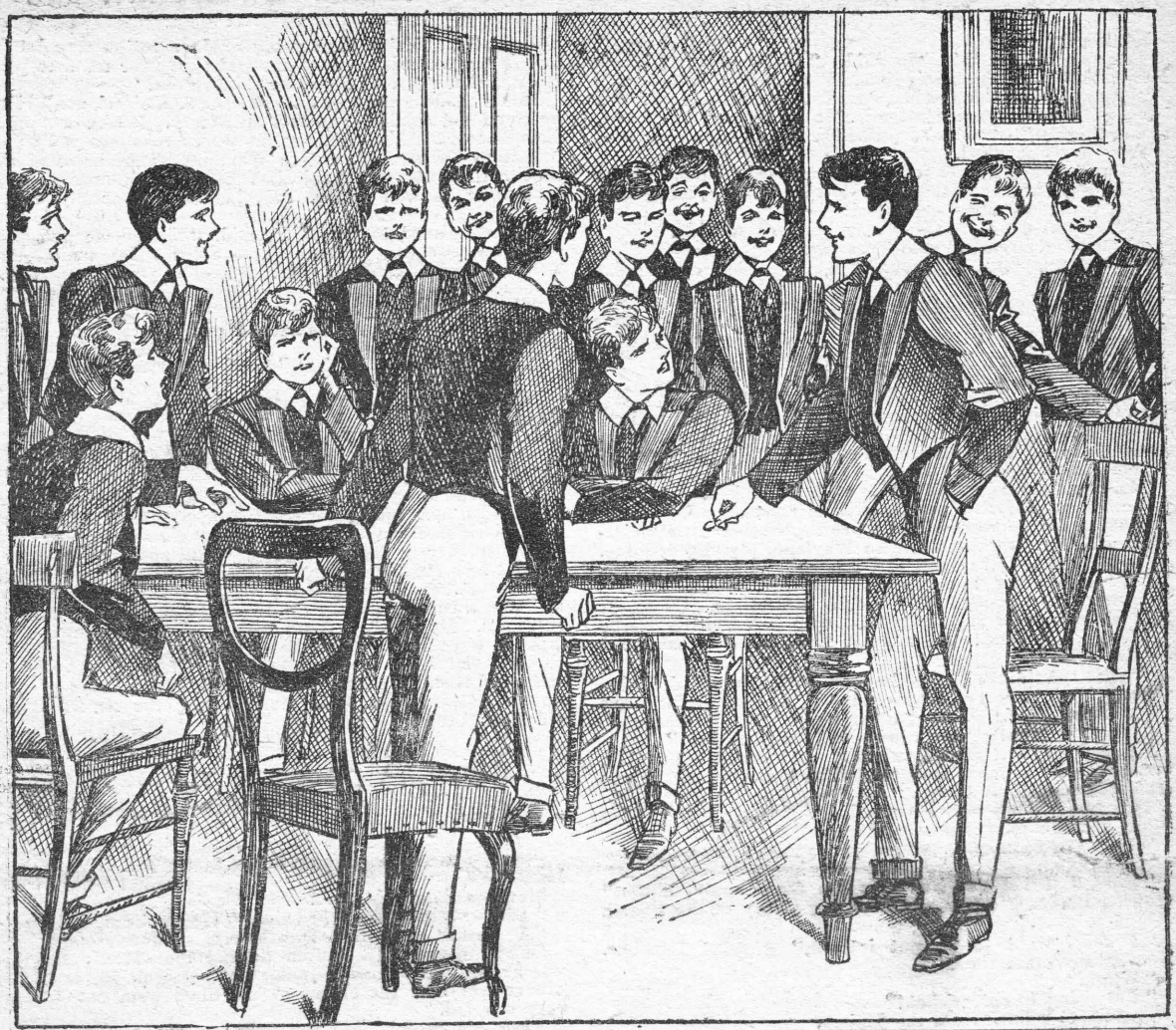
"I think I understand what is the matter with you, Lowther," he said. "You are what is called stagestruck—the stage possesses your imagination to the exclusion of everything else. It is not an uncommon thing, but you must learn to control sentiments of this kind, my boy. You must not bring any rubbish of that sort into the school again. And you shall certainly never attend a theatre again until you can do so without allowing the place to affect your imagination so strongly. Self-control is a lesson everyone has to learn, and you must learn it. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," muttered Lowther.

"I am going to excuse you for your absurd conduct last night," said the Head. "I shall not punish you. But you must clearly understand that if there is any repetition of it, I shall punish you most severely. You may now go to your Form-room."

Monty Lowther stood for a moment amazed. The unexpected kindness of the Head touched him; he had not expected to escape punishment, and he felt a twinge of remorse as he reflected upon what his secret intentions were; of what he intended to do that very day.

"I—I am sorry, sir," he faltered. "I—I wouldn't lose your good opinion for anything, sir. I'm sorry if you should think badly of me."



"Having purchased the winning ticket in my private capacity, gentlemen, I take the prize," said Fisher T. Fish, with perfect coolness, slipping the two sovereigns into his pocket. "The takings in this competition are exactly one shilling, and I take that in part payment of my fee as managing director." And the American junior slipped the shilling into his pocket along with the two sovereigns, while the shareholders in the Fish Company gazed at their managing director speechlessly. (*For the above incident see the grand long complete school tale of Harry Wharton & Co. and Fisher T. Fish, entitled "THE COMPETITION CRAZE AT GREYFRIARS," by Frank Richards, which is contained in this week's splendid issue of our popular companion paper "THE MAGNET" Library. Now on Sale. Price One Penny.*)

Dr. Holmes' face softened.

"I shall not think badly of you, Lowther, if you will remember your duty to your people and to your school, and give me reason to think well of you," he said. "Let all this be forgotten, and prove by your conduct that my leniency has not been misplaced."

And the Head turned away.

Monty Lowther made his way slowly to the Shell Form-room. Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell, gave him a sharp glance, but did not make any remark upon his being late. Neither did he visit the Shell fellow with his attentions when Lowther sat in a dreamy state through the lessons, hardly hearing what was said to him, and answering almost at random. Monty Lowther's thoughts were not in the Form-room at St. Jim's—they were far away, on the Thespian boards, and instead of the Form-master's voice, the strains of the "Counter Girl" Waltz were in his ears.

CHAPTER 6.

Monty Lowther is Mysterious.

"FEELING fit?" asked Tom Merry, clapping Lowther on the shoulder as they came out of the Shell Form-room.

Lowther started out of a dream.

"Eh? Oh, yes."

"You've got some hard batting to do this afternoon," said Tom Merry. "I hear that Fatty Wynn is in better form than ever, and the New House chaps are saying that we're going to have a complete set of duck's eggs in the House match."

"Eh?"

"So we've all got to buck up," said Tom Merry cheerfully; deliberately taking no notice of Lowther's absent-mindedness.

Tom Merry had determined to pass over the events of the evening before without mention. He could see that the matter was still in Lowther's mind, and that his lucky escape from punishment had not changed the current of his thoughts in the least. But it was evident that Lowther was not in a mood to be argued with; and Tom Merry had determined to act as if nothing had happened, in the hope of drawing his chum's thoughts back into their usual channel. As a rule Lowther was keen enough about a House match.

He did not seem very keen now.

"Figgins & Co. think that they're going to beat us this time," remarked Manners, seconding his leader manfully. "Fatty Wynn is a terror, and no mistake. I saw him bowling this morning. You'll have to keep an eye on him, Monty."

"Eh?"

"Lovely weather for cricket, anyway," said Tom Merry. "Hallo, Blake! Feeling up to knocking the ball over the pav.?"

Blake grinned.

"I'm as right as rain," he said. "We're going to knock Figgins & Co. sky-high this time. We're all in good form."

"Yaas, wathah!" remarked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I have been devotin' some attention to a late cut, you know, that I think will wathah surpwise the New House chaps."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Good! I'm going to put Reilly in this time, too. Lemme see, the team will be Blake, Dig, Herries, D'Arcy, Kangaroo, Reilly, Manners, Lowther, myself——"

"Don't put me in," said Monty Lowther, quickly.

"You're in already," said Tom Merry.

"I can't play this afternoon."

"Must!"

Monty Lowther made a peevish gesture.

"I tell you I can't."

"Why not?" demanded Blake, warmly. "There ain't many fellows who'd turn up their nose at batting for the junior House team."

"I can't!"

"Well, put in a chap in the Fourth," said Blake. "There are really too many of the Shell in the team, as a matter of fact. I suggest Macdonald of the Fourth."

Tom Merry frowned.

"Lowther's going to play," he said. "Look here, Monty, you can't cut a House match. Do be reasonable."

Lowther looked worried. He was thinking of his appointment with Mr. Horatio Curll, in Wayland, already overdue. If he started for Wayland at once, he would be nearly an hour late for his appointment with Mr. Curll, and he trembled with anxiety lest he should be too late. He might miss his chance of an engagement with Mr. Splodgers—the chance of a lifetime! He was not likely to miss that for a House match!

"What's the matter with the fathead?" demanded Blake, warmly. "Look here, Lowther, if it's late hours that make you like this, you'd better give 'em up."

"Yaas, wathah! I'm surpwised at you, Lowthah."

"I can't play, and I won't," said Monty Lowther, obstinately. "I don't want to. You can give my cap to somebody else, Tom Merry."

Tom Merry's lips set. He was being very patient with his chum, but he was very nearly at the end of his patience now.

"Then you want to be left out of the team?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Blessed if I'd put him into the team again, either," growled Blake. "After all, there are plenty of the Fourth willing to play."

"I don't want to be put into it," growled Lowther. "Now or any other time."

"What!"

"I'm going to cut cricket!"

There was a howl from the juniors.

"Cut cricket!"

"Yes."

"Oh, you're dotty," said Blake angrily. "Clean off your rocker. I'm not going to jaw to such a silly ass! Br-r-r-r-r!"

And Blake swung away.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy wagged his slim forefinger at Monty Lowther in a very solemn way. "I'm surpwised at you, Lowthah!" he said.

"Oh, rats!"

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"Go and eat coke!"

"Bai Jove! I——"

"Leave him alone, Gussy," said Tom Merry, pacifically. "Lowther's out of sorts to-day, that's all. He'll be sorry for this rot."

Arthur Augustus was mollified.

"Vewy well, Tom Mewwy," he said, "but I must wemark that I considah Lowthah an ass!"

And D'Arcy followed Blake with his aristocratic nose held very high in the air. Monty Lowther was moving away, and Tom Merry went with him. He noticed an impatient look cross Lowther's face, and his lips came tight together.

"I don't quite catch on to this, Monty," he said. "What are you talking about chucking cricket for? You don't mean it?"

"I do mean it," said Lowther.

"It's not quite playing the game, to leave us in the lurch over the House match," Tom Merry exclaimed, rather hotly.

"There's plenty of fellows glad to play."

"That's true enough."

"You won't miss me," said Lowther. "I don't feel up to cricket to-day, anyway. I'm thinking of other things. Be a good chap, Tom, and don't jaw me."

Tom Merry softened at once.

"Well that's all right, Monty," he said. "I'm thinking of you chiefly. You've been going on in a rotten way lately. But this is too thick. Why not make up your mind to play this afternoon and let the other things slide?"

Monty Lowther thought of Mr. Curll, and coloured. But he could not confide that to Tom Merry. He knew that if Tom discovered his intentions, he would take care not to let him keep his appointment in Wayland. The chums of the Shell would rather have locked Lowther up in his study, than have allowed him to ruin himself deliberately, as he meant to do.

"I don't want to play," he said. "Leave me out of it now, for goodness' sake. You don't quite understand, Tommy—and I can't explain. But—but you'll understand presently."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll know how things stand with me, I mean, before to-night."

"You're jolly mysterious," said Tom Merry, puzzled. "You're not thinking of bolting, I suppose."

Monty Lowther laughed, but not very heartily.

"Look here, Tom," he said abruptly, "I'm bothered just now. I can't talk cricket, or anything else. I want to be alone for a bit."

"Oh, all right," said Tom Merry.

He walked away towards the cricket-field. Monty Lowther hesitated a moment. His heart smote him for his harshness with his best chum, and he was tempted to go after Tom Merry and try to explain. But it would not have done, and he had now an opportunity that was not likely to recur for leaving St. Jim's unnoticed. He hesitated only a few minutes, then he walked down to the gates and went out into the road. He strolled along with an air of assumed carelessness until he reached the stile where the footpath led through the wood towards Wayland. He vaulted over the stile, and then broke into a run, and did not pause again till he was through the wood and entering the streets of the old market-town.

CHAPTER 7.
Too Late!

"WHERE'S Lowther?"

Tom Merry asked the question as he sat down at the Shell table in the dining-hall of the School House.

Manners shook his head.

"I haven't seen him," he said. "He went out, I think."

"The ass!" murmured Tom Merry. "More trouble."

During dinner Mr. Linton noticed that Monty Lowther was absent. The missing junior did not come in, and when dinner was over the chums of the Shell went out, looking very worried.

After his escapade of the previous evening, it behoved Monty Lowther to be very careful, and he had taken the first opportunity of transgression instead. Tom Merry was seriously worried about his reckless chum.

"He went out before dinner," said Manners. "I dare say he's gone off for the afternoon. He said he wasn't going to play in the match."

Tom Merry compressed his lips.

"The fathead!" he exclaimed angrily. "Linton has got his back up over it already. There will be trouble with the Head again."

"I'm getting fed up!" growled Manners. "Look here, we've got to think about the match, and not about Lowther!"

"I wish I knew where he was."

"Gone over to Wayland, very likely, to see the theatre again."

"But they're leaving this afternoon," said Tom Merry. "There was only to be the one performance at Wayland Theatre Royal."

"Might be going over to see them off. You say he chummed up with a chap in the company?"

Tom Merry nodded.

It was necessary to get ready for the House match. Macdonald, of the Fourth, had been put in the School House junior eleven in the place of Monty Lowther. It was a half-holiday at St. Jim's, and most of the juniors had been looking forward to the House match, which was one of the last of the season. Tom Merry did not feel just then, however, that he could put his mind into the game.

"You fellows ready?" asked Jack Blake, coming out of the School House in flannels, with his bat under his arm. "Wherefore that worried brow, my son?"

"Lowther wasn't in to dinner."

"No; I noticed he wasn't."

"He hasn't come in, and he never said anything about being booked up for the afternoon," said Tom Merry. "I don't like it."

Blake sniffed.

"I fancy I know where he's gone," he said. "He's simply dotty just lately. If you don't keep an eye on him, he'll bolt."

"He couldn't be such an ass!"

"Well, if he were my little boy, I'd see that he didn't slope off when that theatre company leaves Wayland," said Blake.

Tom Merry started.

"He wouldn't! He couldn't!"

"It will mean a flogging for him if he does," said Blake. "He seems to be looking for trouble all round. What kind of a chap was that he chummed up with last night that you mentioned?"

"I didn't think much of him."

"Lowther got any money?" asked Blake

"I believe he's got a pound or two."

"H'm! If he were rolling in money like Gussy, he would be a good prize for a down-at-heels pro.," said Blake. "But a pound or two wouldn't make all the difference."

"He's got money in the bank," said Manners, "but he's supposed not to touch that excepting for necessaries."

"He might think it necessary to pay his footing to become an actor," said Blake, with a snort. "Lots of touring managers help to pay expenses by taking in stage-struck mugs. I've heard Kerr say so, and his father's an actor."

"I—I say, do you think you could skipper the team this afternoon, Blake?" asked Tom Merry hesitatingly.

"Of course I could!" said Blake promptly. "Not the slightest doubt about that! Wasn't I junior skipper of the School House before you came to St. Jim's? I could do it better than a Shell fellow, as a matter of fact."

Tom Merry smiled faintly.

"Well, take it on, then," he said.

"Willingly. But I should want you in the team. We must have your batting against Wynn."

Tom Merry shook his head.

"I'm going to cut the match," he said.

"Oh, my hat! What utter rot!"

"If Lowther's going to make a fool of himself, it's my biznai as his chum to stand by him and stop him," said Tom Merry. "I'm sorry to cut the match, but—but——"

"Same here," said Manners. "I shall come with you."

Blake looked very thoughtful.

"Well, it's rotten for the House match," he said. "I suppose the best thing you can do is to keep an eye on Lowther. It doesn't matter so much about Manners, but we ought to have you batting against the New House, Tommy."

"Thank you," said Manners, with a sniff.

"Not at all," said Blake blandly. "You're welcome to my opinion. If you two stand out, whom shall I put in in your places?"

"Lumley-Lumley, of the Fourth, and Clifton Dane, of the Shell," said Tom Merry. "They're both jolly good."

"All serene."

"We may as well get over to Wayland now, Manners, old man."

"I'm ready."

"If Lowther's going to make a break, what are you going to do with him?" asked Jack Blake.

"Stop him, of course."

