Complete Stories for ALL, and Every Story a GEM.

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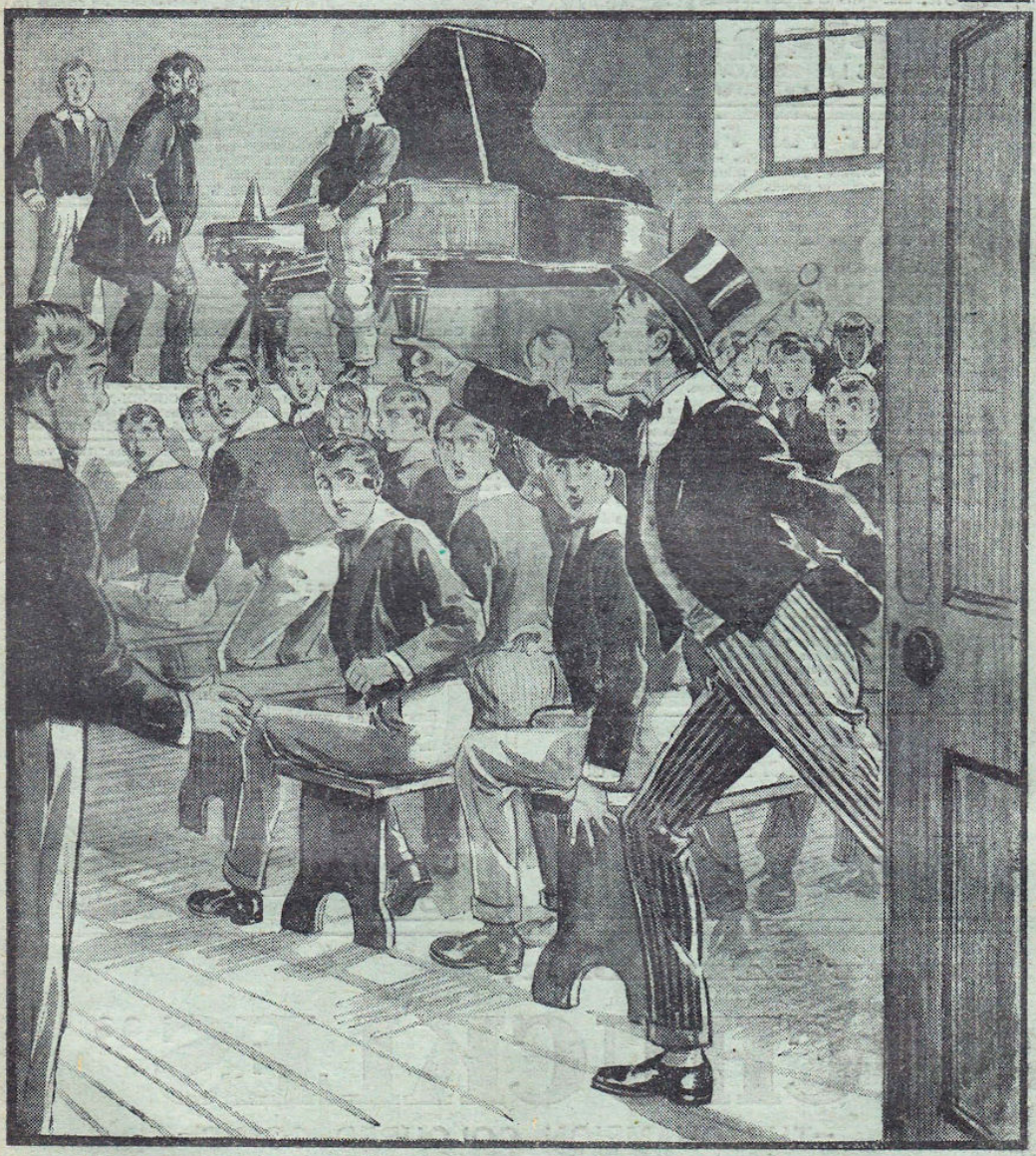


D'Arcy rushed towards the stage, his right hand pointed dramatically at the startled conjurer. "Collah him!" he yelled. "He's an impostah!" (*An exciting incident in the grand long, complete tale of Tom Merry & Co., entitled "A Birthday Celebration," which is contained in this issue.*)

PUBLISHED IN TOWN AND COUNTRY EVERY WEDNESDAY MORNING

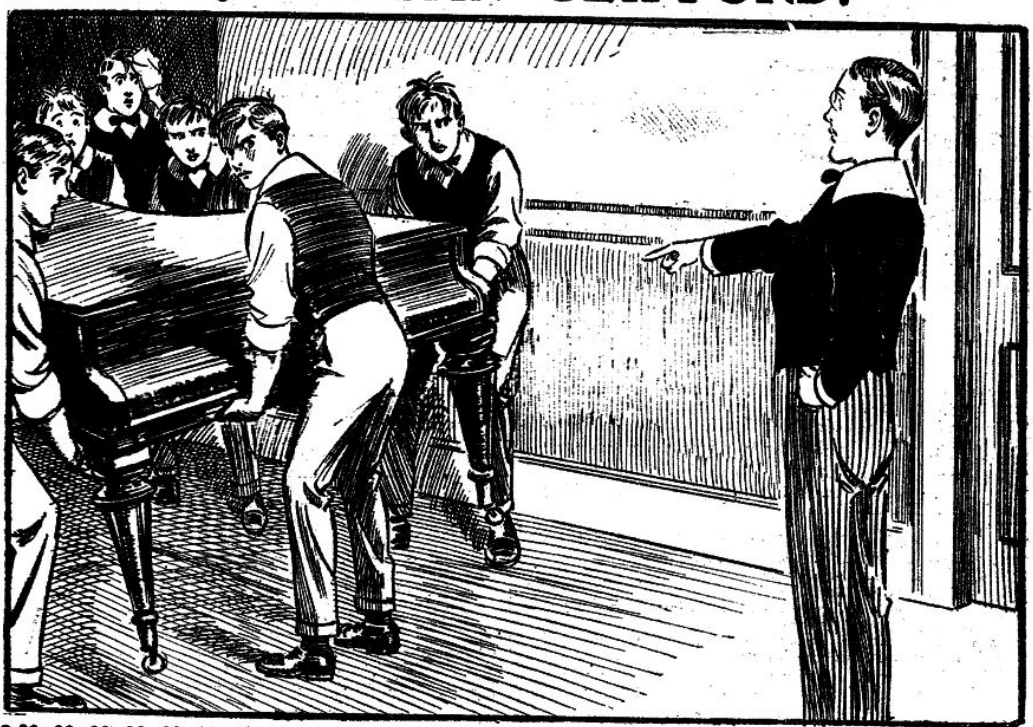
The GEM LIBRARY 1D

COMPLETE STORIES FOR ALL, AND EVERY STORY A GEM!

A BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION

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

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.



Up went the piano again, in the grasp of the perspiring juniors. Arthur Augustus felt it was better to give them instructions than to help them. "That's wight," he said. "Keep cleah of the wall—you'll burst through it if you wush at it like that, Blake!" (*See Chapter* 13.)

CHAPTER 1.

A Meeting and Misunderstanding.

TOM MERRY raised his hand for silence.