"Persuade him, do you mean?"

"Yes."

"And if he won't listen to the voice of the charmer?"

Tom Merry's jaw looked very square as he replied.

"We'll jolly well collar him and bring him back to the school, if we have to carry him all the way! We're not going to let him ruin himself!"

"No fear!" said Manners.

"Then you'd better take a couple of fellows with you," said Blake. "He might dodge you two. Take Glyn and young Brooke."

"Good idea!" said Tom Merry. "I will!"

Blake walked away towards the cricket-field. Bernard Glyn, of the Shell, and Brooke, of the Fourth, were not playing that afternoon, and they cheerfully started out with Tom Merry and Manners. Meanwhile, the junior cricketers were gathering on the cricket-ground. Figgins & Co., of the New House, were there in all their glory. The School House cricketers were mostly there, and a shout greeted Blake as he came up:

"Ain't Tom Merry ready?"

"Not playing," said Blake briefly. "He's asked me to captain the team."

"Bai Jove! It would have been much wisah to ask the best cwicketah in the eleven to do that, deah boy."

"Well, that's what he's done," said Blake.

"Weally, Blake——"

"I want Lumley-Lumley and Dane," said Blake. "They're going in instead of Tom Merry and Manners. It's all right. We shall beat the New House hands down, without those Shell-fish."

"Yaas, wathah! But——"

"I don't think!" grinned Figgins, of the New House.

The House match started, and the juniors soon forgot about the Terrible Three in the interest of the game.

Meanwhile, Tom Merry and his three companions were walking swiftly by the footpath through the wood to Wayland. They arived at the old market-town, and Tom Merry hesitated whether to go to the lodging of Mr. Curll. He was pretty certain that Monty Lowther had been there, though whether he was there still could not be known.

"Better go to the railway-station first," said Manners thoughtfully. "If Lowther is really idiot enough to think of bolting, he'll go in the theatre train, you know. We can watch for him at the station if he isn't there."

"Good egg!"

They hurried on to the railway-station. Brooke, of the Fourth, glanced up at the town-clock as they passed. It was half-past two.

"There's an express leaves at half-past two," said Brooke. "It's most likely the theatre company will go by that."

"Buck up, then!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

They ran into the station.

Tom Merry dashed upon the platform. There was a train upon the metals, just starting. Tom Merry glanced up and down the platform. Monty Lowther was not there; but the "Counter Girl" Company were very evidently there. A notice on the rtain caught Tom Merry's eye: "Reserved for the George E. Splodgers Company."

At the windows could be seen faces that showed traces of grease-paint, and the untidy hair of some of the ladies of the company.

Tom Merry ran towards the train, with his comrades at his heels.

"Monty!" he shouted.

Monty Lowther was looking out of the window.

He was with the theatre company in the train, and the train was moving out of the station!

Lowther started at the sight of Tom Merry & Co.

He drew a breath of relief as he saw that they had no chance. They were racing along the platform, but the train was moving quickly now.

Lowther waved his hand to them.

"Good-bye!" he shouted.

"Monty! Come back! You ass, Monty!"

Monty Lowther laughed.

The juniors halted in dismay on the platform; the train glided out of the station, and Monty Lowther vanished from their sight.

"My hat!" murmured Manners.

"He's gone!"

Tom Merry & Co. turned back. Monty Lowther was gone; they had been too late to stop him. They could do nothing but return to St. Jim's with the news that Monty Lowther, of the Shell, had run away from school!

CHAPTER 8.

The New Member of the Splodgers Co.!

MR. CURLL glanced rather curiously at Monty Lowther as he sat beside him in the carriage reserved for the famous Splodgers Co. Mr. Curll was looking very satisfied with himself and with things generally. So was Mr. Splodgers. Mr. Splodgers was in possession of a new pupil now, who was likely to prove more valuable than many other pupils that gentleman had possessed. The handsome, well-dressed Shell fellow was very welcome in the somewhat untidy "gang" who travelled with Mr. Splodgers.

The fact that he could pay his footing earned him much respect among the Thespian ladies and gentlemen, who were by no means certain whether they would have any dinners the following week. Mr. Curll, especially, owed him a debt of gratitude, as his timely loan of half a sovereign the night before had saved Mr. Curll from the disagreeable and awkward necessity of "bilking" his landlady.

The arrangements between Lowther and his new friends had been made simply and easily. They did not mind his being late for his appointment in Wayland. Everything had gone quite smoothly; and he was travelling with them, to the satisfaction of both parties. But the sight of Tom Merry & Co. racing down the platform after the train had put a suspicion into Mr. Curll's mind.

"Friends of yours, pally?" he asked, jerking a fat thumb towards the station that had been left behind

Lowther coloured.

"Yes," he replied.

"Schoolboys—eh?"

"Yes."

"But you've left school, I understand?"

"I certainly have," said Lowther.

"Good. Not going to be any trouble, I hope?"

"Oh, no!"

Monty Lowther spoke more confidently than he felt. It was quite true that he had left school; and he did not intend to tell the Splodgers Co. that he had left it by running away. He was sorry that Tom Merry & Co. had seen him in the train; it would furnish a clue to where he had gone. But that had to be risked. It could not be helped now, at all events, and he tried to shut it out of his mind.

He felt that the Splodgers Co. would not care to be mixed up in such a business as a junior boy running away from school. It would not be fair on them, either; if there was trouble afterwards, it was better for Mr. Splodgers to be able to say that he hadn't had the faintest idea that Lowther was evading just authority.

As a matter of fact, Mr. Splodgers had not given the matter a thought. He was too accustomed to stage-struck youths to be surprised at Monty Lowther's action; and the chief thing that concerned him was, to get his fat fingers upon the £25 premium.

Miss Kitty Skitty was very kind to Lowther. His evident worship of that lady could not fail to be pleasing to her. The off-handed manners of her theatrical friends contrasted very poorly with the deep respect that Lowther showed her. Miss Skitty, although Monty did not suspect it, was quite old enough to be his mother; but that, perhaps, made her take a somewhat motherly interest in him.

And his open-hearted admiration for her performances in the "Counter Girl" Waltz, and his utter lack of suspicion that it made her bones ache afterwards, touched her heart. To Monty Lowther she was a fairy-like thing that could almost float upon the air like thistledown, and if she had tested the weighing-machine in the station, the result would have surprised Lowther, not that she was likely to do it.

Miss Kitty was very kind to Lowther, in contrast with her haughtiness towards other members of the company. Miss Skitty's Press notices, like Mr. Curll's, were all from little papers in remote provinces; but she certainly was the star of the company, and almost the only member whose salary was not in arrear. And her manners towards the chorus were very distant and haughty.

That her face was thickly powdered did not surprise Lowther, or that her eyebrows were pencilled. All the members of the company bore very visible signs of their profession about them, and cared little—in fact, gloried in it as distinguishing them from the Philistines.

And Lowther did not know that half Miss Skitty's handsome curls had been purchased, and he would not have cared if he had known. Everything that smacked of theatrical life had a glamour about it to Monty Lowther at that time.

The talk around him was incessant, and it was all upon the same subject—themselves and their profession. That there were other professions in the wide universe did not seem to have dawned upon these good folk. And their talk, too, was only half intelligible to Monty Lowther, but he listened to it with avidity, storing up phrases in his memory to use again, when he should have the nerve to speak as his new friends were speaking.

He learned that an engagement was a "shop," that an audience were the people "in front," that applause was "hands," and that when an audience did not like a performer they gave him a weird punishment called "the bird." He also learned that professional jealousy was the reason why everybody present did not rise to the top of his profession; and that there wasn't a person in the company who couldn't have made his mark in the metropolis if only some influential person could have been induced to "put him on."

With it all, he could see, too, that they were all good, kind-hearted people, whose chief fault was a narrowness of vision which prevented them from seeing anything outside the range of their profession. The chief desire of the feminine members was not to be considered great actresses, but real ladies, and all the male members prided themselves upon being gentlemen before everything else.

It was a surprise to the lad, who had expected such trivial considerations to be quite lost sight of in devotion to a great art. But even in a few hours, he realised that what was art to the outsider, was merely the day's round of work to the insider.

Good nature and impecuniosity seemed to be the leading traits in the merry company. They were certainly very merry, with one exception—Mr. Wibbs, who played the part of the comic shopwalker in the "Counter Girl." Mr. Wibbs was funny enough on the stage—indeed, he described himself, with true professional modesty, as "simply a shriek, dear boy, simply a scream!" But perhaps he expended all his funniosity on the boards, for in private he was quite taciturn.

Mr. Splodgers, who was an overbearing tyrant as the Bulkeley of the musical comedy, was beaming with good temper in private life. Certainly, he was very kind, very patient, and very considerate with his company; and, like all managers, he needed plenty of patience. Even his negotiation with Monty Lowther, in which he was to pocket twenty-five pounds, seemed to him quite an equitable business transaction.

He knew that outsiders might not think it was quite cricket; but his view was that he was giving the kid an opening, if there was anything in him; and that people couldn't get experience without paying for it. Certainly they couldn't, anyway, if they came to Mr. Splodgers for the experience.

He was going to shove the kid on the very first night, as an extra in the chorus, and that before the money was paid. Surely that was fair play? He had only Lowther's word about the money, so far; and keen as he was, Mr. Splodgers had sometimes been taken in by persons keener than himself.

Whenever Mr. Splodgers spoke, Lowther listened with rapt attention; and he was deeply respectful to Mr. Curll, and to Mr. Wibbs, and especially to Miss Skitty. Some of the talk he did not understand, and it was just as well that he did not; and some, too, was difficult to follow from the theatrical slang that was employed. Monty Lowther wondered at times, as the train thundered on, whether he was dreaming, and would wake up to find himself in the old Form-room or the dorm. at St. Jim's.

"Do you think you'll like the life, kid?" asked Mr. Curll kindly, as Lowther sat lost in a kind of dream.

The junior started.

"Yes, yes! I know I shall!" he said enthusiastically. "I shall never forget your kindness in helping me in this way."

Mr. Curll coughed—that perhaps being caused by the thick cloud of tobacco-smoke with which he had surrounded himself.

"We stop in Abbotsford for some days," he remarked. "Do you know where you are going to dig—to put up, you know?"

"No."

"Like to dig with me?"

"Oh, yes, yes, if—if——"

"If what?" asked Mr. Curll, a little grimly. His thoughts ran immediately to the financial side of the matter.

"If I sha'n't be a lot of trouble to you," said Monty shyly.

"Oh," said Mr. Curll, relieved, "that's all right! I shall be glad to have you, kid. I can put you through some of the game before we go on."

"Are we—the company playing to-night?"

"What-ho!"

"And I—I," stammered Lowther—"I'm really going on the stage to-night?"

"Didn't you hear his nibs say so?"

"His—his what?"

"The guv'nor, I mean."

"Oh, yes!" said Lowther. "But—but it seems too good to be true."

Mr. Curll laughed kindly, and patted him on the shoulder.

"That's all right," he said, "you'll go on as an extra in the chorus; the stage at the Abbotsford Palace is bigger than that Waylands hole, and every little helps. Ahem! You will be an extra shopman."

"Shall I have to speak?"

"Not a syllable."

"Oh!" said Lowther.

"You'll join in the chorus singing, though," said Mr. Curll encouragingly.

"But I—I don't know the music—excepting the waltz tune," said Lowther.

Mr. Curll laughed.

"A good many in that boat, as well as you, kid. But I'll run over the score with you, if I can dig up a piano at my digs, and give you some tips."

"Oh, thank you; you're very kind!"

"Not at all. When you can sing, sing, and don't quarrel with the orchestra more than you can help. When you're beat, shut up, and only move your mouth."

"I'll remember."

"And I'll take you as my understudy, if you like. I'll put you up to the whoe part of Bertie Bulkeley—if we can fix it."

"I'm sure I shall be jolly glad to fix it," said Lowther.

Mr. Curll looked at him in a rather peculiar way for a moment, but said no more. When the Splodgers Co. disembarked at Abbotsford, Mr. Curll took charge of Monty Lowther. Miss Kitty Skitty tapped him on the shoulder with her fan.

"Don't you give that boy anything to drink, old pal," she said.

Mr. Curll looked deeply injured.

"As if I should!" he replied.

"Well, don't!" said the lady.

"My fairest friend——"

"Oh, rats!" said Miss Skitty.

Mr. Curll murmured something, and slipped his arm

through Lowther's. As they passed the town post-office, Lowther paused.

"Will you wait a minute, while I send a wire?" he asked.

"Hours, if you like," said Mr. Curll obligingly.

"Only a minute."

Monty Lowther disappeared into the post-office, and emerged in a few minutes. Then he accompanied Mr. Curll in search of digs, and they were soon installed in an apartment at the top of three flights of stairs, looking out upon a narrow court.

"If you'd like something better than this, you've only got to say so," said Mr. Curll; "it's simply a question of parting."

"Parting!" said Lowther, puzzled.

"Paying the piper, you know."

"Oh," said Lowther, "I see! No, this suits me all right." As a matter of fact, the shabbiness of the apartment had given him a little chill for the moment, but he felt that he could not be guilty of appearing to want anything better than his friend was satisfied with. "I think this will be ripping."

"Oh, absolutely!" said Mr. Curll.

"Absolutely," was the word that had been most frequently in Monty Lowther's ears during the train journey. Lowther was stage-struck; but he was keen, and he realised that the stage people prided themselves very much upon being up-to-date, without really having the opportunity to become so.

They evidently had the impression that they had the latest catch word, and they worked it to death. But trifles like that did not occupy Lowther's mind; he was feeling too much obliged to his new friends even to smile at their little foibles. And shabby as the room was, there was a piano downstairs, and although the little parlour where the piano was situated, was as shabby as the bed-room—it soon became more than a palace to Monty Lowther; for Mr. Curll's fat fingers glided over the keys, and he rattled off yards and yards of the threadbare jingles that serve as "music" in the weird compositions known as musical comedies. And Monty Lowther, who had a quick ear, found that he was already becoming what Mr. Curll called "O fay" with his part.

He was going on the stage at last! And everything else vanished into the limbo of things that did not matter.

CHAPTER 9.

Missing Again!

TOM MERRY stood with his hands in his pockets, leaning against the cricket pavilion, watching the finish of the House match at St. Jim's. Evening was falling on the old school, and there was barely light enough for play. Tom Merry was worried in his mind, and he wanted to take counsel with his chums. It was not yet calling-over, and so the runaway had not been missed so far. Tom Merry had asked Manners and Brooke and Glyn to say nothing as yet about Lowther's escapade. He wanted time to think things over before the fact was given away that Lowther had "bolted."

He still cherished a vague hope that Lowther would realise the folly he had been guilty of, and come back.

The match ended, unfinished, with honours easy on both sides. Blake carried out his bat, not out, and joined Tom Merry. The gloomy expression upon the brow of the captain of the Shell struck him at once.

"More trouble?" he asked.

Tom Merry nodded.

"Lowther?" asked Blake.

"Yes."

"What's he done?"

"Bolted."

"Phew!"

"Bai Jove," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, "the ass! There will be twouble!"

"That's what I'm afraid of," said Tom Merry miserably. "Don't say anything about it yet. He may have sense enough to come back."

They walked over to the School House together. Toby, the page, met Tom Merry as he came in.

"Telegram for you, Master Merry!"

Tom Merry took the telegram.

"From Lowther, perhaps," said Manners.

"Very likely."

The captain of the Shell opened the telegram. His face clouded over, and he handed it to the others to read.

"Mum's the word! I reply upon you.—M. L."

Blake knitted his brows.

"Dash it all," he exclaimed, "that's too thick! He's asking you to keep dark what you know. He's afraid of having a prefect sent to fetch him back."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I don't know where he's gone," said Tom Merry, "I know that he left Wayland with the 'Counter Girl' people, that's all."

"It would be easy enough for the Head to find out their next pitch," said Blake shrewdly, "if he knew that Lowther had gone with them. That's what the ass is afraid of. He doesn't want to be found. What are you going to do?"

Tom Merry looked disgusted.

"Blessed if I know!" he replied. "I was turning it over in my mind whether I ought to tell the Head."

"I wegard it as your duty to do so, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus. "Lowthah will have to be saved fwom makin' a silly ass of himself, and the sooner he is fetched back, the less he will have to stand for it."

"That's so!" said Manners.

"But—but he's asked us to keep it dark, here," said Tom Merry, crushing the telegram in his hand. "What on earth's a fellow to do?"

"It's a weally awkward posish, deah boy."

"Rotten awkward," said Blake thoughtfully. "It seems rather rotten to give Lowther away when he asks you not to. At the same time, he's got to be fetched back."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Perhaps the Head'll tumble, without our telling him anything," suggested Manners. "Keep it dark for the present, anyway."

"I suppose that's all we can do," said Tom Merry.

The juniors went in to calling-over.

When Lowther's name was called, with the rest of the Shell, it was not, of course, answered to, and Mr. Railton, who was taking call-over, marked him down as absent, with a very severe frown upon his brow. After his escapade of the previous night it was amazing, and most exasperating, that Lowther should repeat the offence. Mr. Railton notified the Head that Monty Lowther was out after locking up, and the Head was angry, as was only to be expected.

Monty Lowther's friends all looked very serious as they left the hall after call-over. They were all concerned for the reckless junior. That it would mean a flogging, at least, everyone expected. Mellish, of the Fourth, indeed, anticipated that result with satisfaction, which he would have been wiser to conceal from the absent junior's chums. Mellish was the special enemy of the Terrible Three, and he could not forgo the opportunity of adding to Tom Merry's worries.

"So Lowther's made another break?" he said, meeting Tom Merry in the passage.

"Yes," said Tom Merry shortly. He was in no mood to be badgered by the cad of the Fourth, and Mellish's ill-natured chuckle irritated him.

"What an awful nerve!" said Mellish. "But you chaps always seem to think the school was built for you."

"Oh, shut up!"

"Lowther will get licked——"

"Shut up!" roared Tom Merry.

"And serve him jolly well right!" said Mellish. "I think—— Yarooh!"

Biff!

Mellish sat down in the passage with startling suddenness, and Tom Merry strode away with a frowning brow.

Tom Merry half expected to be questioned as to Lowther's absence, and if he had been questioned, his position would have been, as D'Arcy remarked, "doocid awkward." But to his great relief, no questions were asked of him, and the Shell went to bed, without knowing what the Head was deciding to do with regard to Monty Lowther.

It was a long time before Tom Merry slept, however.

He was thinking of his absent chum, and wondering where he was, and what he was doing. He had a faintly lingering hope that Lowther would yet return of his own accord, but the hope was ill-founded. It was near midnight when Tom Merry fell asleep at last, and Monty Lowther had not returned to the school, and it was pretty clear that he never would return if he could help it.

CHAPTER 10.

Behind the Footlights.

MONTY LOWTHER felt his excitement increase every moment as the evening came on, though he tried to keep cool. He was not thinking of St. Jim's or possible search after him. He had nearer anxieties. He was to appear on the stage that evening at the Abbotsford Palace; he was to be a member of the chorus in the "Counter Girl." And, humble as the part was, it was a tremendous thing for the schoolboy. He had appeared often enough in amateur theatricals at St. Jim's, but this was quite a different matter. He was to come on the real boards now, with a real audience in front, and real actors and actresses round him, and a real orchestra grinding away in his ears. He was to appear in company with the great Mr. Splodgers, the inimitable Mr. Curll, the irresistible

Mr. Wibb, and the great and only Kitty Skitty. His excitement, as the time came nigh, grew almost painful. His heart was beating almost to suffocation as he left Mr. Curll's lodgings in company with that great tenor, and walked round to the Palace.

Mr. Curll had certainly been very kind to him. Whether his kindness was entirely disinterested or not was another matter. He had done his best for the aspirant. He had rattled half through the score of the "Counter Girl" on the tinny piano at his lodging, and had given Lowther all sorts of useful instructions. Monty Lowther tried to remember them all, but they were buzzing in his mind, along with the tune of the "Counter Girl" Waltz, and, as a matter of fact, he hardly knew whether he was walking on the earth or the air, as he walked along with Mr. Curll.

Mr. Curll had also kindly helped him in the matter of wardrobe. As he had humorously pointed out, he could not stand in the chorus as a shopman at Bulkeley's Stores in an Eton jacket. But it was not difficult to find an outfit, and Mr. Curll had done it.

Monty Lowther felt that he could never be sufficiently grateful to his new friend.

They reached the theatre, which was a small provincial house with the scantiest accommodation for the company. The performers prepared for their appearance in a large dressing-room common to all; only the ladies of the company having a separate dressing-room to themselves. Monty Lowther had had vague ideas of palatial dressing-rooms, and a green-room with rich carpets and gilt mirrors. The reality was something very different. But he was behind the scenes; he was there with a footing in the profession, and that compensated for everything.

Mr. Curll, with untiring kindness, kept close to his young friend. He daubed Monty Lowther's face with the grease-paint to the required pitch. Lowther had a healthy enough complexion, but the reddest of natural roses could not look otherwise than pallid in the glare of the footlights. With a daubed face, and a moustache, and a tight frock-coat, Monty Lowther felt very queer indeed, but Mr. Curll pronounced that he would do splendidly, and he was satisfied.

With his own make-up Mr. Curll was careless enough. He had a lofty contempt for audiences in the country, founded probably upon the fact that those audiences did not "rise" at him as they should have done. If the people "in front" failed to appreciate Mr. Curll, it was evidently due to their own stupidity, and not to any shortcomings on the part of Horatio himself, or so it appeared to Mr. Curll. Mr. Curll confided to Lowther that he just walked through his part in these places; anything was good enough. And Lowther marvelled at the coolness he displayed. It seemed to him that everybody ought to have felt as excited as he did himself.

Miss Kitty Skitty smiled as she saw Lowther in his new rig. Lowther coloured, though his blush did not show through the daubs Mr. Curll had lavished upon his face.

"Feel nervous?" asked Miss Kitty kindly.

"Yes, horribly," confessed Lowther.

"There's no need. You don't have to do anything, only walk on."

"I know," said Lowther. "But——"

Miss Kitty laughed good-naturedly.

"You will get used to it, if you stick to the business," she said.

"I'm going to do that," said Lowther.

"You haven't had any experience so far?"

"None."

"Well, you'll get experience here," said Miss Kitty, somewhat mysteriously, and without specifying the kind of experience Lowther was likely to get.

Lowther was able to take a peep at the people in front before the curtain was raised. The audience was more numerous than in Wayland Theatre Royal. The orchestra were in their places, and the strains of the "Counter Girl" Waltz, played as an overture, were ringing through the building. The orchestra, for the most part, belonged to the company, and, accompanied Mr. Splodgers in his tour; but extra performers were picked up at the stopping places when there were any belonging to the theatre where the company played.

On this occasion the orchestra had been strengthened by the addition of an extra violin and a second 'cello, which somewhat increased the volume of sound without enhancing the effect, as the new violin seemed to have registered a vow not to play in the same time with the orginal violins. The conductor bestowed ferocious glares upon the new violin, who bowed away cheerfully, regardless of them. He knew he was right, and if the others did not choose to agree with him, that was their own look-out. First violin exchanged sympathetic glances with the conductor. The conductor, however, was much more occupied with the attitude he was assuming in the eyes of the audience, than with getting the orchestra to agree with one another. He was a little, pale man, with fair hair, which he wore very long, and which curled profusely, owing to the liberal use of hair-curlers of a night. He had a special attitude which he considered very effective, and a dreamy, musical expression which he practised before a looking-glass. When he conducted, the attitude and the dreamy expression came first, and the conducting afterwards.

"Horrid row, ain't it?" said Mr. Curll cheerfully.

Lowther grinned.

"They don't seem to keep in tune all the time," he remarked.

"They never do," said Mr. Curll. "There's been a row already between Fipps—that's our conductor, you know, Cecil Fipps—and the theatre manager. Hear that fiddle?"

"He's too fast," said Lowther.

"He says the others are too slow," said Mr. Curll. "He's the theatre manager's first-cousin, and he has to go in. Fippy wanted to have him left out, but he wouldn't see it. He'll give Fippy a fearful time. He can't play for toffee, but he's the manager's cousin. Fippy caught him in the band-room imitating some of his attitudes—you see how Fippy attitudinises. Looks like a cat on hot bricks, don't he?"

Lowther laughed.

"They hate one another like poison," said Mr. Curll cheerfully. "The manager's cousin says Fippy can't conduct, and he's quite right! Fippy says he can't play the fiddle, and he's quite right, too! Lovely, ain't it?"

"Not lovely for the music," said Lowther.

"Oh, it ain't music—it's musical comedy!" said Mr. Curll. "The audience don't mind, so long as there's a row."

"Oh!" said Lowther.

The opening chorus of the "Counter Girl" was now forming up on the stage, and Mr. Curll walked off, and Lowther took his place among the supers who played the parts of the shopmen in Bulkeley's Stores.

The boy's heart was beating strangely as the curtain went up.

In the bright light of the stage, which dazzled his eyes a little at first, and the blare of the orchestra, he could hardly grapple with his confusion of mind, and if he had been given any part but a purely passive one, he would certainly have failed to carry it out satisfactorily.

But it was not difficult, even for a novice, to stand in a row with other supers, and open his mouth in imitation of singing, which was all that Lowther had to do. All Mr. Curll's instructions as to the words and the music had vanished from his mind, but he remembered the tip he had received—to appear to be singing without making a sound; and he did that easily enough.

It was some time before he ventured to let his eyes rest upon the audience.

When he did so the sight almost made his head swim.

There were the usual array of deadheads in evening-dress in the stalls, and behind them the public, numerous and much interested.

"Take down those absurd photographs from the walls, Lowther!" said the Head, sternly. Lowther hesitated. But there was nothing for it but to obey. Dr. Holmes stood frowning, while Lowther pulled down the offending theatrical photographs. "And now put them in the grate and set fire to them!" said the Head. (*See Chap. 5.*)

Nobody in the theatre was looking at Lowther, but it seemed to him that every eye was fixed especially upon him, and his cheeks burned under the grease-paint.

It was a marvel to him that Mr. Curll could stroll upon the stage, in the character of young Bertie Bulkeley from Oxford, with as much coolness as if he were entering the stuffy little parlour at his lodgings.

Would the time ever come when he could do that, and burst into melody as Mr. Curll did, without a quiver?

He wondered!

Mr. Curll was really gifted. Whether his tenor voice was more than a semi-falsetto shriek might be a question, but he certainly knew stage business, and the part was nothing to him. And even when he failed in some part of his solo, the look he directed at the orchestra, to be observed by the audience, conveyed the impression that it was the fault of the bandsmen—quite an old dodge with Mr. Curll.

Lowther was breathlessly excited during the first act.

His head was in a whirl as he went off when the curtain came down. The sight of Miss Kitty Skitty eating ham sandwiches, with a glass of beer to wash them down, gave him a slight shock. It was not to be supposed that the plump Miss Kitty lived entirely upon air, or the scent of roses or lilies. But ham sandwiches and beer did seem a little commonplace for so divine a creature.

Mr. Curll clapped Lowther merrily on the shoulder in the dressing-room.

"How did it go, kid?" he asked.

Lowther was a little surprised that so old a hand as Mr. Curll should ask him, a novice, how the act had gone. He replied that he thought the audience liked the opera; and then he discovered that Mr. Curll was not alluding to the "Counter Girl," but to his own individual solo.

"But my little bit?" said Mr. Curll.

"Oh, your song," said Lowther.

"Yes, how did it go?"

Lowther might have replied, with perfect truth, that it had gone flat—that being one of the little weaknesses of Mr Curll's magnificent tenor. He might have replied, too, that it had gone sharp, as it certainly had, in places. Mr. Curll, indeed, had a great gift for emerging above or below his note.

But Lowther was gifted with too much tact to reply to Mr. Curll in that strain.

"Well, I only wish I could do it," was his diplomatic reply.

"Can't do your best with a band like that," said Mr. Curll disparagingly.

"No, I suppose not."

"You should hear me with the London Symphony Orchestra!" said Mr. Curll, his tone implying that it was quite a common thing for him to be backed up by that famous body.

"Yes, I'd like to," said Lowther.

"Not very encouraging, working among these mugs," said Mr. Curll, "but it's up to me to keep the show alive, and that's what I'm doing."

"It's very good of you," said Lowther.

Mr. Curll cast a sharp glance at the junior to ascertain

whether he was speaking sarcastically; but Lowther was quite in earnest.

"Have a sandwich," said Mr. Curll.

"Thanks; I'm not hungry."

"You will be; shove it in."

Lowther consented, and shoved it in. When the bell rang, he went on for the second act with more confidence. But the whole evening seemed like a dream to him. When the performance was over at last, and he walked home with Mr. Curll, he felt as if he was walking on air. He was on the stage at last—if not an actor, he was on the stage—and the future was bright with rosy dreams.

CHAPTER 11.
Kindness Itself.

LOWTHER awoke the next morning with strange confused ideas in his mind, not for the moment remembering where he was.

He had been dreaming of the stage and the "Counter Girl," and in dreamland he had whirled in the "Counter Girl" Waltz with Miss Kitty Skitty; but as he awoke, he expected, from force of habit, to see the high walls and white ceiling of the Shell dormitory in the School House at St. Jim's.

Over his bed there was a low, cracked ceiling, soiled with the dust of ages, and in a corner of it a spider was industriously spinning his web.

Lowther started, and rubbed his eyes, and remembered.

He sat up in bed.

He had gone to bed the previous night tired and happy, without noticing his surroundings much. Now, as he caught the light of the summer morning sun streaming in at the window, he realised that the room was not cleanly. Also, it appeared not to be a custom to put on clean sheets for visitors. There were two beds in the room, and in the other one Mr. Curll was still asleep. He slept with a muffler tied round his neck—in spite of the heat of the weather—for fear of an accidental draught which might have harmful effects upon his voice. That muffler was, indeed, a part of Mr. Curll's life—in it he lived and moved and had his being—and, perhaps, the constant need of it was one reason why it was not washed so frequently as some wearers would have deemed essential.

Mr. Curll was snoring gently as he slept. Monty Lowther looked at his watch; it was nearly ten o'clock.

"Phew!" murmured Lowther.

He was not out of bed yet; but at St. Jim's the fellows would be all in the Form-room long ago. But it was evident that a fellow who did not go to bed until half-past twelve, could not rise at seven like other fellows. In his new profession late hours at night, and late hours in the morning, could not be avoided—with the natural results of late hours—carelessness, shiftlessness, slovenliness, as a rule.

Lowther was accustomed to sleeping with the windows open in the school dorm., but Mr. Curll was evidently not a believer in fresh air. The one small window the room contained was tightly closed, and the bedroom was insufferably stuffy. Monty Lowther felt a little headache, which he knew was the result of close air. He stepped out of bed, and jammed down the window and looked out. He drew in a deep breath of fresh air. But there was little to be seen from the windows, save the backs of houses and two or three dirty children playing on the dirty pavement.

A prodigious yawn from Mr. Curll announced tha tthat gentleman was awake.

He sat up in bed, and rubbed his eyes, and yawned again.

He looked fifteen years older in the morning light, as Monty Lowther could not help noticing.

"Hullo!" he said, sleepily.

"Good morning!" said Lowther.

"Wharrer you up for?"

"It's ten."

"I don't gerrup till eleven," said Mr. Curll drowsily. "'Tain't a matinee to-day. And there ain't any rehearsals, thank goodness!"

"Sorry I disturbed you," said Lowther.

"Oh, that's all right," said Mr. Curll, waking up more fully. "Never mind! I'm thirsty, now I come to think of it. Hullo! You've got the window open!" he exclaimed in alarm.

"Yes."

"Shut it, for goodness' sake. There's a draught." Mr. Curll's hand went up to his muffler at once, and he wound it more tightly about his valuable throat. "Shut the window, kid."

Monty Lowther complied.

"I'm thirsty," said Mr. Curll.

Lowther crossed to the washstand.

He looked in the jug, and found that there was water there, and he filled the cracked glass, and turned towards Mr. Curll. The actor regarded him with an expression in which amazement seemed to be mingled with ferocity.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Water."

"What for?"

Lowther stared.

"You said you were thirsty," he replied, in surprise.

"Chuck it away!"

"But——!"

"Don't bring it near me," said Mr. Curll.

Lowther returned the cracked glass to the washstand. It was evident that Mr. Horatio Curll's thirst was not one that could be relieved by mere water.

Mr. Curll smiled gently.

"You see," he explained, "I have to think of my voice."

"Does water hurt the voice?" asked Lowther, in astonishment.

Mr. Curll nodded solemnly.

"I've found that it does," he said. "Some singers gargle their throats with cold water, and it does them good. I've always found that something warm is better. The best gargle I've ever used was made up of hot water and whisky, with a little lemon."

"Oh!" said Lowther.

"I dare say you can get whisky in the house," said Mr. Curll. "This is a place where theatrical folk stop, you know. Run down and get me some Scotch, if you can, with warm water, and a lemon and some sugar. Pay for it when you have it, and then it won't be charged for twice in the bill."

Lowther laughed.

"But suppose they haven't any to sell?"

"Sell! They don't sell whisky—they can't without a licence," said Mr. Curll. "They will let you have a little as a favour."

"Oh, I see."

"And be quick—and pay for it, as I said; it saves bother to pay as you go."