"Gentlemen——"

And all the fellows in Tom Merry's study in the School House at St. Jim's said cordially:

"Hear, hear!"

There was quite a crowd.

Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther, the Terrible Three of the Shell, to whom the study belonged, and Blake and Herries and Digby and D'Arcy from Study No. 6, and Figgins and Co. from the New House—ten fellows in all.

Ten fellows were a goodly number to pack into a junior study, and, as Arthur Augustus D'Arcy remarked with his beautiful accent, it was "wathah a cwowd."

But the juniors didn't mind; they were used to crowds. Excepting the Terrible Three, no one knew the objects of the gathering; but they naturally supposed it to be a feed. In the first place, it was about tea-time. In the second place, they were hungry after footer practice. In the third place, what possible object could Tom Merry have had in calling them together, excepting for a feed?

True, there were no signs of a feed on the table. The table was bare, save for an inkstand and a sheet of impot paper.

Fatty Wynn's eyes wandered towards the cupboard. He didn't want to seem eager. But really he couldn't guess why the hosts did not produce the grub.

"Gentlemen——" repeated Tom Merry.

"Pile in!" said Blake cheerfully.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We are all here, or nearly all. I told Kangy to come, but——"

"Here I am!" said the cheerful voice of Harry Noble of the Shell, as he came into the study. "Hungry as a hunter."

"Same here!" murmured Fatty Wynn, with deep feeling.

"Shut the door, Kangaroo. We're all here now."

"Good!"

The Cornstalk closed the door. He glanced in some surprise at the table. Like the rest, he could conceive no possible object for that gathering in Tom Merry's study save a feed, and he was fresh from the footer-ground, and quite ready to do the fullest justice to the most substantial feed.

"Gentlemen, I rise to make a few remarks——"

Next Wednesday:

"THE NEW CAPTAIN!" AND "SECRET SERVICE!"

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"I say, we could eat while you talk, you know," said Fatty Wynn, breaking out at last. "You don't mind my mentioning it, but I'm rather peckish."

"Now Wynn speaks of it, I'm a bit sharp too," remarked Jack Blake. "I always think that a speech goes down better during a feed."

"No objection to our getting on while you jaw, Tommy?" asked Herries affably.

"None at all!" said Tom Merry, with great politeness. "Gentlemen——"

"Then we may as well begin," said Fatty Wynn.

"Certainly, gentlemen——"

"We can't begin without the feed, you know," hinted Digby.

"What feed?"

The juniors all stared at Tom Merry as he asked that question. Tom Merry stared at them. There was evidently a misunderstanding somewhere.

"What feed?" repeated Figgins.

"Yes, what feed?"

"The feed we came here for!" exclaimed Kerr.

"My hat! Did you come here for a feed?" exclaimed Tom Merry, in astonishment. "What on earth put that idea into your heads?"

"Why, you—you ass——"

"You fathead!"

"You duffah——"

"You asked me to come here for something important!" roared Fatty Wynn. "Of course, I thought it was for a feed!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You would," grinned Monty Lowther.

"Well, isn't it?"

"No, it isn't!"

Fatty Wynn rose to his feet. Fatty Wynn was a good-tempered chap, and he could take most things in good part; but there were limits. There were sardines and jam waiting for him in his own study in the New House, and he had left them to come over to the School House for a feed in Tom Merry's study. And now there was no feed!

"I wegard it as sheeah cheek!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, surveying the Terrible Three severely through his eyeglass. "Sheeah nerve!"

"I'm hungry," remarked Kangaroo.

"So am I!" said Blake. "Luckily we've got something in our study. I'm off!"

"Same here!"

"Hold on!" exclaimed Tom Merry warmly. "This is an important meeting, on an important subject."

"Really important?" said Manners.

"Awfully important!" said Monty Lowther.

The juniors were all on their feet now, ready to depart. They were wrathful, and they were impatient. They did not believe a little bit in the importance of the meeting—at all events, in comparison with the importance of a feed.

"Well, pile in," said Figgins gruffly. "We'll give you a couple of minutes. If the thing's really important we'll look over it. If you're only wasting our time we'll give you a bumping all round."

"Hear, hear!" said the whole meeting heartily.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Gentlemen——" said Tom Merry, for the fifth or sixth time.

"We've had that," said Blake. "Get on with the washing."

"Gentlemen——"

"Time's going," said Figgins, looking at his watch. "Only two minutes, mind."

"Cut the cackle, and come to the hosses!" exclaimed Herries.

"Get to bizney!"

"Buck up!"

"How can I get to business if you silly duffers keep on interrupting me?" exclaimed Tom Merry, exasperated.

"Only another minute!" said Figgins grimly. "Then the bumping begins. Better make the most of it."

"Then shut up, and give a chap a chance," said Tom Merry indignantly. "Gentlemen, you may, or may not, be aware that next week occurs the birthday of our Form-master, Mr. Linton."

"Your Form-master!" snorted Blake. "He's not ours!"

"We don't own him!" remarked Figgins.

"Being Mr. Linton's birthday," pursued Tom Merry, unheeding, "we—Lowther, Manners, and I—have thought that it is up to us to celebrate the occasion. Form-masters don't have birthdays every day, and when they happen, why, it's only the right thing to make a bit of a celebration, you know. Linton will be pleased."

"Blow Linton!" said all the Fourth-Formers together. Evidently they were not greatly concerned about the birthday of the master of the Shell.

"Well, Linton isn't a bad sort," said Tom Merry. "Rather ratty at times, but you expect that from a Form-master. He might be worse. He might be like old Ratty, your House-master, Figgy."

"Oh, let my House-master alone!" growled Figgins.

"So we called this meeting to consider the important matter of a celebration on Mr. Linton's birthday," said Tom Merry impressively.

"Rats!"

"Rot!"

"Rubbish!"

"Bosh!"

"Tosh!"

Those replies seemed to indicate that the juniors did not in the least realise that the birthday of a Form-master was an important occasion. The Terrible Three looked a little discouraged, but Tom Merry went on manfully. He felt that it was the little misunderstanding about the feed that accounted for the want of enthusiasm on the part of the meeting.

"We were thinking of an entertainment on the great day!" he went on. "A sort of show, with all the talent of both Houses to the fore, with professional assistance."

"Professional assistance!" said Figgins. "What does that mean?"

"You have heard of Professor Buzzle, who is giving the conjuring show in Rylcombe. If we made our show a matinee—in the afternoon, you know."

"I think we know what a matinee is," said Kerr sarcastically.

"If we made it an afternoon show, we could get the professor to come and give us a turn," said Tom Merry. "He would do it for a guinea. That would be the piece de resistance of the entertainment—the principal item, you know."

"I fancy we know what a piece de resistance is!" snorted Kerr.

"Then we could have songs and dances and things, and—and all sorts of items," said Tom Merry, a little vaguely. "D'Arcy could give his celebrated imitation of a cat on the tiles——"

"You uttah ass! If you are alludin' to my tenah solos——"

"It ought to be a ripping success," said Tom enthusiastically, in spite of the frigidity of the meeting. "Old Linton would be pleased. And as we should charge for admission, we ought to have a tidy sum left over for the benefit of the cricket club to start the season with. How does that strike you?"

Figgins put his watch back into his pocket.

"Time's up—more than up!" he remarked.

"What do you think of the idea?" roared Tom Merry.