Monty Lowther paused a moment, but Mr. Curll was lying down again now, and so it was clear that the money was to come from Lowther. But Lowther was feeling too much obliged to his friend to mind that. He dressed himself and went downstairs, and expended a small portion of his change in obtaining that valuable gargle for Mr. Curll's throat. He returned to the bed-room with it, and Mr. Curll sat up in bed and received it with an appreciative sniff. His system of gargling his throat with whisky-and-water was very simple—he simply poured it down, just as if he were drinking it in the ordinary way. Perhaps the reference to it as a gargle was simply a little joke of Mr. Curll's.

Monty Lowther, who had never seen anybody drink spirits in the morning before, gazed at Mr. Curll with open eyes.

"How are you feeling this morning, kid?" asked Mr. Curll, apparently very much enlivened by the gargle.

"All serene!" said Lowther.

"Bit tired, eh?"

"Yes, a bit."

"You'll get over that," said Mr. Curll. "It's a great life. Freedom, you know—no anxieties, really, if you've got something in you."

Monty Lowther nodded.

"No reason at all why you shouldn't get a good part," said Mr. Curll. "I've got a chance of another shop, but I'm sticking to the old show to pull it through. Between ourselves, not to make a secret of it, the show isn't doing any too well, and it's only my little bit that keeps it from going under."

Monty Lowther had already learned that Mr. Curll was not the only member of the company whose little bit was all that kept the show from going under. But he nodded.

"Now, if I make you my understudy, you'd have a chance of stepping into my shoes when I get into another shop," said Mr. Curll. "What do you think of that?"

Lowther's eyes glistened.

"Ripping!" he said. "But it would be a long time, surely?"

"Long or short, I'm ready to give you the chance," said Mr. Curll—"that is, of course, if you're willing to try."

"What-ho!" said Lowther.

"I could give you singing-lessons," said Mr. Curll. "I could put you up to all the business of the part, and you can attend all rehearsals, and I'll get a chance of putting you through a rehearsal in the part, too. I don't think any beginner ever had such a chance."

"You're jolly good!" said Lowther, with a falter in his

voice. "I really don't know why you should take all this trouble for me, Mr. Curll."

Mr. Curll coughed.

"The only question is terms," he remarked.

"Terms!" said Lowther.

"Absolutely," said Mr. Curll. "You see, I should like to do all this for nothing, but we can't afford to do all that we'd like to do in this world. I should have to give up some other—ahem!—pupils, and—and in fact, all I could do would be to take you on as a pupil on ridiculously low terms—in fact, bare out-of-pocket expenses. You wouldn't have anything to grumble at in that."

"That's all right," said Lowther.

"The question is, how are you fixed?" said Mr. Curll.

"I've got thirty pounds in the bank, as I told you," said Lowther. "Twenty-five is going to Mr. Splodgers. I shall have five left."

Mr. Curll laughed.

"Five pounds isn't much for what I'm undertaking," he remarked.

"I suppose it isn't," agreed Lowther, in dismay.

"But there, something's due to friendship!" exclaimed Mr. Curll. "I'll take the five quid, and put the rest down to friendship."

"You're very generous, sir!"

"The fact is, I mean to be generous," said Mr. Curll magnificently. "I take an interest in you, and I'll see you through. Five quid, and it's done. I suppose you've got some other tin to live on?"

"I've got a pound left," said Lowther.

"You'll want that for your board in this place. But I suppose you've got some other resources?" said Mr. Curll.

"No, sir," said Lowther. "I—I suppose I shall be getting some salary with the engagement Mr. Splodgers is going to give me?"

Mr. Curll looked at him very queerly.

"I shouldn't build too much on that," he said. "You'll be getting teaching and experience in return for your premium, and that's fair. As for salary, you'll have to wait for that till you earn some."

"Oh!"

"Not much good a beginner going on the stage unless he has some resources" said Mr. Curll, with a shake of the head. "You want something to fall back on, you see."

"I see," said Lowther.

"No room on the stage for genius without cash," said Mr. Curll humorously. "Look at me. If genius without money or influence could do anything, do you think I should be rotting in the provinces with a musical comedy on tour? No fear!"

"I suppose not."

"Rather not!" said Mr. Curll.

"I—I don't know what I'd better do, then," said Monty Lowther, in dismay. "I can't live on air. If I hand Mr. Splodgers twenty-five pounds and you five, I shall have nothing left, and I can't live without a salary. I certainly understood that there would be some salary attached to the engagement. If there isn't, I suppose I'd better give up the whole idea."

Mr. Curll looked alarmed.

"You can't do that," he said. "You've made the arrangement with Splodgey, and you'll have to carry it out—unless you want to throw it up on the plea of being a minor. That's not playing the game."

"I don't want to throw it up," said Lowther eagerly. "I want to keep on. But I can't live without money to pay my expenses, can I?"

"Tap some other resources," said Mr. Curll. "Young fellows who go on the stage generally have some friends they can draw on till they get an opening."

Monty Lowther reddened.

"Dash it all, I can't live by sponging on my friends!" he exclaimed.

Mr. Curll stared at him.

"Why not?" he asked.

"Well—I—I——"

"If you can get a loan or two, take my advice and get 'em, and pay back the money when you're drawing in your hundreds of quids a week," said Mr. Curll. "I suppose you've got some relations with money, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, it's only fair that they should lend you a hand."

"They wouldn't agree to what I've done. I couldn't even write to them."

"What about those young fellows who saw you off at Wayland? Wouldn't they stand by you a bit? They looked well heeled!"

"I can't ask them."

"Well—well, we'll talk about this another time," said Mr. Curll, beginning to feel uneasy about the thirty pounds. "Wait a bit, and I'll use my influence with Splodgers, and perhaps we can arrange about a salary."

Monty Lowther looked at him with some firmness.

"If we can't fix about a salary, the whole thing will have to drop," he said, "and it had better drop before I draw the money from the Post Office Bank."

Mr. Curll gasped for a moment.

"I'll speak to Splodgers!" he exclaimed. "Don't you be uneasy, pally. You've got a friend to stand by you. I fancy I can fix it all right. I just wished to know how you stood, that's all. At the same time, if you can raise any capital, you'd find it useful. Now, if you'll go and tell 'em I'm ready for breakfast, I'll turn out."

"Right-ho!" said Monty Lowther.

And he went downstairs, and Mr. Curll rose in a leisurely way, and came down to breakfast at half-past eleven, without the preliminary of shaving himself.

CHAPTER 12.

Mr. Curll is Very Merry.

MONTY LOWTHER was in a thoughtful mood that day.

The excitement of appearing on the stage before a real audience had not worn off, and he still felt a thrill at being free to enter a theatre by the stage door.

But in other matters he was beginning to think.

Mr. Curll's words had opened his eyes a little to the real facts of the case, and it was only too clear that without money—and a good deal of it—he stood a poor chance of maintaining his footing on the Thespian boards.

That the show was not making a very successful tour he knew by the talk of the members of the company, though he did not know yet that most of the salaries were very much in arrears.

To pay for his engagement with Mr. Splodgers, and to pay for lessons from Mr. Curll, appeared to him reasonable; but when that was done he would have no money left, and unless a salary sufficient to live upon was given him, he would be without resources.

The alternative of settling coolly down to sponge upon his friends and relations, which Mr. Curll had so cheerfully suggested, was repugnant in the extreme to Monty Lowther. He felt that he could not do it, and even if he could, that resource would not last for ever. He must have a salary, and he wished that that had been made clear before he had taken so serious a step as breaking with St. Jim's for the purpose of joining the company.

Monty Lowther was stage-struck, but he was no fool. He determined, in his own mind, that he would have that question of the salary settled before he handed over his little capital to the keeping of Mr. Splodgers.

He was glad, now, that the money was tied up in the Post Office Savings Bank. But for the preliminaries necessary before the money could be withdrawn, it would have been already handed over, without any security being made for the future. Those preliminaries, which he had regarded as a nuisance, had saved his little capital so far.

He was anxious for the interview with Mr. Splodgers. But Mr. Splodgers was not accessible that day, and the evening came round without Lowther having seen him. Lowther appeared in the chorus of the "Counter Girl" that evening with less excitement than on the first occasion. He was able to sing his little bit, too, with the rest of the chorus. The music was of the simplest, and he simply had to follow the others.

Mr. Curll pronounced that he was doing very well, and complimented him at the finish, and told him as they walked home that he had never seen a fellow he fancied more as an understudy. Mr. Curll stopped for refreshment at two or three places on the way back to his lodgings, Lowther waiting outside for him, for nothing would induce the boy to enter a public-house—not even friendship for Mr. Curll. Mr. Curll was quite willing to leave him outside. After the last halt, there was a certain slackness in Mr. Curll's pace as he walked homeward, and once or twice he had a peculiar little stagger in his walk, which seemed to hint that he had been refreshing himself with something stronger than ginger-beer. He leaned at last on Monty's arm, and leaned very heavily, and breathed an odour of mingled whisky and tobacco upon him which Lowther, with all his friendly feelings for Mr. Curll, found hard to bear.

When they reached their lodging it was closed and dark; but Mr. Curll had a latchkey. He felt in his pocket with a great solemnity of manner.

"What on earth are you up to?" demanded Lowther, as he suddenly became aware that Mr. Curll was attempting to insert his watch into the keyhole.

"Won't open," murmured Mr. Curll, turning a glassy eye upon Lowther. "Must have got the wrong key. Br-r-r!"

Lowther laughed.

"You're trying to open it with your watch!" he said.

"Eh?" said Mr. Curll.

"You're trying to open the door with your watch!" bawled Lowther.

Mr. Curll gazed glassily at him, and then gazed at the watch, with an expression of the greatest astonishment.

"Strordinary!" he murmured.

"Where's the key?" asked Lowther. "Why, here it is—you've dropped it."

"Strordinary!" repeated Mr. Curll, with conviction.

Lowther unlocked the door and opened it, and pushed Mr. Curll into the passage within. It was quite dark. The stairs opened on the passage, and Mr. Curll sat on the lowest step, leaned his head against the banisters, and began to snore. Monty Lowther closed the door, and stumbled over Mr. Curll.

"What times we have in Oxford!" sang Mr. Curll, waking up. "Town and gown, round the town, a gay young spark, but keep it dark——"

"Shut up, for goodness' sake," murmured Lowther. "You'll wake the house."

"Eh?"

"Come up to bed."

"Certainly not," said Mr. Curll, with stately dignity. "I wonder at your proposing such a thing, Mr. Splodgers. I refuse to go to bed. Am I to understand, sir, that you are intimating that I am under the influence of liquor? I repudiate the insin—insin—insinuation, sir. I cast it in your teeth, sir. I distinctly refuse to go to bed."

"I'm not Mr. Splodgers," said Lowther, half-laughing and half-exasperated. "Do come up to bed, Mr. Curll."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Monty Lowther, you ass."

"Monty, my old chum Monty," said Mr. Curll, suddenly breaking out into the most affecting friendship. "Dear boy! Come to my arms! My understudy—my most promising pupil! Where are you, Monty, my dear chap. Have another with me."

"Do come up!"

"I'd do anything for you, Monty," said Mr. Curll, staggering to his feet. "Disgusting quarters these. Where are the stairs?"

"Here they are!"

"Lean on me, Monty, dear boy, and I'll help you up," said Mr. Curll, generously. "Rely on me. I'll see you through."

It was Mr. Curll who was in need of assistance; but Monty Lowther did not argue the point. He seized the great tenor, and propelled him up the stairs. Mr. Curll forgot his intention of obliging his young friend, by the time the first landing was reached, and he sat down there and announced his firm resolve to go to sleep. He entreated Monty with tears not to abandon an old chum, but to remain with him, promising as a recompense that Horatio Curll would stick to him as long as life lasted.

It was a quarter of an hour before Monty Lowther finally succeeded in getting Mr. Curll into the bedroom, and pitching him upon his bed.

Mr. Curll lay there breathing stertorously. Lowther took his boots off for him, but did not feel equal to anything more, so he left him to sleep as he was. He turned the gas out and got into bed.

Then came Mr. Curll's voice from the darkness.

"Are you there, dear boy?"

"I'm here!" growled Lowther.

"Will you have another with me?"

"Oh, go to sleep," said Lowther.

"I decline to go to sleep!" came back Mr. Curll's voice. "I absolutely decline. I repeat my question: will you have another with me?"

Monty Lowther snored.

"Sleep, gentle infant, sleep!" said Mr. Curll, his mood changing again. "Thy friend Horatio watches over thy slumbers.'

Snore!

"Round the town, town and gown," murmured Mr. Curll, dreamily. "I should have got the note all right, but who's going to sing to that rotten orchestra. It is a lie, sir, to say that I cannot get the note. My voice, sir, has been praised by critics who know what they are talking about. My voice has been compared to Caruso's, sir, to the disadvantage of Caruso. The man who says I cannot sing, sir, is a prevaricator. I have had offers from the Grand Opera Syndicate—in writing, sir. I refuse to show you the letters. The man who cannot take the word of Horatio Curll is beneath my notice, sir."

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Lowther.

"Perhaps you would care to see my Press notices," said Mr. Curll from the darkness, in another tone. "I shall be happy to show them. They are a few I happen to have by me merely by accident—I don't keep Press notices as a rule—too many of 'em!"

Snore!

"I say!" called out Mr. Curll, so sharply that Lowther thought he was suddenly sobered, and replied.

"Hallo! What do you want?"

"Are you there, Monty, dear boy?"

"Yes, I am here."

"Good. Will you have another with me?"

"Oh, rats!"

Mr. Curll laughed—immoderately. There was a tap upon the wall from the next room, where someone had apparently been awakened by Mr. Curll's proceedings. The partition was thin, and Mr. Curll tapped back gravely.

"Will you shut up?" came a voice from the next room. "Do you know it's one o'clock?"

"No, sir," replied Mr. Curll, firmly. "I do not know that it is one o'clock. And I refuse to take your word for it, sir. I decline to place the slightest reliance upon your statement unless I see it in writing, sir."

That reply probably convinced the lodger in the adjoining room that Mr. Curll was not in a state to be argued with. He was silent, and Mr. Curll chuckled triumphantly. It was some time before he went to sleep. Monty Lowther dropped off to sleep, and left him still making remarks to the desert air.

CHAPTER 13.

Cash Down.

MR. CURLL was apologetic next morning.

When he awoke up—about half-past eleven—he found Monty Lowther gone out, but the junior came in by the time Mr. Curll was down to breakfast.

He was looking a little grim, and Mr. Curll looked a little shamefaced, but he soon recovered his ease.

"We're all human at times," he confided to Monty Lowther. "I am afraid I was a little too liberal with the rosy last night—it's a thing that practically never happens to me. Don't you ever take to it, my boy."

"I don't mean to," said Lowther.

"It's a good thing to keep off."

"I know that!"

"Well, let's say no more about it," said Mr. Curll. "Where have you been? Having a nice healthy walk while I've been in bed, eh?"

"I've had a stroll out of the town," said Lowther. "I've called at the post-office, too. I had my letter from the savings-bank directed to Abbotsford Post Office, you know, for me to call for."

"Had it come?" asked Mr. Curll eagerly.

"Yes."

"Then you've got the cash?"

"Yes."

"You've drawn it out?"

"Yes," repeated Monty Lowther.

"Good," said Mr. Curll. "We'd better go round and see Mr. Splodgers. Nothing like getting little matters of business settled up without delay."

"I'm ready when you've had your brekker," said Lowther.

"By the way, our own little arrangement may as well be settled up too," remarked Mr. Curll, looking up from his haddock. "Five pounds down was the idea."

"To be taken as your understudy, and instructed in singing and playing the part of Bertie Bulkeley," said Lowther. His faith in Mr. Horatio Curll had been considerably shaken by the happenings of the previous night, and he wished to have matters fully understood in a business-like way.

Mr. Curll nodded readily.

"Quite so!" he agreed. "Absolutely. If you've got the fiver about you now, I'll write out a receipt at once."

"Here it is," said Lowther.

Mr. Curll's eyes danced at the sight of the crisp five-pound note. He stowed it away in his pocket, and wrote out a receipt cheerfully enough. Then, when his breakfast was finished, he walked round with Monty Lowther to Mr. Splodgers' lodgings.

Mr. Splodgers was interviewing Mr. Wibb when they arrived. Mr. Wibb looked very excited, and voices were raised as Mr. Curll and his young friend came in. Mr. Curll coughed, and Mr. Wibb relapsed into angry silence. Mr. Splodgers was looking very red too. The discussion had been upon the familiar subject of the "ghost," and when he was likely to "walk," but Monty Lowther was not aware of that.

"I'll see you later, Wibb," said Splodgers. "It will be all right."

"It had better be," said Mr. Wibb. "I'm fed up. I——"

"Buzz off, Wibby," said Mr. Curll, poking him in the

ribs. "My young friend has come to settle a matter of business with the boss."

Mr. Wibb nodded, and his face cleared; doubtless he knew that there was a better prospect of the ghost walking when Lowther had handed over his money to the manager.