And the meeting replied with one voice:

"Rotten!"

"Well, you silly asses——"

"You chumps!" said Lowther.

"You duffers!" remarked Manners.

Jack Blake glanced round at the disgusted meeting.

"Gentlemen, it was agreed that unless Tom Merry had really something important to say, these three howling josers were to be bumped baldheaded. I submit to the meeting that this tosh about old Linton's birthday isn't important at all!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Wathah not!"

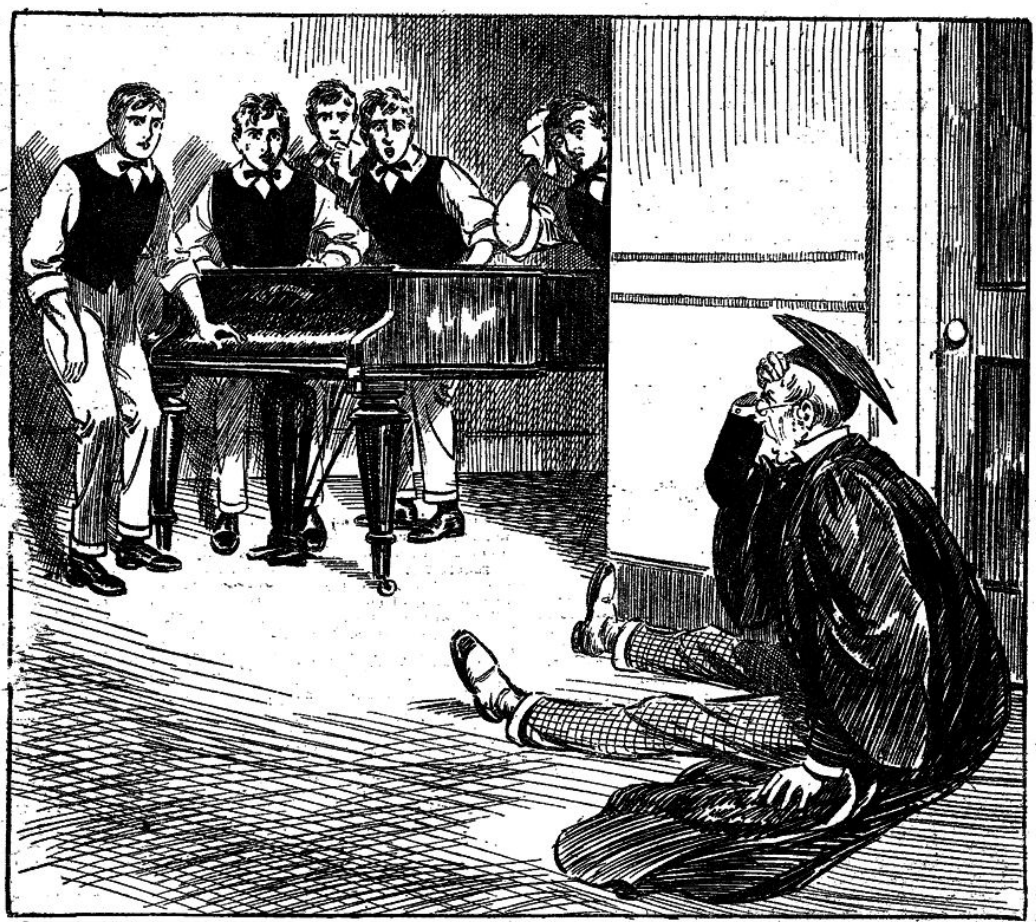
"Bump them!"

"Hands off, you chumps!" roared Tom Merry, as the meeting made a general rush for the owners of the study.

But the meeting did not "hands off." Their hands were on, and the Terrible Three were whirled off their feet, struggling, and bumped heartily on the floor of the study.

There was a wild and whirling struggle, and half the juniors were on the floor at once, and the din was terrific.

The Terrible Three were great fighting-men, and even eight indignant juniors did not find it easy to handle them.



As the juniors bearing the piano came round the corner, they collided violently with Mr. Linton, who happened to be coming in the other direction. The Form-master sat down on the floor with a bump. "Wha—aa—t does this mean?" he stuttered. (*See Chapter* 13.)

The table went over, and the chairs were knocked right and left.

"Yarooh! Leggo!"

"Ow! My eye!"

Gweat Scott!"

"Bump them!"

"Yah! Oh! Whoop!"

In the midst of the terrific uproar, the study door opened. The stern and severe figure of Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell, appeared.

Just at that moment Lowther "buzzed" a cushion at Jack Blake, and Blake dodged his head just in time to escape it. The cushion whizzed on to the doorway, with accidental but deadly aim.

There was a wild gasp from Mr. Linton.

Biff!

The whizzing cushion smote him fairly and squarely on the chest, and he whirled back into the passage and sat down—hard.

CHAPTER 2.

Too Bad!

THE tussle in Tom Merry's study ceased as if by magic.

The juniors stood up or sat down, in frozen dismay. They had caught sight of Mr. Linton just as that unlucky cushion smote him and hurled him out of the doorway.

"Oh, my only hat!" murmured Jack Blake, rubbing his nose. "This is where we hear something drop!"

"Bai Jove! Wathah!"

Blake was right.

Mr. Linton reposed gracefully on the floor of the passage for about the hundredth part of a second; then he jumped up, his gown dusty and his brow like a thundercloud. He reappeared in the doorway, his eyes gleaming at the dismayed juniors. They stood in a state of dusty and dishevelled disarray, frozen by the gaze of the Form-master.

"Who threw that cushion?" demanded Mr. Linton, in a grinding voice.

"I did, sir!" stuttered Lowther. "I—I chucked it at Blake, sir! I didn't know you were there. Quite an accident, sir."

"Yaas, wathah, sir! You surely could not suspect Lowthah of buzzin' a cush at you, sir?"

"Silence, D'Arcy!"

"Yaas, sir. But——"

"What is the meaning of this disgraceful disturbance?" exclaimed the master of the Shell. "The noise could be heard downstairs!"

"C-c-could it, sir?" stammered Tom Merry.

"Sorry, sir!"

"It's a—a—a—a meeting, sir!"

"It's a—a—a little friendly discussion, sir!"

"That's all, sir!"

"Indeed! Do you usually conduct friendly discussions in this manner?" said Mr. Linton, with heavy sarcasm. "I wonder what an unfriendly discussion would be like, in that case? This disturbance is simply disgraceful!"

"Oh, sir!" murmured the juniors.

"And will be punished severely!"

"Oh, sir!"

"Weally, sir——"

"The boys of my Form here," pursued Mr. Linton, eyeing the Terrible Three and Kangaroo, "will take a hundred lines each, and will be detained to-morrow afternoon!"

"Oh!"

"The other boys I shall report to their Housemasters. We shall see whether order cannot be maintained even in junior studies!"

"If—if you please, sir——"

"Not a word!" said Mr. Linton majestically.

And he strode away, with rustling gown.

The dusty and dishevelled juniors in Tom Merry's study gazed at one another with feelings almost too deep for words, as the footsteps of the Form-master died away down the passage.

"Well," said Blake at last, with a deep breath, "that takes the cake! It prances off with the whole giddy biscuit factory!"

"Reported to our Housemaster!" groaned Figgins. "That will give old Ratty a chance at us! Oh crumbs!"

"Blow Ratty!" growled Herries. "Railton will lay it into us, too!"

"Detained to-morrow afternoon!" murmured Monty Lowther. "And we have bought the tickets for old Buzzle's performance at Rylcombe!"

"You can give us the tickets, if you like!" said Digby consolingly. "We sha'n't be detained, anyway. We'll go instead!"

To which generous offer Monty Lowther replied only with a basilisk-like glare.

"Detained to-morrow afternoon!" said Kangaroo. "What about the dashed football match? I was going to captain the dashed team in your dashed place, Tom Merry, and now I shall be stuck in a dashed Form-room for the whole dashed afternoon! Of all the silly duffers that ever duffed, you are the dashedest!"

And Kangaroo stamped indignantly away.

The Fourth-Formers, restrained from further and more violent expression of their feelings by the possibility that Mr. Linton might return, glared at the Terrible Three and departed.

The Shell fellows exchanged glances.

"Doesn't seem to be what you'd call a howling success, does it?" murmured Tom Merry.

Monty Lowther snorted.

"I don't think it was much of a wheeze, anyway!" he growled. "Who cares for old Linton's birthday? Ungrateful beast, I call him, detaining us when we were considering ways and means of celebrating his beastly birthday!"

"Well, he didn't know——"

"Oh, rats! I think you're an ass!"

"So do I!" said Manners. "Several sorts of an ass!"

"And a howling chump!" said Lowther.

"And a blithering cuckoo!" chimed in Manners.

"And a burbling josser——"

"And a chortling jabberwock——"

Tom Merry fled from the study. Manners and Lowther had by no means exhausted their list of choice epithets, and Tom did not want to hear them go on to the end.

Meanwhile, Blake & Co. had been called into Mr. Railton's study. Mr. Linton had not failed to report their disorderly conduct to the master of the School House.

"You have been making a disturbance, I understand," said Mr. Railton, taking up a cane.

"Not exactly, sir," ventured Blake; "it was really a friendly meeting——"

"And a cushion was hurled, which struck Mr. Linton by mistake——"

"That was an accident, sir——"

"Yaas, wathah, sir!"

"Accidents of that kind," said Mr. Railton grimly, "must not be allowed to happen. You will hold out your hands!"

Swish, swish, swish, swish!

And Blake & Co. dolefully departed. In the passage Blake sucked his aching palm, and looked like thunder.

"If ever Tom Merry calls a meeting again," he said darkly, "we'll get him to hold it out of doors somewhere. Then we can slaughter him without silly Form-masters buzzing in at the wrong moment."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"As for old Linton's birthday, he can celebrate it on his lonesome, without my assistance. I—I hope he'll have rheumatism and gout on his birthday!" said Blake ferociously.

And a little later Figgins & Co. stood in the presence of their Housemaster, Mr. Ratcliff, with apprehensive looks. Mr. Ratcliff was a much more severe master than Mr. Railton of the School House. And he did not like Figgins & Co.

It was his duty to cane them, and never had a duty been undertaken more cheerfully.

"I understand that you are guilty of disgraceful disloyaliness in the School House?" said the New House master. "It does not surprise me—in you! You are, I think, the most disorderly boys in this House. However, we will endeavour to correct these faults of character. You will hold out your hand, Figgins; now the other!"

Swish! swish!

"Ow! ow!" groaned Figgins.

"Don't make those ridiculous noises, Figgins, or I shall cane you again. Now, Kerr!"

Swish! swish!

"Groo-hooh!"

"Silence! Now, Wynn!"

Swish! swish!

"Yaroooooop!"

"Now you may go!" said Mr. Ratcliff, laying down the cane, "and do not let me hear of anything of the kind again. You will not escape so lightly on another occasion."

"Lightly!" groaned Figgins, when they were safe-out of the House-master's room. "Ratty has queer ideas of escaping lightly, I must say! Ow! I believe the beast does special Indian club exercises to get his muscle up for licking us. Ow!"

"And all over old Linton's beastly birthday!" growled Kerr.

"Blow Linton!"

"Blow his birthday!"

"If Tom Merry gets up any rotten entertainment for the rotten birthday, we'll make it a point to muck it up!" said Figgins darkly.

And that prospect was the only consolation left to the unfortunate Co.

CHAPTER 3.
Not to be Stood.

THE next day the Terrible Three might have been observed to wear extremely thoughtful expressions.

The situation was, as Monty Lowther remarked, rotten.

They had expended the considerable sum of seven shillings and sixpence upon the purchase of seats for the afternoon performance at Rylcombe Assembly Rooms, where Professor Buzzle was giving his conjuring entertainment.

And now they were detained.

The professor was really a good entertainer, and a great many of the St. Jim's fellows had been to the show during the past week, and they were loud in their praises of it. Naturally, the Terrible Three wanted to go too. Entertainments of any kind were scarce enough in the quiet village, and they did not want to miss any that happened in their way. Besides, they specially wanted to see the professor, because of Tom Merry's scheme of getting him to give a performance at St. Jim's.

But it was useless to think of asking Mr. Linton to let them off.

Mr. Linton's sentences were like the laws of the Medes and Persians. They were not to be altered under any circumstances.

But it was really too bad. They were detained simply because they had been mooting a scheme for celebrating their Form-master's birthday. Mr. Linton did not know it, but there it was. Detaining them, under such circumstances, was altogether too thick. It was insult added to injury, and, as Tom Merry said, they weren't bound to stand it.

"We'll go all the same!" said Tom determinedly, on Wednesday morning.

His chums whistled.

"What about Linton?" said Manners.

To which Tom Merry replied, tensely and emphatically:

"Blow Linton!"

"Blow him as hard as you like," agreed Lowther. "But suppose he misses us."

"He won't!"

"How do you know?"

"Because he's going out himself."

"Oh, that's better," said Lowther, brightening up. "If he's going out for the afternoon, he can't know whether we're in the Form-room or not. It won't occur to him that we shall have the nerve to clear out without permission."

"Exactly."

"Sure he's going out, though?" asked Manners doubtfully.

"Quite sure. He's going to the entertainment."

"What!"

"He's taking some of the kids," Tom Merry explained. "He's got his good points, old Linton has, you know. He's taking a dozen fags to the show, and paying for them himself.

Wally told me. He's taking Wally D'Arcy and a crowd of other young rascals of the Third."

"To Buzzle's show?"

"Yes."

"You—you crass ass!" said Monty Lowther. "How can we go there if Linton's there? He's bound to see us. And if he sees us in the Assembly Rooms, don't you think it might possibly occur to him that we've cleared out of the Form-room. He could work that out in his head, you know."

Tom Merry laughed.

"He won't recognise us!" he said.

"Why won't he?"

"Because we shall be unrecognisable."

"Wha-a-at!"

"Look here," said Tom, "it's up to us to go! We've got leave to go. The fellows are all cackling over our being detained by the master we were going to honour with a celebration on his beastly birthday. We're going! As Linton's going out, we've got a chance. All we've got to do is to make sure that he doesn't recognise us at the place."

"Thinking of putting on Guy Fawkes' masks?" asked Monty Lowther sarcastically.

"That would attract attention, I think," said Tom Merry calmly.