Mr. Wibb quitted the room, leaving Lowther considerably astonished that any member of the company should have ventured to use such language to the great Splodgers.

Mr. Splodgers coughed, and bade Lowther good-morning very pleasantly, and asked him to be seated.

"Our young friend is very anxious to get the matter settled about the engagement," Mr. Curll explained.

"No time like the present," said Mr. Splodgers. "There's nothing more to be done, excepting for the cash to be paid as agreed. It's not of much importance, but it may as well be done."

Lowther turned a little pink. He was nervous about broaching the question of the salary to Mr. Splodgers, who looked very fat and imposing. But he nerved himself to do so. It was worse than useless to leave that important point unsettled.

"I've got the money this morning, sir," he said.

Mr. Splodgers nodded.

"Very well, lad."

"I'm to be engaged for the whole tour, as I understand," Lowther said.

"That's already been gone into," said Mr. Splodgers. "I've booked you up for the tour."

"Yes. But——"

"I think we settled everything," said Mr. Splodgers. "Shall I make you out the receipt?"

"About the salary, sir?" said Lowther.

Mr. Splodgers looked at him fixedly.

"The what?" he demanded.

Monty Lowther's heart sank, but he stuck to his guns.

"The salary!"

"I don't remember mentioning any salary," said Mr. Splodgers.

"But I must live," explained Monty Lowther. "You see, this is all the money I have. If I don't have a salary, I can't join the company."

"I'm giving you training and an opening," said Mr. Splodgers. "If you knew something about the profession, my young friend, you'd know that you're getting a very great deal for this small fee."

"I—I suppose I am, sir," said poor Lowther. "But—but it's a case of necessity with me, you see. Unless I have a salary, I've got nothing to live on."

"It's not wise to go on the stage unless you've got resources."

"Yes; Mr. Curll was telling me that," said Lowther. "But I haven't any, you see. Of course, if I'm not worth any salary, I can't expect you to pay me any."

"I should say not," agreed Mr. Splodgers. "I should certainly say not."

"Only, in that case, it wouldn't be any good my coming into the company at all," Lowther explained.

"Oh, I see!"

"So, if I'm not worth my keep to you, I—I'm afraid the whole thing will have to drop," Lowther faltered.

"It's not so bad as that," said Mr. Splodgers, smiling. "I didn't know exactly how you were fixed. What salary do you expect?"

"I—I don't know. I should have to have enough to live on, I suppose?"

"Well, well, how much is that?"

"I suppose a chap could live on three pounds a week, perhaps," said Lowther hesitatingly. "I—I've never been on my own before, you know."

"Three pounds a week!" gasped Mr. Splodgers.

"Well, four, then," said Lowther. "I should try to be very economical."

"My hat!' gasped Mr. Splodgers. "Do you know that my principal tenor has only two pound ten?"

"Oh!" ejaculated Lowther.

"Chorus ladies a pound!" said Mr. Splodgers.

"Oh!"

"London star prices ain't paid in touring companies in the provs.," said Mr. Splodgers kindly. "Now, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll stand you ten shillings a week at the start, to be increased to a pound after the first three months."

Mr. Splodgers did not think it necessary to mention that, unless fortune changed very much, the tour was pretty certain to "bust up" before three weeks were out, to say nothing of three months.

"Can I live on ten shillings a week?" asked Lowther.

"When in doubt, apply to your uncle," suggested Mr. Curll.

"My uncle wouldn't help me," said Lowther

Mr. Curll chuckled.

"I mean your other uncle," he explained. "Ikey Solomons—three brass balls—vat can I do for you shentlemans?"

"Oh, I see!" said Lowther. "The pawnbrokers, do you mean?"

"Tell it not in Gath," said Mr. Curll. "But if you must live, you must live, you know, and when one way won't do, you must try another."

"I see," said Lowther slowly.

"Oh, dash it all," said Mr. Splodgers, "I'm always ruining myself by my good-nature! We'll put it down at fifteen bob."

"You're in luck, my young friend," said Mr. Curll, nodding his head at Lowther.

"You're very kind, Mr. Splodgers," said Lowther falteringly. "I'll take it, and I suppose I shall be able to manage."

Mr. Splodgers took up a pen.

Lowther laid five crisp five-pound notes upon the table.

When he left Mr. Splodgers he was twenty-five pounds the poorer, and Mr. Splodgers was twenty-five pounds the richer; but Lowther had an engagement with the company for as long as the tour lasted at a salary of fifteen shillings a week, increasing to a pound after the lapse of three months.

Mr. Curll congratulated him as they walked away.

"You're in luck!" he declared. "In howling luck, my boy! And you'll get on, I feel quite sure about that."

"I hope so," said Lowther; but less hopefully than he would have spoken a couple of days before.

"Now, I must be off," said Mr. Curll. "I've got an important appointment for to-day. You don't mind having your lunch alone?"

"Not at all," said Lowther.

And Mr. Curll departed to keep his appointment, which he had invented upon the spot. He did not return to his lodging still shortly before the time to start for the theatre; and when he came in, he did not seem to Lowther to be in quite a condition to "go on." And in his pockets there remained very little of the change of Monty Lowther's five-pound note.

CHAPTER 14.

Hard Lines.

THE Splodgers Co. stayed a couple of days longer in Abbotsford, and then moved on to another town.

Monty Lowther was glad of the removal, which took him further away from St. Jim's. He had thought a good deal about the old school in the past few days, and wondered what efforts were being made to find him. That Tom Merry had kept the secret was clear enough, as otherwise the Head would have known that he was with the theatrical company, and would have known where to look for him.

As he was not found, it was clear that Tom Merry had regarded his request in the telegram, and had kept silence. The Head, doubtless, had not the least suspicion that Lowther had joined a touring company, and so did not know where to send in search of him. But Lowther felt more secure the further he was from St. Jim's; though, as a matter of fact, he had already began to wonder whether he had made a fool of himself in running away from school to go on the stage.

The people he now found himself among had many good qualities—good nature being the chief of them. But the improvidence he found about him now was not at all in accord with Lowther's character. Living from hand to mouth, and trusting for something to turn up, appeared to him utterly reckless, and likely to end badly for anybody; and he found that there was scarcely any other method of living open to the members of the touring company.

He had learned by this time, too, that the tour was far from successful; and although wages had been paid in Abbotsford, he could not help suspecting that it was his own twenty-five pound premium which had enabled Mr. Splodgers to meet his obligations to the company in this respect.

As for himself, he was without money now, and entirely dependent upon his salary, which he had not received yet.

When the first week became due, Mr. Splodgers made no motion towards payment, and the junior allowed a day to elapse before approaching him on the subject.

The Splodgers Co. was then in a country town, where they were to stay for an engagement of three evenings and a matinee, but business was decidedly not good.

Monty Lowther was still sharing the diggings of Mr. Curll, putting up with him at every stopping-place, and receiving lessons from him in consideration of the fee of five pounds so rashly paid in advance.

That five pounds had quickly disappeared; and Mr. Curll conscientiously tried to perform his promise, so far as a naturally slack and careless disposition would allow him.

Monty Lowther profited by the lessons to some extent; but the high hopes with which he had joined the Splodgers Co. were being rapidly dissipated.

When he ventured at last to corner Mr. Splodgers, and ask for his salary, that gentleman greeted him with a stare of surprise.

"Eh—what is it, what is it?" he asked testily.

"Can I have my salary, sir?" asked Lowther.

"Oh, your salary!" said Mr. Splodgers.

"Yes. I need it, sir."

"Yes, yes, yes," said Mr. Splodgers. "A man must be fair all round, you know. You must take your turn with the rest. The fact is, takings have been very bad, and some payments will have to be held over for a time. It can't be helped."

Lowther looked at him in dismay.

"But I've got nothing to pay for my lodgings with, sir!" he exclaimed.

"All in the same boat," said Mr. Splodgers carelessly. "I warned you that a young fellow shouldn't go on the stage without resources, didn't I?"

"Yes. But——"

"Business will look up, I expect, when we get to Lantham," said Mr. Splodgers. "Look here, you don't want to bust up the tour, do you?"

"Bust up the tour?" repeated Lowther.

"Yes. If they all come on to me for money, I shall have to close down the tour," said Mr. Splodgers irritably. "In fact, I'm only keeping it on now for the sake of the company, and I'm money out of pocket every day. I'm willing to cancel your engagement if you like, and I can't say better than that."

And he walked away.

Lowther stood dumbfounded.

That even the absurd pittance he had been promised should be withheld, surprised him, and utterly dismayed him.

He had not the wherewithal to discharge the debt he had already incurred at his lodgings, which he shared with Mr. Curll, and he began to understand that in the new life he had entered into, improvidence might be pushed perilously near the verge of dishonesty.

Mr. Curll tried to comfort him.

"Keep your pecker up, kid," he said. "Things must mend; they can't very well get worse, anyway. And the ghost hasn't walked for a long time. Three of the chorus sloped at Abbotsford."

"But how am I to pay my bill?" said Lowther.

"Your ticker."

"Oh!"

And Lowther's watch found a resting-place with Uncle Solomons. One or two little articles of value that he possessed went along with it; and he found himself in possession of a few pounds. But as he found himself called upon to discharge Mr. Curll's account at the lodging, as well as his own, the money did not seem likely to last long. Mr. Curll was, as he confided to Lowther, down to bedrock, and his friendship seemed likely to prove somewhat expensive.

The company moved on to Lantham, and there the prospects of the "Counter Girl" looked up a little. Two or three members of the company had gone, and their places were not filled. Mr. Splodgers, however, in spite of the hardness of the times, contrived to keep himself in considerable comfort, and still smoked shilling cigars. In the course of a week he had smoked away Lowther's salary, as the junior could not help feeling. But Mr. Splodgers was far too high and mighty a gentleman to have a matter like that explained to him.

Indeed, Lowther could not help realising that his presence in the "Counter Girl" Company was something in the nature of a joke; and that unless he received a substantial remittance from some quarter, Mr. Splodgers would soon be giving him strong hints that his room would be preferred to his company.

The closing down of the tour, too, was a prospect that could only dismay the junior. His engagement had been booked for the tour; he had understood that it was for a long time, but there was nothing written down to bind Mr. Splodgers beyond the extent of that tour. If the tour closed down, Lowther would be left stranded, without a penny in his pocket, in whatever town the last performance took place in. Other members of the company would be in the same fix, certainly. Most of them, however, accustomed to the vicissitudes of the life, had some resources or other, or some idea how to get fresh engagements, or to try to get them. Lowther felt helpless, and he began to understand that it would have been a very fortunate thing for him if Tom Merry had succeeded in stopping his departure from Wayland.

But he would not give up hope yet.

Mr. Curll spoke frequently of the other "shop" that was open to him when he left the Splodgers Co., to which he was sticking out of sheer good-nature; and although Lowther's faith in his friend had been very much shaken, he did not yet know that this was only what is commonly termed "gas" on Mr. Curll's part.

He reminded Mr. Curll of his promise to make him his understudy, to give him a chance of taking his place when he went, and Mr. Curll heroically tried to live up to his word. He had a distaste for letting Lowther find him out.

He turned out of bed sometimes before eleven, in order to instruct his young pupil; but his instruction generally lapsed into long talks about himself, his unsurpassable powers, and his brilliant prospects, and the high opinion newspaper critics had of him.

There was hardly an incident in Mr. Curll's varied career with which Lowther was not fully acquainted by this time, and he could have written a biography of Horatio with ease, if there had been any demand for it.

Monty Lowther experienced most real kindness from Miss Kitty Skitty, who was always very kind to him, and encouraged him the most. She had taken a kindly fancy to the stage-struck youth, founded mostly upon his unbounded admiration for herself. The tired and disillusioned actress had found something very agreeable in the fresh and unsuspecting homage of the eager schoolboy. Indeed, if Lowther had been a little older, he would probably have fallen in love with Miss Kitty.

One morning Mr. Curll was specially cheerful at breakfast. He had received something off his salary, which looked as if matters were looking up. He told Lowther that he had used his influence for him, and that he was going to rehearse the part of Bertie Bulkeley, with a view to taking Mr. Curll's place if that gentleman should be indisposed. Lowther brightened up wonderfully.

"Miss Kitty has consented to go through the part with you, in the dance act," said Mr. Curll. "She thinks you can waltz."

"So I can!" said Lowther.

As a matter of fact, Lowther was a graceful dancer, and could waltz very much better than Horatio Curll.

Mr. Curll smiled indulgently.

"You want knocking into shape," he remarked; "well, we're going to knock you. There are some new things going to be put in now, and there's to be a rehearsal, and I've got Splodgey's permission to shove you into the dance act at the rehearsal, so that you can show what you can do."

"Thank you very much," said Lowther gratefully.

Mr. Curll waved his hand.

"Not at all," he said; "I'm keeping my bargain, that's all. My dear kid, you could look for a real good chance if you had tin enough to see you through. I should really advise you to try your friends. All beginners have to."

Monty Lowther did not reply to that. His objection to starting in life as a sponge was as strong as ever; but he had the additional reason that he did not wish to betray his whereabouts to his friends; though he did not explain that to Mr. Curll.

The rehearsal was to take place in the afternoon, at the theatre, and Monty Lowther started off with his friend in high spirits. As they walked down the street, Mr. Curll descanting upon the superiority of his own voice to Caruso's, Monty Lowther suddenly halted. They were passing the railway station, and a gentleman had come out of the station, and Monty Lowther's eyes had fallen upon him.

It was Dr. Holmes!

For a moment Monty Lowther stood petrified.

The Head of St. Jim's was not looking in his direction, and Lowther's presence of mind returned very quickly.

He seized Mr. Curll by the arm, interrupting his discourse, and dragged him down a side street. Mr. Curll was so astonished that he went without resistance.

"My aunt! What's the matter?" he ejaculated, as soon as he recovered his breath.

Monty Lowther was panting.

"I—I've just seen somebody!" he gasped.

"Somebody you didn't want to meet?"

"Ye-es."

Mr. Curll winked.

"All serene!" he said. "I savvy. I've been there myself. Let's get round the other way to the theatre."

Lowther did not understand, but he nodded; it was only after some thought that he realised that Mr. Curll supposed that he had caught sight of a creditor. He did not correct Mr. Curll's mistaken impression. They reached the theatre without any further encounter, and Lowther breathed more freely when he was within the walls. Whether Dr. Holmes had come to Lantham to look for him he did not know—other business might have brought the Head of St. Jim's there. But Lowther was in a very troubled state of mind as he went on the stage for the rehearsal.

CHAPTER 15.

The Return of the Prodigal.

THE theatre was empty, but the orchestra were in their places, and the stage was lighted.

Some new songs and scenes were being introduced into the musical comedy, and a rehearsal was necessary. Mr. Splodgers had consented to Lowther's taking Mr. Curll's place in the waltz act. It did not do any harm, as Mr. Curll's own part was unchanged, and he knew it too well to want to rehearse it.

As a matter of fact, he was glad to escape the trouble. And Lowther had been studying Mr. Curll's part so assiduously, that it was most likely he would be able to stumble through it sufficiently well for a rehearsal. Lowther was, in fact, simply saving Mr. Curll some bodily exertion, in taking advantage of this great chance, as Mr. Curll described it, of going through the part.

Miss Skitty was very kind to Lowther, and she liked to dance with him. She had very seriously endangered Mr. Curll's friendship with Lowther, by remarking frankly that the "kid" danced better than he did. But Mr. Curll loftily assumed that the remark was prompted by the fact that he received more "hands" than Miss Skitty—a fact, indeed, which existed solely in his imagination.

As soon as the rehearsal began, Monty Lowther forgot all about the Head of St. Jim's, and the startling encounter with him. With the strains of the music in his ears, all his old keenness came back. He was looking forward eagerly to his waltz with Miss Skitty, and he hoped to prove to Mr. Splodgers that that gentleman might do worse than engage him as Bertie Bulkeley, when Mr. Curll departed to fulfil that prosperous engagement he could apparently take up when he liked.

Mr. Splodgers was not in a good temper.

Rehearsals, Lowther had learned, were looked upon as a bore and a nuisance by most of the company. They were unpaid performances, and so regarded. Nobody wanted to attend them, and only beginners showed any keenness.

But Monty Lowther himself was brimming with enthusiasm and nervousness.

When the "Counter Girl" Waltz rattled off the orchestra, and he led Miss Kitty Skitty out to dance, his heart was beating high.

In the pleasure of the dance he forgot time and space. The strains of the waltz echoed through the empty theatre, and the junior and Miss Skitty danced very gracefully, so that even the irate Mr. Splodgers turned an approving eye upon them.

But just as Mr. Wibb was going to begin his comic interlude, when the waltzers were to push him over and waltz round him, there was a startled exclamation from Mr. Curll in the wings.

"Oh, my hat!"

A grave-looking gentleman strode upon the stage.