"Go hon! Make it false beards and moustaches, then," said Lowther.

"Just what I was thinking."

"What!" yelled Lowther.

"Don't rouse the whole neighbourhood!" said Tom Merry chidingly. "We've got to keep this dark. What's the good of being the leading lights of the Junior Dramatic Society if we can't disguise ourselves? We've got a whole stock of theatrical things, and grease-paints, and things. What's the matter with disguising ourselves?"

Three schoolboys with black beards and pink moustaches that?"

"Ass! We sha'n't go as boys."

"Make it girls!" said Lowther, who was evidently in a sarcastic vein.

"Not girls, either; that would be rather hard, considering our faces——"

"What's the matter with my face?"

"It would take too long to go into that," said Tom cheerfully. "Besides, that isn't the question. We're going as old gentlemen!"

"As old gentlemen!" said Lowther dazedly.

"Yes; in white whiskers, white waistcoats, and spectacles."

"Oh crumbs!"

"We've got all the props," said Tom Merry boldly. "Why shouldn't we? It would be no end of a lark, anyway. And Linton couldn't possibly suspect three respectable old gents, in specs of being three Shell fellows."

"Ha, ha, ha! Probably not!"

"But—but we should be spotted in the daylight!" gasped Manners.

"Fancy walking a mile in broad daylight in white whiskers!" murmured Lowther.

"We sha'n't walk. Have you ever heard of such a thing as a telephone? We can 'phone for a cab to be waiting for us just outside the gates."

"Oh!"

"Then we shall drive up to the Assembly Rooms in style. We've got our tickets; we shall simply have to go straight to our places. Easy as falling off a form."

"By Jove!" said Lowther. "It's not a bad wheeze. It will be fun, even if we get bowled out. After all, it would only be a licking."

"We'll wait till Linton has started with his blessed army of fags," said Tom Merry, "then we scoot out of the Form-room and make up. We've got all the things in the study. The other fellows will all be on the footer-ground, and there will be nobody to spot us."

"Suppose we're spotted going out?"

"Oh, don't hunt for difficulties! Besides, why shouldn't three respectable old gentlemen walk round the quad if they like? The public are admitted—there are lot of old johnnies come down here to look at the buildings, and gas about Early English architecture, and that kind of thing."

"Well, we'll risk it!" said Lowther.

"Then I'll go and telephone for the cab."

After dinner, when most of the fellows were thinking about football or various excursions for the half-holiday, four serious-looking juniors made their way into the Shell Form-room. They were the Terrible Three and Kangaroo. The Terrible Three looked properly resigned to their fate; but the Cornstalk had a rebellious expression.

"You chaps know Linton's going out this afternoon?" he asked, as he sat down at his desk.

"I've heard something of the sort!" said Tom Merry.

"Well, I'm not going to stick here," said Noble. "When he's gone, I'm off. I'm jolly well not going to miss the footer match."

"Risky!" said Lowther.

"Blow the risk! I tell you——"

"Shush!"

Kangaroo "shushed" as Mr. Linton came into the Form-room. Mr. Linton's severe face wore its sternest expression.

"Ah! You are here!" he said.

"Yes, sir!" said the juniors respectfully.

"I trust," said Mr. Linton, "that while you are detained this afternoon you will reflect upon your conduct, and make better resolves for the future."

"I trust so!" said Lowther demurely.

Mr. Linton gave him a sharp glance; but Monty Lowther's face was quite solemn and grave. The Form-master went on hastily.

"I am going out this afternoon; but I need not tell you that you are expected to remain here until five o'clock, when you may go. I shall request a prefect to see that you do not leave the Form-room. If you should do so, Kildare will report to me. That is all!"

And Mr. Linton departed.

"Did you ever hear anything like it?" said Monty Lowther, in deep disgust. "Setting old Kildare to watch us, just as if we couldn't be trusted to stay here without that!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What are you cackling at?" sniffed Lowther.

"Well, considering that we don't intend to stay here——" grinned Tom Merry.

"Well, I call it rotten! That knocks it all on the head!"

"Stuff! How is Kildare going to keep an eye on us? He's captaining the First Eleven this afternoon. The Abbotsford team are coming over."

"By George, so he is!" said Lowther, with a chuckle. "He'll give us a look in before the match, and then forget all about us, I expect."

"I hope so!"

"I hope he'll be too busy with the Abbotsford chaps to see me on Little Side!" growled Kangaroo. "That's where I shall be!"

"Buck up with the lines!" said Tom Merry. "We've got to do a hundred each, anyway, and we had better have something to show!"

And the four juniors wired into the lines at express speed.

Ten minutes later, Kildare of the Sixth, the captain of St. Jim's, looked into the Form-room.

The four juniors were writing away as if their lives depended on it.

"Hallo!" said Kildare. "I hear you kids are detained, and you're not to leave the Form-room while Mr. Linton is out!"

"That's all right, Kildare," said Monty Lowther affably. "We're enjoying ourselves. We're getting on rippingly with the pious Æneas. Would you like me to read out this splendid description of a storm at sea——"

"Shut up!" said Kildare, laughing. "Mind you stay here, that's all. I've got an eye on you!"

"Which eye?" asked Lowther.

Kildare did not reply to that question. He went out of the Form-room, and closed the door behind him.

"Good!" said Tom Merry, with satisfaction. "Now that's over! Kildare won't think of us again till after the Abbotsford match!"

"And as soon as the whistle goes we clear?" said Lowther.

"That's it! Pile into the lines!"

Four pens raced over the paper till the faint and distant sound of the whistle was heard from Big Side. Then the pens suddenly stopped all at once.

"This is where we clear!" said Kangaroo.

"What-ho!"

And they cleared.

CHAPTER 4.

Three Old Geats!

THE Terrible Three lost no time in getting to their study.

By that time the village hack that Tom had telephoned for was waiting in the lane, ready to take them to the Assembly Rooms in Rylcombe. There was still time to get to the entertainment in time for the start.

Tom Merry opened the box in which the stage "props" were kept.

The Junior Dramatic Society of the School House had quite a wide variety of costumes, and there was plenty to choose from.

"We'll keep on our own clobber," said Tom Merry. "It will fill out the clothes, you know, and we may have to change quickly afterwards, too."

"Frock-coats and grey bags!" said Lowther. "We can

have the set we used when we were playing 'George's Uncles'.' Tumble in!"

The three juniors donned the black frock-coats and trousers and spats which "George's Uncles'" had worn in their last comedy.

The change in their appearance was startling.

Three grinning schoolboy faces looking out over high collars and black frock-coats had a decidedly odd effect.

Then came the make-up.

White whiskers and moustaches and wigs added to the effect, and a little grease-paint artistically applied aged their youthful faces.

The junior actors were accustomed to making-up, and it did not take them very long.

When they had finished they looked at one another, and roared with laughter.

"I don't think Linton would know us now if we were right under his eyes!" chuckled Monty Lowther.

"Our own giddy aunts wouldn't know us," said Manners. "Blessed if I quite know myself!"

"You'll do," said Tom Merry, surveying them. "I think we look three eminently quiet and respectable old gents!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You've got to cultivate subdued voices; a bit husky will be better, too. Now I think we're ready. Come on!"

In spite of their confidence, in the excellence of their make-up, it was with a slight inward uneasiness that the chums of the Shell quitted the study and walked down the passage.