Lowther did not see him for a moment; he continued to dance, with flushed and excited face, to the strains of the famous "Counter Girl" melody.

It was not till the new arrival spoke that he was aware of his presence.

"Lowther!"

Monty Lowther jumped.

"Oh!" he gasped. "The Head!"

He ceased to whirl. Miss Skitty, suddenly deserted by her partner, fell into a seat, in surprise. Every eye was turned upon the doctor.

Dr. Holmes was frowning.

"Lowther!" he repeated.

Lowther stood before him thunderstruck.

Mr. Splodgers bustled forward.

"What does this mean?" he exclaimed. "Who are you? What are you doing in my theatre? I'll sack that doorkeeper!"

"It was not the doorkeeper's fault, sir," said Dr. Holmes, with quiet dignity. "I explained to him who I am."

"And who are you?" demanded Mr. Splodgers.

"I am that foolish boy's schoolmaster, and I have come to take him back to school. He has been missing for more than a week, and I have only lately learned where to find him," said the Head of St. Jim's.

"Oh!" ejaculated Mr. Splodgers.

"Come with me, Lowther!" said the Head.

Lowther was very pale.

"Do you mean to say that the boy has run away from school?" demanded Mr. Splodgers.

"Yes."

"I never knew that! I consider that I have been imposed upon!" said Mr. Splodgers. "You had better go with your schoolmaster, kid. You had no right to put me into this position. You said nothing about having run away from school. The sooner you clear off the better!"

Lowther choked a little. If he had been minded to bid defiance to authority, it was evident that he could expect to find no backing there. Indeed, now that he was in the situation of a squeezed lemon, Mr. Splodgers was very probably pleased to be rid of him.

"I have a cab waiting below," said the Head.

Lowther cast a look round the stage. Some of the company looked sorry for him, some were laughing. Miss Kitty pressed his hand.

"Good-bye, laddy!" she said. "Don't be downhearted! This is the very best thing that could have happened for you, and you'll come to understand it yourself before long. You threw up a good thing for a bad one. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" said Mr. Curll. "Sorry to lose you, kid, but needs be, you must know."

Monty Lowther followed the Head from the theatre.

Neither of them spoke as they sat in the cab, driving to the railway station. It was not till they were seated in the train, whirling away towards Rylcombe, that the Head addressed the silent, downcast junior.

"You've done wrong, Lowther," he said—"very wrong, indeed. I hope you are able to realise that. Your uncle has been very anxious about you, and the whole school has been disturbed. Your friends have been very anxious. I hope you are sorry."

"I wanted to go on the stage, sir," muttered Lowther.

"And to do so, you have thrown up every obligation and duty," said the Head.

Lowther was silent.

"It is only because you are a really good lad, and I think you have been carried away by an absurd obsession, that I shall not expel you from the school," said the Head. "But you will have the choice—either you give me your word of honour not to leave the school again, and to dismiss these follies from your mind, or else you will be sent home to your uncle. Think it over!"

Lowther smiled a little bitterly.

"It's all right, sir," he said. "I know I've been an ass, and I was almost at the end of my tether. I suppose I couldn't have stuck it out much longer without money, and I haven't any money left. I shall have to borrow some to pay my bill at my lodging, and I can send it by post. If you'll give me another chance, sir, I'll promise willingly not to play the fool again. I was getting fed up, anyway."

The Head's expression relaxed.

"Very well, Lowther," he said, "I will take your word for this, and we shall see."

And Monty Lowther, whose experiences with the Splodgers Co. had to a very large extent gone towards curing his stage-fever, felt an unexpected pleasure when the grey old tower of St. Jim's rose on his view at last. He felt as if he were coming home again.

* * * * * * * *

Tom Merry and Manners were having tea in the old study in the Shell passage, when the door opened. Both the chums of the Shell were looking downcast. They missed Monty Lowther sorely. They were anxious about his fate, and anxious, too, about the punishment which would await him at St. Jim's, when he was found and brought back. They were thinking of their missing chum when the door opened, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth, came in. The swell of St. Jim's was smiling cheerfully.

"It's all wight, deah boys!" he announced.

Tom Merry jumped up.

"Lowther——" he exclaimed.

"He's come back. I thought I'd tell you. He's come back with the Head, and he's lookin' all serene, so I suppose the Head has decided not to wag him. Bai Jove, here he is!"

Monty Lowther came into the study, looking somewhat shamefaced.

"Hallo, you fellows!"

"Hallo, you silly ass!" said Manners.

"Hallo, you howling dummy!" said Tom Merry.

Monty Lowther grinned.

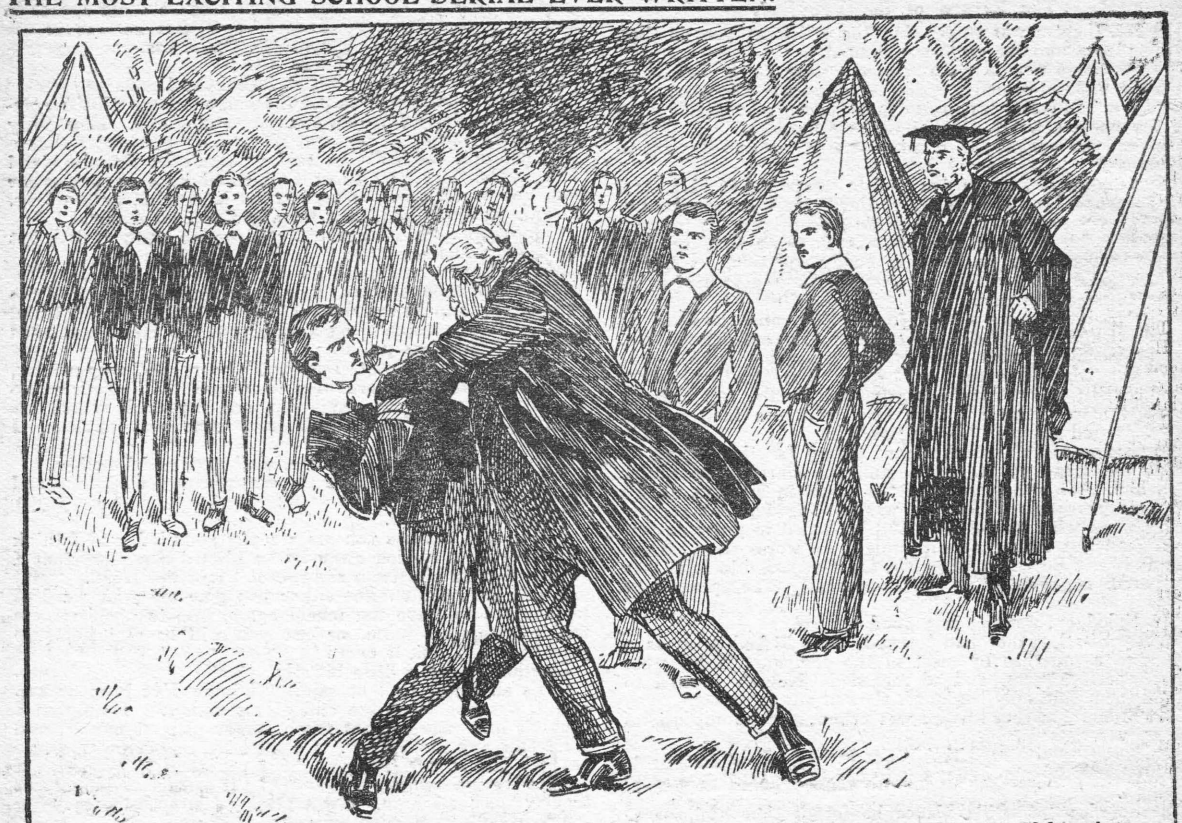
"Pile it on!" he said. "I deserve it—and more! I've made an ass of myself, and the Head's overlooked it. He's a brick! You can call me what you like."

"We won't call you anything, old man," said Tom Merry. "We'll have the biggest feed we've ever had in the study, and ask all the fellows in to see the prodigal son."

"Yaas, wathah!"

And the chums of the School House, and Figgins & Co., from the New House, gathered at that great feed with great enthusiasm, to celebrate the return of the prodigal.

THE MOST EXCITING SCHOOL SERIAL EVER WRITTEN.



The German master strode savagely towards Gordon Gay, and grasped him by the collar. "Mein papers!" he hissed. "Give dem to me, or——" And in his blind rage his hands closed in a grip like a vice upon the throat of the Cornstalk junior. (See p. 23).

THE SCHOOL UNDER CANVAS!

A Rousing, New and Original School Story of Gordon Gay, Frank Monk and Co.

By PROSPER HOWARD.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED SO FAR.

"The School will assemble in Big Hall at half-past six o'clock. An important announcement will be made.

"(Signed), E. MONK, Headmaster."

The appearance of the above brief notice on the school board is the first hint that the Rylcombe Grammar School receives of the great change in its circumstances that is pending—nothing less than the removal of the whole school into temporary quarters under canvas by the sea, on the Essex coast. Just at this time the ranks of the Fourth Form are reinforced by Gustave Blanc—immediately christened Mont Blong—a new boy from across the Channel. Mont Blong, who attaches himself to Gordon Gay & Co., is a slim and elegant youth with a peculiar flow of English, but he quickly shows his worth by holding his own with Carker, the bully of the Fourth. Amidst great excitement the Grammarians travel down to their new abode. During the first few days Gordon Gay discovers that there is more in Mont Blong than at first meets the eye, and that the French junior can speak English fluently. Gordon Gay and Frank Monk & Co. one day see Herr Hentzel in secret conversation with two German military officers in a cave on the seashore. They are surprised to hear from Mont Blong that the three are spies.

One night, a week later, while Herr Hentzel is absent, Gordon Gay & Co. rag the German master's tent, and Mont Blong, unknown to the others, extracts some private papers and photographs from an iron-bound chest in the tent. Herr Hentzel, on discovering he has been robbed, informs the Head, who, next morning, calls the school together, so that the matter can be investigated.

(Now go on with the story).

Herr Hentzel's Accusation.

That the German master was very much disturbed by his loss was evident from his looks. His face was paler than usual, and he pulled continually at his thick moustache, and the deep wrinkle never left his brow. No one had ever suspected Otto Hentzel of possessing literary tastes before; but evidently he took the loss of his papers very much to heart. Indeed, a keen observer might have fancied that there was fear, as well as anger, in the deep-set eyes of the German master.

The Grammarians muttered together as they assembled in their places, the prefects walking up and down the ranks to keep order. But there was silence as the Head came out of his tent. The Head looked very grave.

"Your governor's on the giddy war-path, Frank," murmured Carboy.

And Frank Monk nodded with a grin.

Dr. Monk stopped before the assembled school. The buzz in the crowd died away into silence.

"Boys!" said Dr. Monk, in his deep tones. "There has been a most unpleasant occurrence in this school last night. Herr Hentzel's tent was entered by some person or persons

at present not known, and thrown into a state of great disorder. It was, in short, what I believe you would term a ragging."

Some of the fellows grinned. Nobody liked Herr Hentzel especially, and few, if any, were sorry to hear that his quarters had been ragged.

"But that, I am sorry to say, is not all," said Dr. Monk quietly. "A box belonging to Herr Hentzel was opened, not by violence, but with the use, apparently, of a skeleton key. This is a very much more serious matter than the ragging. Some papers were taken from this box—some papers and photographs, which Herr Hentzel was collecting for a literary work. Herr Hentzel places a very high value upon these papers. He is so anxious to reclaim them that he has requested me to promise a free pardon to the boy or boys guilty of the outrage, if they will restore his papers intact. I have consented to do this. I therefore call upon the boy who has taken Herr Hentzel's papers, to confess, and return them at once."

The Head paused.

Herr Hentzel scanned the faces of the juniors with anxious keenness. It was as if he was trying to read from the boyish faces which of them had opened his strong box. And his glance fell chiefly upon Gordon Gay & Co.

There was no reply to the Head's speech. The Grammarians stood and waited. It was the doctor himself who broke the silence.

"You have heard me. If the culprit chooses to confess, and to return the papers, he shall be freely pardoned. Surely the boy concerned cannot refuse this offer?"

Silence.

Gordon Gay & Co. were looking at one another dubiously. They would gladly have confessed to the ragging on those terms; but as for the papers, since they had not taken them, they could not return them. And to confess to the ragging without confessing to taking the papers, was not of much use.

"No one answers me," said the Head, frowning. "Am I to understand that the culprit, who must be standing here before me at this moment, refuses my offer?"

Silence.

"Let him reflect!" said the Head quietly. "If he does not confess, there will be the most rigid investigation, and the whole camp will be searched for the papers. They must be found; in a camp like this there are no nooks or crannies where they can be concealed for long. Every corner will be searched and researched until they are found. Surely it will be wiser for the boy to take the offer of pardon. If he refuses and then is discovered, he will be flogged and expelled from the school."

Silence.

"I am willing to believe that the papers have been taken only for a foolish joke, and to pardon the person who has taken them," said the Head, his eyes beginning to gleam; "but if they are not returned, I can only conclude that the person who has taken them is a thief, and intends to keep them. A thief cannot, and will not, be allowed to remain in this school! I give the boy one more chance."

He paused.

There was no reply.

"Very well," said the Head, at last, frowning darkly—"very well! I shall now have the whole of the camp searched."

"Tat you excuse me, sir," said Herr Hentzel. "Tat you permit me to question te poys whom I tink have done dis."

"You may do so, Herr Hentzel."

The Cornstalk Co. exchanged a hopeless glance. They felt that they were in for it.

"Gay! Wootton major! Wootton minor! Step out, if you please!"

The trio stepped out before the school.

"Vere vas you last night, Gay?" asked the German-master, fixing his little gleaming eyes upon the Cornstalk.

"In my tent, sir."

"Did you go to ped at lights out?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you leave your ped again till rising-bell in te morning?"

Gordon Gay was silent.

Whatever the result might be, he could not tell a deliberate lie. He could not stand there before the whole school and speak an untruth, if it was to save his life. He looked at the Head.

"Am I bound to answer that question, sir?" he asked.

"Certainly, Gay," said the Head. "You need not be afraid. Any minor offence that may come to light in the course of this investigation, will be taken no notice of. Only the main object will be kept in view. Answer Herr Hentzel."

"Very well, sir. Yes, I did get out of bed after going to bed, sir."

"Did you leave your tent?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where did you go?"

"To your tent, sir."

There was a buzz in the ranks of the assembled school. Gordon Gay's answers came out quite clearly and crisply.

Herr Hentzel's eyes gleamed savagely now.

"Vat did you do dere?" he asked,.

"I ragged your tent, sir, because you had treated a Fourth-Form fellow brutally in the afternoon," said Gordon Gay, his voice ringing out clearly.

There was a grin from some of the Grammarians, and Herr Hentzel flushed crimson. The Cornstalk junior was being compelled to own up to the ragging, and he did not mean that the cause should remain unknown, either. If anything was to come out, it should all come out.

"And you have taken my papers?" demanded Herr Hentzel.

"No, sir!"

"Ach! Tat is a lie!" exclaimed the German-master furiously. "You admit tat you have go to mein tent and rag him, and I know tat also you have taken my papers! Vere are my papers?"

Gordon Gay did not reply. He stood calm and cool, his eyes fixed fearlessly upon the German-master, but he did not speak.

"Answer me!" shrieked Herr Hentzel.

"I have answered you. I did not touch your papers, and I did not know they were taken until ten minutes ago!"

"That is a lie! Tell me vere——"

"I have nothing more to say," said Gordon Gay, a little pale, but with gleaming eyes. "And I refuse to answer a man who calls me a liar! I'm finished."

There was a buzz of applause from the crowded ranks of the Grammarians. Herr Hentzel, purple with rage, strode savagely towards Gordon Gay, and grasped him by the collar. The infuriated man had completely lost his self-control.

"Mein papers!" he hissed. "Give dem to me, or——" And in his blind rage, his hands closed in a grip like a vice upon the throat of the Cornstalk junior.

——

Undiscovered.

Gordon Gay reeled in the savage grasp of Otto Hentzel.

The German master seemed to be, for the moment, completely beside himself. His little eyes were glittering, his lips parted in a snarl, and his breathing came thick and quick. His hands had closed like a vice upon the Fourth-Former's throat, and the suddenness of the savage attack rendered Gordon Gay helpless.

There was a shout of angry amazement from the boys, a cry of alarm from the Head.

"Herr Hentzel!"

"Stop that at once!" shouted Mr. Hilton, the Fifth Form-master, springing forward. "Do you hear me? Let him go!"

Wootton major sprang forward at the same moment, and grasped the arm of the burly German.

"Herr Hentzel! Are you mad?" exclaimed the Head.

Wootton major and Mr. Hilton dragged the German back.

Gordon Gay staggered from his grasp, and Jack Wootton caught him in his arms.

"Oh!" murmured Gay. "The brute!"