They descended the stairs, and in the lower hall encountered Toby, the house page, who looked at them, and came towards them. Toby evidently did not recognise them; he supposed they were visitors, and came to see what they wanted.

Tom Merry regarded him benevolently through his big spectacles. The spectacles, of course, were furnished with plain glass; but they were very large and very imposing.

"Ah!" wheezed Tom Merry. "I have called—we have called—to see—ahem!—— Is Master Wally D'Arcy at home, my lad?"

Toby shook his head.

"Master Wally's gone to Rylcombe, sir, with Mr. Linton," he said.

"Dear me! Can you tell me—ahem!—where he is gone?"

"The Assembly Rooms, sir, to see the show. Mr. Linton has took a party of them, sir!"

"Indeed! Then we will go to the Assembly Rooms also," said Tom Merry. "Thank you, my boy!"

"Oo shall I say 'ave called, sir?" asked Toby.

"Ahem! You may tell Master Wally that his Uncle Joseph, from Timbuctoo, has called—in case we do not meet him."

"Yessir!" said Toby.

And the three respectable old gentlemen walked out of the School House, grinning under their white beards in a way that was very frivolous for gents of such a respectable age.

"Works all right—what?" murmured Lowther.

"Like a charm!" said Manners.

Tom Merry chuckled.

"I had to leave some message for Wally," he remarked. "I don't know what he'll think about his Uncle Joseph from Timbuctoo."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The three old gents walked across the quadrangle.

They did not hurry their steps, but walked along at a pace suitable to their white hair and whiskers.

Two juniors of the Fourth Form were going down to the gates also—Jack Blake and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. They glanced at the three old gentlemen, who studiously kept their eyes another way.

"Bai Jove! Visitahs!" Arthur Augustus remarked to his chum.

"Yes; come on," said Blake.

"Pway allow me time to waise my hat, deah boy!"

"We shall be late for the show, ass!"

"Mannahs befoah everythin', deah boy," said Arthur Augustus imperturbably; and he gracefully saluted the three old gentlemen.

They returned his salute politely.

"Are you coming, you fathead?" murmured Blake. "We sha'n't be in time for the start now, and we've paid for the seats."

"I'm weady, deah boy."

Blake and D'Arcy walked out of the gates, followed by the three old gentlemen.

"They're going to the entertainment!" murmured Tom Merry.

"And they haven't recognised us!" chuckled Lowther.

"No fear!"

"Here's the cab!" said Manners.

The cab was waiting in the lane, the driver leaning on a tree and chewing a straw.

D'Arcy halted at the cab.

"Come on!" howled Blake.

Arthur Augustus regarded his famous gold ticker.

"We're wathah late, deah boy, thwough stayin' to see the beginnin' of the match," he remarked. "I think we'd bettah take this cab."

"Tain't worth it."

"I'll stand tweat, deah boy."

"Oh, all right!" said Blake resignedly.

"Dwivah, pway buck up; we're in a huwwy to get to Rylcombe!"

The driver touched his hat.

"Sorry, sir; I'm engaged."

"Bai Jove! That's wathah wotten! Are you waitin' for somebody?"

"Yessir."

"Somebody fwom the school?" asked Arthur Augustus.

"Yessir."

"That's all wight, then, Blake; we'll go whacks with them," said D'Arcy. "We'll share the exes and share the cab!"

"Suppose it's a senior—he won't whack out his blessed cab with us," said Blake. "No good waiting here on the chance. Come on!"

"My dear chap, we shall be late, and it's wathah a fag walkin' anyway. Can you tell me whom you are waitin' for, dwivah? What's his name?"

"I dunno, sir. I was telephoned for to wait here, that's all I know," said old George, spitting out his straw. "I've bin waitin' some time."

"You don't know if it was a seniah chap?"

"No, sir."

"Pewwaps the chap has changed his mind, aftah all?" suggested Arthur Augustus. "In that case, you had bettah take us."

Old George grinned.

"I'm afraid I must wait 'ere, sir, till my fare comes," he said.

"Are you coming, you ass?" growled Blake.

"Bettah wait, deah boy. If the chap is goin' to the entahtainment, he can't be long now. And I weally do not see why even a seniah should object to our company," said Arthur Augustus, with dignity.

"Suppose it's Knox—or Cutts——"

"Pwobably it isn't."

"Look here——"

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus, as three white-whiskered old gentlemen came up to the cab. "Bai Jove!"

"Our cab, I think!" wheezed Tom Merry. "Get in. Driver, pray make haste to Rylcombe, as we are rather pressed for time."

"You the gent who hordered this cab by telephone?" asked the driver, touching his hat.

"Yes."

Arthur Augustus and Blake exchanged glances of astonishment. How three old gentlemen, evidently strangers at St. Jim's, could have ordered a cab by telephone from the school was a great mystery. The three old boys clambered into the cab; but before the driver could move on, Arthur Augustus approached the vehicle, and raised his shining silk topper very politely.

"Pway excuse me, gentlemen," he said. "I undahstand that you are goin' to Wylcombe."

"Ahem! Yes, certainly!"

"Might I wequest you to do us the favah to give us a lift?" asked the swell of St. Jim's. "We are wathah late for the entahtainment there."

The three old gents exchanged a quick glance. Arthur Augustus evidently had not the faintest suspicion of the real identity of the persons he was speaking to; and it was all the Terrible Three could do to avoid a burst of laughter. They were, however, in a somewhat difficult position. They wanted to oblige the Fourth-Formers with a lift to Rylcombe; but to arrive at the Assembly Rooms in company with St. Jim's fellows might be risky. But Tom Merry quickly decided.

"Certainly!" he wheezed. "One of you can sit outside with the driver, and there is room for one inside."

"Thank you vewy much, sir! You are vewy kind."

"Not at all, little boy!" said Tom affably.

Arthur Augustus turned slightly pink; he did not exactly like being addressed as a little boy. However, the old gentleman was so kind in giving him a lift that he swallowed the remark without wincing. He stepped into the cab, and took his seat, and Blake climbed up beside old George, and the cab started.

CHAPTER 5.
The Old Boys.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY regarded his companions in the old hack with some interest. He was still puzzled by the circumstance that these three strangers to the school had ordered the cab by telephone from St. Jim's. He could not help wondering whom they were.

The three old gentlemen were silent; but Arthur Augustus felt it incumbent upon him, from politeness, to make conversation.

"Wathah a nice aftahnoon," he remarked, by way of a beginning.

"Hem! Very nice indeed, little boy."

"You have been visitin' our school, sir?"

"Yes. It is pleasant to see the little fellows at their little games, my child," said Tom Merry solemnly.

"You know some of our chaps, of course, sir?"

"Hem! Yes, indeed! We have belonged to St. Jim's ourselves," explained Tom.

Arthur Augustus was interested at once

"Oh, you are old boys?" he exclaimed. "I should have been delighted to show you wound the place, if I had known, sir."

"That is right, little boy," said Tom, with a nod of approval. "I am glad to see that the manners of the boys have not deteriorated since my time."

"I'm not really what you'd call a little boy, you know," Arthur Augustus ventured. "I'm in the Fourth Form, sir."

"Are you really? And the other little fellow—is he in the Fourth Form?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"And I hope you are good boys, and always respectful to your kind teachers," said Tom, in the best manner of an old uncle.

"I—I twust so, sir!"

"And I hope you always wash your neck in the morning?"

Arthur Augustus stared.

"Weally, my deah sir——" he protested.

"We always did in my time," said Tom Merry solemnly. "I should be sorry to learn that that custom had died out at St. Jim's."

The swell of the School House almost exploded.

"Weally, sir, we always bath in the mornin', exceptin' a few slackahs like Levison and Mellish!" he exclaimed indignantly.

"How very nice! I see you are a good little boy. And are you always attentive to your studies?"

"Ya-a-as!"

"Twice two?" said the old gentleman, holding up his finger at D'Arcy in a magisterial manner.

"Wha-a-at?"

"Twice two?"

"Weally, sir——"

"I am afraid," said the old gentleman severely, "that you cannot have been properly attentive to your studies, little boy, if you cannot answer so simple a question in arithmetic."

"Bai Jove! Weally——"

"Twice two are four!" said the old gentleman severely.

"But weally——"

"Twice three?"

"My deah sir——"

"Twice three are six!" said Tom Merry.

"I am perfectly aware of that fact, and we do not do the multiplication table in the Fourth Form, sir!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, beginning to get exasperated.

"Dear me! Then what do you learn?"

"Lots of things, sir—Fwench, German, Euclid——"

"Very good. What is French for good-morning?" asked the old gentleman.

"Bonjour!" said D'Arcy.

"Good! And what is German for good-evening?"

"Guten abend!"

"Very good! And what is Euclid for good-night?"

Arthur Augustus nearly fell off his seat.

"Wha-at is wha-at?" he gasped.

"What is Euclid for good-night?" demanded the old gentleman, with a frown. "Do you mean to say that you cannot tell me—when you are in the Fourth Form?"

"Gweat Scott!"

"Try to think!" said the old gentleman encouragingly. "Now, turn it over in your mind. Give me the answer."

"B-b-but Euclid isn't a language!" shrieked Arthur Augustus.

The old gentleman shook his head sadly.

"I am afraid the boys are not so bright as they were in our time," he remarked to his companions; and the two other old gentlemen shook their heads also. Evidently they were feeling quite mournful over the decadence of St. Jim's.

"Gweat Scott!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "I nevah met anybody befoah who supposed that Euclid was a language. And they were at St. Jim's! Must have been jollay queeah in those days, bai Jove!"

"I suppose you learn geography also?" resumed the old gentleman, turning again to Arthur Augustus.

"Oh, yaas!"

"Then you can tell me the name of the capital of Borriobhoola-Gha?"

"The capital of what?"

"Borriobhoola-Gha?"

"I—I nevah heard of such a place, sir."

"Dear me! Bless my soul! This is really shocking!" exclaimed the old gentleman, in astonishment. "I shall really write to Dr. Holmes on the subject. However, I will try you in history. You study history?"

"Yaas, sir."

"In what country did King Cole reign?"

"K-k-king whom, sir?"

"King Cole. You have surely heard of Old King Cole?"

"Ya-a-as, but—but——"

"He was celebrated for being a merry old soul," said Monty Lowther huskily. "You must have heard of him."

"Ya-as, but I don't believe he was a weal person."

"Shocking!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Bless my soul! My dear little boy, your education has been sadly neglected."

"Weally, sir——"

"Things have changed since our time," said Tom Merry mournfully, and again there was a sad shaking of white heads. "I suppose you study Latin?"

"Oh, wathah, sir!"

"And you can construe the Georgics of Homer?"

"Oh cwumbs! Homah w'ote in Gweek, sir, and—and the Georgics were weally witten by a chap named Virgil—they were really, sir!"

"Shocking!"

"Appalling!"

"Incredible!"

And the three white heads wagged solemnly again. Arthur Augustus was quite relieved when the hack rolled into the old High Street of Rylcombe. The three old gentlemen were becoming intolerable. They might be old boys of St. Jim's, but if so, learning must have been in a weird state at the old school in their time, though politeness forbade Arthur Augustus to say so.

"Ah, here we are, I think!" said Tom Merry. "This is Rylcombe, I believe?"

"Yaas, sir."

"Where shall we put you down, little boy?"

"Anywhah you like, sir. We are goin' to the Assembly Wooms."

"Bless my soul, so are we! Then we will take you there!"

"Thank you vewy much, sir!"

The hack stopped outside the Assembly Rooms. Quite a number of people were going in. Professor Buzzle's entertainment was very popular in the little place, which did not have very many amusements.

"I am weally vewy much obliged to you, sir," said Arthur Augustus, as he raised his silk topper to the old gentlemen after alighting.

"Not at all, my dear child. Your conversation has been most amusing," said Tom Merry benevolently. "However, if you really feel obliged——"

"Certainly, sir."

"Then you shall pay for the cab," said Tom calmly. "Come on, my friends; this young gentleman is going to pay for the cab."

And the three old gents walked up the steps of the Assembly Rooms; and Arthur Augustus, in almost a dazed frame of mind, paid five shillings to the driver. As he entered the building with Blake, he confided to the latter his opinion of the three old gentlemen—and that opinion was not a flattering one.

CHAPTER 6.
Arthur Augustus is Alarmed!

TOM MERRY and his chums chuckled gleefully as they went in.

The little joke on Arthur Augustus tickled them very much—all the more because the swell of St. Jim's had not the slightest suspicion that he had been japed.

"Poor old Gussy!" murmured Monty Lowther. "He was born to have his noble leg pulled!"

"We owe him five bob!" grinned Tom Merry. "That will do later. Now for our seats!"

The place was well filled.

In the front row could be seen Mr. Linton, the Form-master, and an army of fags, whom he had so kindly taken to the entertainment. On one side of the master of the Shell were three vacant seats.

"This way, sir!" said the attendant to whom Tom Merry showed his tickets.

And he led the way directly towards Mr. Linton.

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Manners. "Those are the seats, right under Linton's eye!"

"Next door to Linton, by Jove!" groaned Lowther.

Tom Merry felt a little dismay for the moment; but it was too late to back out now.

Mr. Linton rose to make room for them to pass. They sat down in the vacant seats, Tom Merry placing himself next to his Form-master.

Mr. Linton gave him a casual glance, and Tom Merry's heart thumped for a moment; but there was no recognition in Mr. Linton's look. Evidently he regarded the new-comers as three perfectly commonplace old gentlemen.

But the Terrible Three felt decidedly uneasy.

Mr. Linton was blessed with extremely sharp sight, and the slightest untoward circumstance might betray them.

But they were fairly in for it now, and the only thing to do was to "sit tight" and see the matter through.

Fortunately, the performance was not long in commencing.

A little, slim gentleman in evening-dress appeared upon the stage. It was Professor Buzzle, the renowned conjurer, who had performed before all the crowned heads of Europe—perhaps.

There was a murmur of applause.

The way the professor extracted yards of ribbon from his ears, and white rabbits from a hat belonging to a gentleman in the audience, was really wonderful.

Then he requested a watch to be passed up, promising to smash it into little pieces before the eyes of the audience, and then to restore it unhurt to the owner. Jack Blake jerked Arthur Augustus by the arm.

"Go it, Gussy!"