"Buck up, old chap——"

"Herr Hentzel," said the Head sternly, "how dare you lay hands upon a boy in that brutal manner? Have you taken leave of your senses, sir?"

"Ach! I—I——"

The German had calmed himself a little now. The outburst of fury had passed, and he realised that he had made a very false step indeed.

His hard face was flushed red, and his eyes sank before the stern and angry look of the Head.

"I—I am sorry!" he muttered. "I lose mein temper. But tat is pecause tat poy have mein bapers, and he not give dem to me."

"You had no right to touch him, as you know very well, especially in that brutal way," rapped out the Head.

"I peg your pardon, sir!"

"Very well. Leave the matter to me now. I cannot trust you to question the boy."

Herr Hentzel stepped back, biting his lips with rage. There was still a kind of convulsive quiver in his large hands, as though they longed to be at somebody's throat. Many of the fellows could see that the burly German contained himself only with great difficulty, and they wondered that the loss of a few papers should have infuriated the man to this extent. His explanation that the papers missing from the box were the manuscripts of some literary work seemed hardly adequate under the circumstances.

"Gay," said Dr. Monk, fixing his eyes upon the junior, who was still gasping, "you have admitted that you visited

Herr Hentzel's tent last night, to rag the place, as you call it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you go alone?"

"No, sir."

"Give me the names of your companions. I shall not punish them, so far as the ragging is concerned. My only desire is to clear up the loss of the papers."

Gay glanced at his two chums.

Wootton major and minor stepped forward at once. They were quite ready to own up. But Gustave Blanc stayed in the ranks of the Fourth. The French junior, apparently, did not wish to attract public attention to himself just then.

"We were with Gay, sir," said Harry Wootton.

"Both of you?" said the Head.

"Yes, sir."

Wootton major wondered why Mont Blong did not come forward; but it was not his business to betray the French junior. Unless the Head asked a direct question as to the number of raggers, Mont Blong would remain out of it.

"You wrecked Herr Hentzel's tent?" asked the Head.

Wootton major grinned faintly.

"Yes, sir; please, sir."

"You three were concerned together in it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why did you do it?"

"Because Herr Hentzel was brutal to a fellow in our Form, sir."

"Tat is not true, sir!" said Herr Hentzel hastily. "Tat is vun lie!"

"It's the truth!" said Gordon Gay. "He boxed Mont Blong's ears and hurt him. Dr. Monk himself has forbidden a junior's ears to be boxed."

"Quite true!" said the Head. "I am surprised at your forgetting yourself in this way, Herr Hentzel. Of course, that does not excuse the conduct of the juniors. We will pass on. I have already said that the ragging shall not be punished so long as we can recover the missing papers, to which Herr Hentzel attaches a great value. Did any of you three juniors take the papers from the box?"

"No, sir," said the three Australians together.

"Did you open the box?"

"No, sir."

"Could you have opened it?"

"Certainly not, sir. It was locked when we saw it, and we had no key."

"It vas opened mit a skeleton-key," said Herr Hentzel.

"We've certainly never had such a thing about us, sir," said Gordon Gay.

"I believe the statements made by these boys, Herr Hentzel," said Dr. Monk. "I cannot believe that tney are speaking falsely."

"Hear, hear!" shouted Lane, of the Fourth.

"Silence!" said the Head, frowning.

Herr Hentzel gritted his teeth.

"Dey admit being in my tent!" he exclaimed. "If dey did not take the papers, who did take dem? My box was robbed!"

"It is certainly very curious," said the Head; "but the facts that a skeleton-key was used, and that these boys deny any knowledge of the matter, point to the assumption that the robbery was committed by someone outside the school."

"Tat is impossible!"

"If the papers were valuable——"

"Dey vas ferry valuable!"

"Then a thief may have taken them. But if they have been taken for a joke, I do not believe that these boys took them."

"But, sir——"

"I will order a search of the school by Corporal Cutts," said the Head. "While the lessons are going on this morning, the corporal can search all the tents and the boxes. I have no doubt the papers will be found if they have been taken by a boy of this school."

"And if dey are not——"

"Then you must evidently look elsewhere for them."

The German muttered something under his breath. His savage display of temper had set the Head against him, he could see that. He had great difficulty in controlling his rage now.

"You may, of course, call in the police if you choose," said the Head. "That is entirely for you to decide."

The German tightened his lips.

"I do not vish to pring disgrace upon te school," he muttered.

Dr. Monk nodded.

"You may please yourself, Herr Hentzel. I repeat my firm belief that these boys did not take your papers. Dismiss!"

And the assembly broke up.

Secret Service.

Gordon Gay looked very thoughtful during morning lessons.

The other fellows, who noticed that his face was clouded, attributed it to the suspicion that had fallen upon him in connection with the loss of the German master's papers.

Frank Monk clapped him on the shoulder cheerily as the Fourth came out after lessons into the breezy sunlight of the school camp.

"Cheero!" said Frank. "It's all serene, Gay, old man. Nobody believes that you had a hand in taking old Dutchy's papers."

Gordon Gay nodded.

"I do, for one," said Carker. "It's jolly clear to me that Gay took them—— Ow!"

Carker broke off with a yell as the Old Co. laid violent hands upon him, and Gordon Gay strolled away, leaving the bully of the Fourth struggling in the grasp of Monk and Lane and Carboy.

Mont Blong followed the Cornstalk.

Gordon Gay strolled down upon the beach, and sat down to rest upon a sandy knoll, and gazed out to sea. He was in a very thoughtful and troubled mood.

"My shum!"

It was a soft and timid voice behind him

Gordon Gay turned his head abruptly, and a frown knitted his brows as he saw Gustave Blanc standing before him.

"My dear shum——"

"Look here," said Gordon Gay, savagely. "I'm not your chum, and I don't want to be. Let me alone.'

The French junior's eyes filled with tears.

"My shum!" he murmured.

"I'm not going to chum with a chap who—who——"

"Who vat, my shum?"

"I believe you went back afterwards and collared old Hentzel's papers," said Gordon Gay, angrily. "Didn't you?"

Mont Blong did not reply.

"Corporal Cutts has been searching the school camp this morning—all the morning," went on the Cornstalk. "He hasn't found them. But I don't believe any outside thief took them. I believe you did! That's flat."

Still Gustave Blanc was silent.

"You don't deny it?" exclaimed Gay angrily.

"Non, non!"

"Then it's true?"

"I zink zat I tell you everyzing, my shum," said Mont Blong, seating himself beside the Cornstalk on the sand. "You promise me by ze bright honour zat you zay nozzing."

Gay made a gesture of disdain.

"I don't want your rotten secrets," he said. "You've told us that Herr Hentzel is a German spy. It looks to me as if you're as big a spy as he is."

The French junior coloured faintly.

"I zink zat you do me injustice," he said. "If it is zat you vill listen to me, you see zat I am good friend to you, and to all your country."

Gordon Gay started.

"What do you mean?"

"It is zat you are patriotic?" said Mont Blong.

"I suppose so," said Gordon Gay, in wonder. "I haven't thought much about it; but I suppose I should stand up for the old country as soon as anybody else. What do you mean?"

"If zat zere is a Sherman invasion——"

Gordon Gay laughed.

"We shall all turn out when the Germans come, if they do come," he said. "They won't find the biggest difficulty how to get here, but how to get away again."

Mont Blong smiled.

"Zat is quite true," he said. "But if ze Shermans come suddenly, zey do much damage before zat you—vat you call wallop zem."

"Very likely. But——"

"And ven zey come, zen zay come sudden and silent, in ze night, perhaps," said Mont Blong. "And if zey come sudden and silent in ze night, vat part of ze coast zink you zey land on?"

Gordon Gay started.

"Essex, I should say," he said slowly. "About here—very likely—or up the Blackwater."

Mont Blong nodded.

"Before ze Franco-Sherman var, which desolate my country," he said, "ze Shermans send into France spies by ze tousand—tousand and tousand. Zey make maps of all ze roads, and ze bridges, and everyzing, and ven ze Sherman army come, zey know the country better zan ze French generals."

"Yes I've read of that," said Gay.

"Zat is ze same plan zat ze Kaiser's generals follow in

zis country," said the French junior. "Ze War Office in London sit viz ze eyes shut, n'est-ce-pas? But ven ze Sherman fleet come, zey have all ze knowledge zey need of zis coast—because zat zey have spies at work here."

"Oh!"

"Ze London War Office is asleep, but in Paris ve know ze Shermans," said Mont Blong, "ve know all ze game, because it has been played on us. And among ze Sherman spies zat are under ze eye of ze French War Office, zere is vun zat have ze name of Otto Hentzel in England and pretend to be a Sherman master at a school."

Gordon Gay stared.

"My hat."

"He is ze agent, who spy and send in reports of ozzer spies. Vun of zem is a Sherman who live here in Netherby—Franz Pfalz."

"The village photographer?" exclaimed Gay.

"Zat is so—he make photographs in ze village—and he make photographs on ze shore, for ze use of ze Sherman pilots."

"The rascal!"

"And zere are hundreds of zem—waiters, and tutors, and clerks, and all zings," said Mont Blong, "and zey are sending reports every day to ze Secret Service in Berlin under ze eyes of your sleepy War Office. But France is ze friend of England, and from ze Quai d'Orsay zere are varnings sent, n'est-ce-pas?"

"I daresay that's all true," said Gordon Gay, slowly. "But how do you know anything about it—you, a schoolboy?"

Mont Blong grinned.

"It is not zat I am only a schoolboy," he said. "I am sent here not to learn ze English, vich I know very well. I am sent to watch Herr Hentzel & Co."

"What!"

"It is so, mon ami."

"Then you are—are——" Gordon Gay paused.

"Oui, oui!" said Mont Blong. "I am a Secret Service agent—zat is all. And all ze better, vous savez, because I am a schoolboy, and zerefore make no suspicion of me. You comprehend now, mon ami?"

Gordon Gay stared at him blankly.

"A Secret Service agent," he murmured.

"Zat is so!"

"You—a kid!"

The French junior chuckled.

"Oui, moi! Un enfant! But sharper in ze vits zan many people who are grown up, my shum. Sharper zan Herr Hentzel, I zink, zough he is an old spy of ze Sherman Government."

"I—I see," said Gay, slowly. "That alters the case, of course. I understand now. But—but look here, Mont Blong. Does that mean that you have taken Herr Hentzel's papers?"

"Oui, oui."

"You went back again after we left the tent?"

"Zat is so."

"But—I say—his papers, you know——"

"Do you know vat zose papers are?" said Mont Blong, in a low voice.

"He said part of a literary work——"

"Zat vas a whopper. Zose papers are maps, plans, photographs, and descriptions of the coast and the inlets, and all information zat is needed for ze Sherman pilots. Zey have been collected by Franz Pfalz, and ozzers in ze service, and Herr Hentzel he put zem togezzer to be sent to Berlin. I know zat, from vat zey vas saying in ze cave——"

"Ah! You understood all that?"

"I understand ze Sherman quite as easily as ze French. I hear ze talk zere, and I hear Herr Hentzel talk viz Pfalz. I know all zat zey say, and I look for ze chance to get ze papers. Now I have got zem."

"And they contain information for an enemy to use against England?" asked Gordon Gay breathlessly.

"Oui, oui!"

"What are you going to do with them?"

"Send zem to London."

"My hat! That alters the case," said Gordon Gay. He held out his hand. "I didn't understand, Mont Blong. Give us your fist."

"Zen you are my shum again!" exclaimed the French junior, beaming.

"What-ho!"

"I embrace my shum—I kiss ze good friend."

"Oh, dear!"

And Mont Blong embraced his friend, and kissed him on both cheeks; and Gordon Gay stood it as cheerfully as he could. And they strolled back to the school camp together on the best of terms.

The Mysterious Packet.

Gordon Gay had much food for thought, in the revelation the French junior had made to him, in that talk on the sands.

The discovery that Mont Blong, innocent and simple youth as he looked, was in reality a Secret Service agent sent from Paris, was a startling one.

It explained many things that had puzzled Gordon Gay before.

The loss of Herr Hentzel's papers was the one topic in the school under canvas that day. The German wore a troubled and furious expression, and the German lesson was missed that afternoon, as he was too disturbed to give it—a miss that the Fourth Form considered very fortunate.

Gay understood now why the German dared not call in the aid of the police.

It was not regard for the honour and reputation of the school that had stopped him. He simply dared not let the papers fall into the hands of the police. For if they had been seen by official eyes, their secret would have been made known at once. His lie about the papers being part of a literary work would have been exposed at once. If the police found the papers, instead of restoring them to him, they would send them to the authorities in London, and probably arrest the German into the bargain.

But without the aid of the police, it was a problem to the German how he should recover the missing papers.

Corporal Cutts had searched every tent in the camp, and every box, from the head of the Sixth, down to the youngest fag, no one had escaped the scrutiny.

But not a trace of the papers had been discovered.

Of course, there were many places where they could have been securely hidden. They could have been buried in the sand, in the camp or outside it, and if so, they would remain there beyond the possibility of discovery.

All the German-master could do was to keep his eyes open, and discover when they were taken up, to be sent away.

For the German could be in no doubt as to why they had been taken.

He must have known that such papers, dry, uninteresting, and, indeed, incomprehensible to the average schoolboy, could only have been taken by someone who was acquainted with their object

In short, that there was someone in the school camp who knew that he was a spy, piling up information for the use of the German fleet in time of war with England.

Knowing that, all Herr Hentzel could do was to take precautions against the papers being sent away; so long as they remained in the school camp they were safe, and he was safe; but once delivered into the hands of the War Office authorities in London, and the game would be up, and he himself no longer safe from arrest. Herr Hentzel, like Othello, would find his occupation gone.

The deep anxiety in the German-master's face was observed by all, and some of the fellows felt sorry for his loss, not having the slightest suspicion of its real nature.

But Gordon Gay saw the clouded face of the German with grim satisfaction.

The man who was taking advantage of the hospitality of an unsuspicious nation, for the purpose of spying out secrets, fully deserved anything that might happen to him. Perhaps Herr Hentzel had some excuse he could offer to his own conscience. He may have fancied that he was serving his country by spying in another land. But whatever salve he might apply to his conscience the fact remained that a spy was a spy, and that he was an unscrupulous rascal. And the idea of "downing" him was very agreeable to Gordon Gay.

That the German was watching for the packet of papers to be sent out of the school camp was soon clear.

After lessons that day, when the Cornstalk Company strolled along the beach, they came upon Herr Franz Pfalz, the German photographer, of Netherby. He was taking photographs, and looked harmless and innocent enough, but he had a keen eye on the juniors.

Gordon Gay grinned.

"Let's have a walk round the camp," he said.

They walked round the camp.

Another German, in the attire of a tourist—those weird tweeds which German tourists wear under the impression that it makes them look English—was sitting on a sandy knoll on the north side of the camp, consulting a guide-book.

Towards the village the juniors encountered another German, and in the distance on the headland Gordon Gay caught sight of a stout gentleman with a pair of binoculars in his hand.

The Cornstalk chuckled. His chums looked puzzled.

"Seem to be a blessed lot of Germans about here this afternoon," Wootton major remarked. "Are they friends of Herr Hentzel?"

"They're a party of tourists, staying in the village for the

fishing," said Jack Wootton. "I heard Herr Hentzel tell Mr. Hilton so."

Gay laughed.

He had a very accurate idea that the "tourists" were all good friends of Herr Otto Hentzel, and that they were watching the camp to discover whether the purloined papers were sent out of it.

"Come on!" said Gay abruptly.

"Where?"

"Back to camp."

"What for?"

"A little jape on the Dutchies."

Wootton major and minor followed him in some wonder. Gordon Gay went into his tent, and selected a couple of old newspapers and some of Tadpole's artistic works, and made a bundle of them, which he tied up in brown-paper and string.

"What on earth's that for?" asked Wootton major.

"To bury."

"Eh?"

"For the German chaps to find."

"But I—I don't understand," said Wootton major, in bewilderment.

"I think those German chaps are friends of old Hentzel's, looking for his giddy papers," explained Gay. "I'm going to give them something to look for."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Gordon Gay left the tent with the bundle under his arm, and the Wootton, composing their countenances, strolled down with him to the beach. Herr Pfalz was still there, and his eyes gleamed as he noted the package under Gay's arm. The three Cornstalks strolled on with great unconsciousness of manner, and Gordon Gay went on towards the headland. He took a sly glance over his shoulder a few minutes later, and was not surprised to see Herr Pfalz strolling along in the same direction.

Gay paused by the cliffs, and selected a deep crevice, and jammed the package into it the full length of his arms.

Then he walked back with his chums. They passed Franz Pfalz, the German photographer, apparently being busily occupied in looking for a favourable stand for his camera. The three juniors saluted him politely.

"Ripping evening, sir!" said Gordon Gay.

"Ach! Ja, ja, wohl!"

"Hope we didn't hurt you the other night, sir, when we piled on you by mistake," said the Cornstalk.

"Tat is all right," said the German. "It vas an accident. I am sorry tat I was angry. It is all right after."

The juniors walked on, smiling. Herr Pfalz was busy with his camera for some little time, but as the juniors disappeared round the cliff he laid the camera on the sands, and made a rush for the crevice where Gordon Gay had jammed the package into hiding.

Round the bulging cliff, out of sight of the German photographer, the three Cornstalks halted.

"Hold on!" said Gordon Gay. "We'll walk back now."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

They strolled back round the cliff. The German's camera lay on the sands, and the German himself was standing close up to the cliff, his right arm buried in the crevice, tugging away at the package buried there deep in the split rock. His fat face was very red, and his eyes starting with exertion. Gordon Gay had jammed the package in very tightly in the extremity of the fissure.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Gordon Gay.

The German gave a violent start, and his head knocked against the cliff. He gave a sharp cry, and turned upon the juniors.

Herr Hentzel Makes a New Move.

Gordon Gay smiled cheerfully at the startled, confused German.

"Looking for anything, sir?" he asked.

"N-n-nein—nein!" gasped Herr Pfalz.

"You can let that packet alone," said Gay. "It belongs to me."

"Vat!"

"I put that packet there. It's some private property of mine, and I've put it there for safety," explained Gay.

The German turned crimson. That he was seeking to take the packet he had watched Gay hide in the fissure was a thing he could hardly conceal now. But he did not mean to yield it. He dragged again at the packet, and it came out in his hand. Gordon Gay ran towards him.

"That's mine!" he shouted.

"Nein—nein! Tat is mine!" said Herr Pfalz. "I keeps it, ain't it?"

"It doesn't contain anything of any value," said Gordon Gay. "But it's mine. You just hand it over to me!"

The German smiled sneeringly.

"I tink tat I keeps it," he said.

And he turned to stride away.

"Collar him!" shouted Jack Wootton.

"Take it away from him!" said Wootton major.

Herr Pfalz gave the juniors a hurried glance. It was extremely undignified of him to run from junior schoolboys, and he knew that personally he was hardly a match for three sturdy young athletes.

As the three Grammarians rushed upon him he made up his mind, and fled along the sands.

"After him!" shouted Gay.

"Stop, thief!"

"Stop him!"

The Cornstalks dashed in pursuit.

They could easily have overtaken the clumsy German, as a matter of fact, if they had wanted to do so, but they didn't. They kept just far enough behind, gasping loudly, to convince him that they were straining every nerve to overtake him. Herr Pfalz gasped and puffed in deadly earnest as he ran.

Herr Hentzel came into sight round the headland, and Pfalz dashed towards him. The Grammarians stopped at the sight of the German-master.

"Hold on!" murmured Gordon Gay. "Let him rip! Only I should like to see old Hentzel's face when he opens the packet."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

All three of the juniors would have liked to see it, but they did not care to risk it. They ran back round the headland, and left the two Germans in undisputed possession of the packet. Herr Pfalz joined Otto Hentzel, gasping.

"Vat is it?" the German-master exclaimed.

Pfalz held up the package.

He explained in breathless German that he had seen Gordon Gay hide it in a fissure of the cliff, and that the Grammarians had tried to recapture it.

Otto Hentzel's eyes gleamed.

"My papers!" he exclaimed.

"Ja wohl!"

Herr Hentzel seized the packet, and cut the string. He laid the packet on a rock, and unwrapped the thick sheet of paper it was wrapped in.

Pfalz watched him with gleaming eyes.

Herr Hentzel's face was full of satisfaction, too. He had no doubt that his confederate had succeeded in recovering the stolen papers.

But as he turned out the contents of the packet his expression changed.

A "Daily Mail," dated June 29th, and an "Evening News," dated June 22nd, and several sheets of crumpled cartridge-papers with weird colourings on them—such were the contents of the mysterious package.

The two Germans gazed at it speechlessly.

Herr Hentzel found his voice at last.

"Mein Gott!"

"Ach!" said Pfalz.

"It is a trick!" said Herr Hentzel, his face black with rage. "They knew that you were watching, and they did this as a trick." He spoke in German. "They were the three boys I saw following you?"

"Ja, ja!"

"Then it is proof—they took the papers, and they know all, or else they could not think of playing a trick like this. They must have known you were watching them."

Pfalz nodded.

Herr Hentzel picked up the valuable parcel and hurled it into the sea. Then he strolled off in the direction of the school camp, with knitted brows.

He came upon Gordon Gay and Co. near the camp. The Cornstalks were seated upon an upturned boat, gazing out to sea, and talking cricket. At all events, they were talking cricket when Herr Hentzel came into hearing. Their smiles seemed to indicate that they had been discussing something else before he came within sound of their voices.

"Gay!" said the German harshly.

Gordon Gay rose, and lifted his cap.

"Yes, sir."

"I vant to speak mit you."

"Yes, sir."

"Wootton and Wootton minor may go."

"Very well, sir," said Harry Wootton, and the brothers retired to a little distance, and sat on another boat.

The Herr fixed his gleaming eyes upon Gordon Gay.

"I haf seen te trick tat you play upon my friend Pfalz," he exclaimed.

Gordon Gay looked surprised.

"Trick, sir!" he exclaimed.

"Ja, ja! You have hide a packet in te cliff, making him tink tat it vas mein papers tat you have hidden dere——"

"I didn't tell him so, sir," said Gay. "I suppose there's no reason why I shouldn't stack old rubbish away in a hole in the cliff, is there, sir? It keeps the camp tidy to get rid of old newspapers and things, sir. Dr. Monk gave us a lecture the other day on keeping the camp tidy, sir."

The German ground his teeth.

"Listen to me, Gay. I must have dem papers. If you vill return dem to me I giff you twenty pounds in gold."

"If I had them, sir, I shouldn't need a reward for returning them."

"You refuse?"

"I haven't anything more to say, sir."

"Den you have sent dem away alretty, ain't it?" asked the German, with a gleam of keen anxiety in his eyes which did not escape Gordon Gay.

"No, sir. I've had nothing to do with them."

"I do not believe it. You do not play this trick if you know noting of dem. Listen to me, poy! You vill return dose papers, or you vill be sorry for it."

"I haven't anything more to say, sir."

The German clenched his hand. For a moment it looked as if he would spring upon the junior. Gordon Gay backed away a step or two, and his eyes glittered. Harry and Jack Wootton rose from their seats upon the adjacent boat.

But the German-master restrained himself.

"Very well!" he said. "You vill not give me pack dem papers. I have discover since tat dere vas a banknote in tat packet I have lost—a banknote for ten pounds."

"Yes, sir."

"I demand te return of tat money."

"I know nothing about it."

"Very well! I shall speak to te Head!"

And the German-master strode away. Wootton major and Jack Wootton rejoined their chum. There was a deep line in Gordon Gay's forehead now.

"What did he want?" asked Jack.

"His rotten papers. He says now there was a banknote among them," said Gordon Gay.

"Phew!"

"I don't believe him," said Gay quietly. "I believe he has worked that up because he thinks I've got the papers, and he'll frighten me into handing them back. But he says he's going to speak to the Head about it."

(A thrilling instalment of this splendid serial again next Thursday, when Herr Hentzel's banknote turns up unexpectedly!)

NEXT THURSDAY: **"BOUGHT HONOURS!"**

A NEW FREE CORRESPONDENCE EXCHANGE.

The only names and addresses which can be printed in these columns will be from those readers living in any of our Colonies who desire Correspondents in Great Britain and Ireland.

Colonists sending in their names and addresses for insertion in the columns of this popular story-book must state what kind of correspondent is required—boy or girl, English, Scotch, Welsh, or Irish.

Would-be correspondents must send with each notice two coupons. One taken from "The Gem," and one from the same week's issue of its companion paper, "The Magnet" Library. *Coupons will always be found on page 2 of both papers, and requests for correspondents not containing these two coupons will be absolutely disregarded.*

All requests should be addressed: "The Editor, 'The Gem' Library, 23, Bouverie Street, London, E.C., England."

V. H. Hill, 24, Stawell Street, Richmond, Victoria, Australia, would like to correspond with readers in Scotland.

Miss L. C. Farmer, 31, William Street, Norwood, Adelaide, South Australia, wishes to correspond with readers in the United Kingdom.

W. G. Tyler, Letter Carriers Staff, G. P. O., Port Elizabeth, South Africa, would like to correspond with readers in England.

W. and A. Alexander, 29, Makay Avenue, Toronto, Canada, wishes to correspond with readers in England.

F. G., Germiston, Transvaal, South Africa, wishes to wishes to correspond with readers in England.

W. A. Serong, c.o. D. O'Halloran, 99, Queen Street, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, would like to correspond with readers in England.

D. Dixon, 2124, St. Andre Street, Montreal, Canada, wishes to correspond with girl readers in England.

G. Atkinson, 96, Courtney Street North, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with readers in England.

R. W. Patterson, G. P. O., Norseman, Western Australia, would like to correspond with readers in England.

Miss L. M. Watson, P. O. Box 53, Tamworth, New South Wales, Australia, wishes to correspond with a Church of England reader living in England.

V. Webb, 37-38, Williams Buildings, 413, Granville Street, Vancouver, B. C., age 16, wishes to correspond with a reader in England, the same age.

A. Downes, P. O. Box 2269, Johannesburg, South Africa, would like to correspond with a reader in British North Borneo, or the Fiji Islands.

Miss F. Kitchener, Portland, Mudgee Line, N.S.W., Australia, wishes to exchange postcards with a boy reader about 20 years of age.

C. Dewhurst, c. o., J. Duff, 250, Flinders Lane, Melbourne, wishes to correspond with a girl reader living in any British possession.

A. Dimery, age 18, of 3, Chamberlain Street, Greylynn, Auckland, New Zealand, wishes to correspond with some girl reader about the same age.

F. Whittaker, age 17, of 13, Chamberlain Street, Greylynn, Auckland, New Zealand, wishes to correspond with some girl reader about the same age.

Miss G. Tanner, Service Street, Glebe, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia, wishes to correspond with a reader living in or near London, age about 18 or 19.

Miss D. R. Everett, Bendigonia, Park Street, E., South Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with a reader in England.

L. Dewe, 56, Princess, Enwood, Invercargill, New Zealand, wishes to correspond with a reader, age 15, living in England.

C. R. Wright, 115, Crystal Street, Petersham, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader, age between 17 and 20, living in the British Isles.

The Editor specially requests Colonial Readers to kindly bring the Free Correspondence Exchange to the notice of their friends.

A Splendid, New, Long, Complete School Tale of the Juniors of St Jim's. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

OUR SPECIAL WEEKLY FEATURE

For Next Thursday.

Martin Clifford's grand school story for next week is entitled,

"BOUGHT HONOURS!"

and the central figures in this powerful tale are Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of St. Jim's, and Levison, the cad of the Fourth. How these two—by nature the very antithesis of one another—become associated in carrying out an amazing deception upon the whole school, and how D'Arcy realises that he has, for the first time in his life, become party to a very shady action, whereby he becomes the guilty recipient of

"BOUGHT HONOURS!"

is told in a way that cannot fail to interest and thrill every reader, and my chums are advised to make sure of obtaining this rattling story by

ORDERING IN ADVANCE!

From a School-Story Enthusiast.

It almost makes me blush to publish the following letter from a Scots laddie, who evidently dotes on really good school tales, and expresses his opinion of the All-School Story "Gem" in the most generous way. This is what "Scottie," of Glasgow, writes:

"Glasgow.

"Dear Editor,—Your latest move in making 'The Gem' an all-school story-book, provides, in my humble opinion, the one thing wanted to make the good old 'Gem' the finest penny story-book on earth! I think school tales are the best stories of all, and the ones in 'The Gem' the very best school stories I have ever read or heard of. In my opinion, 'The Gem' is worth, at least, twice the price you have to pay for it, and I think all readers ought to show their appreciation of the Editor's efforts in every way they can, and especially by getting more readers for all they are worth. My own idea is not only to give my copy away each week to a different reader, but I buy an extra copy each week specially to give away, so that, you see, I really do think 'The Gem' is worth, at least, twopence! If all your readers would do this, as often as they could, anyway, I think it would be a splendid way of showing our Editor what we think of him, don't you? Of course, I still manage to have a penny to spare for 'The Magnet' Library, which I think is easily the next best weekly story-book to 'The Gem.'

"Hoping you will always keep 'The Gem' an all-school story-paper, and wishing you the best of luck,

"Your grateful reader,

"SCOTTIE."

Well, "Scottie," I can only say that I feel very flattered and much gratified by your enthusiastic letter, for which I owe you my best thanks. Your method of showing your appreciation of the fare I am at pains to provide you with, proves that you are a fellow who practises what he preaches, and it is certainly the most practical possible way of helping your Editor. I am too modest to suppose, however, that all "Gemites" will think their Editor worthy of the honour which they would be doing me by purchasing two copies of "The Gem" weekly instead of one, though I should not be very surprised to find quite a number of my chums loyal enough to carry out your suggestion.

As to the hope you express that I shall always keep "The Gem" an all-school story-paper, while agreeing with your opinion that school stories in general form the best possible variety of reading matter, yet I prefer not to make any hard and fast promise as to the future policy of the paper. You may be certain of this, however, "Scottie," that I shall always do my very utmost to keep "The Gem" up to the very highest standard of excellence

Replies in Brief.

C. A. "Silkworm" (Hammersmith).—(1) If you study the columns of "The Exchange and Mart" (published thrice a week—price twopence) you will probably find an advertiser who has silkworms for sale. (2) If you start with the worms, they will eventually change into moths. The male moth dies off, but the female usually lays from two to three hundred eggs. These are hatched into silkworms, and so the process goes on. (3) Any kind of box can be used as long as it is large, and has sufficient holes bored in the lid to allow the air to get in. A cardboard box is quite suitable.

M. Muir (Glasgow).—Thank you for your letter. I think the best way for you to improve your handwriting would be to attend an evening school, if there is one in your district. If this isn't possible you must obtain a good copy-book, and practise a suitable style of handwriting until you are thoroughly proficient in it.

M. C. C. (Blackpool).—If you cannot obtain the necessary articles for "making-up" in your own town, you should write either to A. W. Gamage, of High Holborn, London, W.C., or to Barr & Co., 24A, Bow Lane, E.C., for their list. Both of these firms are well known for their theatrical goods, etc.

Hints to Young Botanists—A Fascinating Holiday Hobby.

The collection of the different sorts of fern which grow wild in many parts of rural England is a holiday hobby that is steadily growing in favour. Amateur botanists on holiday in the country will be surprised at the number and variety of beautiful ferns which can be discovered by searching for them in out-of-the-way places, and the occupation of drying, classifying, and labelling the specimens add greatly to the enjoyment of the holiday. Such counties as Cornwall and Devon, where the graceful hartstongue fern, for instance, can be found growing wild upon almost every bank, are happy hunting grounds for the amateur fern-collector.

For collecting ferns whilst on holiday, perhaps the best outfit of all is a couple of half-inch deal boards, about 17in. by 11in., secured at each end by elastic bands, or a buckle and strap, and having between them about twenty sheets of good, spongy paper—the paper used by grocers for wrapping sugar is excellent.

When removing a frond, be careful not to break its stipe or stalk, and cut it off where it joins on to the main stock. And take only fronds which will lie flat between your boards.

To dry the ferns, place them in a single layer on a sheet of the drying paper, covering with four or five sheets, on top of which place more specimens, then more paper, and so on.

When the pile is completed, cap it with a stout board, on top of which place weights.

After not less than twenty-four, and not more than forty-eight hours in this press, repeat the process with fresh paper.

Finally, transfer each specimen to a fresh sheet of paper, placing it on the paper with the under, or fructifying, surface uppermost—i.e., the surface with the brown spots or lines on it, and secure the fern to the paper by pasting narrow strips of gummed paper over some of its ribs or branches.

It is sometimes desired in the case of certain ferns, to dye the preserved specimens to ensure their keeping their natural colour. Under these circumstances, the best dye to use is the variety of "chlorophyll green," which is soluble in spirit. This dye is the natural green colouring matter of plants, extracted by chemical methods, and therefore gives to the fern specimens the effect of natural preservation. A strong solution should be made by dissolving chlorophyll in methylated spirit; the fern should be well dipped in the solution, and, after having been allowed to dry, pressed between two sheets of paper under a weight. This treatment, properly carried out, will impart the natural green colour to the dried fronds.

THE EDITOR.

Printed and published weekly by the Proprietors, 23, Bouverie Street, London, England. Agents for Australia: Gordon & Gotch, Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, Brisbane, and Wellington, N.Z. South Africa: The Central News Agency, Ltd., Cape Town and Johannesburg. Subscription, 7s. per annum. Saturday, August 24th, 1912.