"Weally, Blake, I do not want to have my tickah smashed into pieces," protested D'Arcy. "It was a birthday pwesent fwom my patah, you know!"

"He won't hurt it, ass!"

"But suppose he did?"

"Rats! It's a D'Arcy's place to lead, isn't it?" demanded Blake. "I've heard you say so lots of times. And nobody seems anxious to risk his watch."

"But weally——"

The professor was smiling over the footlights, and, bowing and rubbing his hands—washing them, as it were, in invisible soap in imperceptible water.

"I assure you, ladies and gentlemen, that the timekeeper will not be damaged," he repeated. "Now, gentlemen——"

Blake shoved Arthur Augustus to his feet.

"Here you are, sir!" he called out.

"Weally, Blake——"

The professor bowed to the dismayed Arthur Augustus.

"Pray step on the stage, young gentleman!" he said.

"But I——"

"Go it, Gussy!" called out Monty Lowther, forgetting himself for the moment.

Mr. Linton looked round sharply.

For a moment he thought he must be dreaming. He had plainly recognised the voice of a junior who was detained in the Form-room at St. Jim's! The master of the Shell rose to his feet, and scanned the audience near about him. Lowther—whose blushes were fortunately hidden by grease-paint and whiskers—sat as still as a mouse now, with his eyes fixed upon the stage.

"Bless my soul!" murmured Mr. Linton. "I was certain that was Lowther's voice; but he is certainly not here. And the voice was very near me too! I must have been mistaken! But, really, it is very strange."

Arthur Augustus had gone on the stage. He was feeling very uneasy; but nobody else had offered a watch for the trick, and D'Arcy accepted Blake's assurance that it was up to him.

The professor smiled benignantly as he accepted the handsome gold ticker, which was famous in the Fourth Form at St. Jim's.

"You are quite sure that it will not be damaged, sir?" asked Arthur Augustus.

"You have my assurance on that point."

"But you are goin' to bweak it up?"

"Certainly."

"But—but how——"

"Rely upon me!" smiled the professor. "Now, ladies and gentlemen, you see this watch in my hand?"

Ladies and gentlemen testified that they did.

"You see me hurl it upon the floor——"

Crash!

"Gweat Scott!"

"You see me tread upon it, and stamp it out of shape——"

"Bai Jove! Stop——"

Stamp! Stamp! Stamp!

Whether it was D'Arcy's watch or not, the watch on the stage was certainly reduced to such a state of ruin that it was not likely ever to go again. Arthur Augustus surveyed the wreck through his eyeglass, and breathed wrath.

"You uttah ass!" he exclaimed. "You have smashed up my gold tickah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Stamp! Stamp!

D'Arcy's face was a study. He made a jump forward to rescue the remains of the watch, and the professor gently pushed him back.

"It is all right," he assured him.

"You have smashed my tickah——"

"Ladies and gentlemen——"

"My tickah——"

"Shut up, Gussy!" roared Blake.

"My tickah——"

"Cheese it!"

"I wefuse to cheese it! My tickah has been smashed up. It was a birthday pwesent fwom my patah——"

"Order!" shouted Lowther, forgetting himself again.

"Ow-yow!" he added, as Tom Merry stamped on his foot.

Mr. Linton glanced round sharply. This time his glance rested upon the white-whiskered old gentleman next but one to him. His glance was amazed. It was that old gentleman who had called out in a strong, boyish voice—and the tones of Monty Lowther of the Shell! It was really extraordinary!

"Oh, you ass!" murmured Manners.

"Ladies and gentlemen, you see the fragments of the young gentleman's watch——"

"Yaas, wathah; and I considah——"

"I shall now proceed to restore the watch to its owner in the same state in which it was presented to me," said the professor.

"Wats! You can't do it!"

The professor made some weird passes with his slim hands, and the broken watch disappeared from sight—where, no one could tell. Arthur Augustus watched the conjurer with gleaming eyes. There was one thing he was determined upon—unless his watch was restored to him intact, his knuckles were going to make close acquaintance with the professor's prominent nose.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the watch has now disappeared!"

"Bravo!"

"The young gentleman appears to be a little anxious about his watch——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But there is no cause for anxiety. The young gentleman's watch is at this moment reposing quite safely in the young gentleman's pocket."

Arthur Augustus jumped.

"Wats!" he exclaimed.

"Feel in your pockets!" said the professor, smiling.

"I wepeat, wats! It is imposs!"

"Feel in your pockets!" roared Blake.

"What is the use of feelin' in my pockets, when I know that the watch cannot possibly be there, you duffah?"

"Kindly oblige the audience by feeling in your pockets!" said the professor. "I assure you that the watch will be found safe and sound."

"Wot!"

However, Arthur Augustus ran his hands through his pockets. He uttered a sudden exclamation as his fingers came into contact with something hard.

He drew his hand out, and his face was a study as he recognised his watch.

There it was—the famous gold ticker—reposing safely in the palm of his hand, quite unhurt after its adventures. Arthur Augustus gazed at it in amazement.

"Bai Jove!" he ejaculated.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bravo!"

"Weally, I do not undahstand this at all——"

"Is the young gentleman satisfied?" asked the professor suavely.

"Yaas; but I weally do not compwehend. Howevah, it is all wight."

And Arthur Augustus, much relieved by the discovery that his gold ticker was safe after all, returned to his place in the audience. The professor bowed to the ladies and gentlemen, and there was a great deal of cheering.

To the simple minds of the Rylcombe folk the trick appeared very wonderful indeed. To Arthur Augustus, indeed, it appeared very wonderful also. He was still in a state of great astonishment.

"That is a vewy wemarkable twick, Blake, deah boy," he remarked. "I weally do not see how it was done."

Blake chuckled.

"It wasn't your watch he smashed up, ass!"

"But I saw him do it, deah boy."

As soon as D'Arcy was fairly started, Blake, Herries and Digby tiptoed out of the study, Blake shutting the door noiselessly behind. Arthur Augustus, in blissful ignorance of the silent departure of the chums, sang on. (See Chapter 10.)

"He had another watch hidden about him, fathead!"

"Bai Jove! I nevah thought of that! It's a wippin' good twick," said Arthur Augustus thoughtfully. "Do you know, deah boy, I've thought sometimes that I could be a conjuwah. Levison can do those things, you know, and I've got a lot more bwains than Levison. I shall twy that twick myself when we go back."

"You won't try it with my watch, at any rate!" grinned Blake.

"Weally, Blake——"

"Shurrup! The professor's talking!"

Professor Buzzle went on with his performance, greatly astonishing the good people of Rylcombe by his magical powers. Tom Merry & Co. were so interested that they quite forgot the parts they were playing. When the professor produced a singing canary from the back of his neck, and made it disappear down his throat, there was great applause, and the Terrible Three joined in it heartily.

Mr. Linton's eyes turned upon the three white-haired and white-whiskered old gentlemen, who were clapping their hands and cheering like boys.

"Bless my soul!" he ejaculated.

The Form-master's ejaculation warned the Terrible Three of their imprudence. They became suddenly silent, and trembled. Mr. Linton's eye was upon them like a gimlet. He had recognised their voices; there was no doubt about that. But their appearance baffled him—such a disguise was really too extraordinary—and the Shell master hesitated to risk committing a blunder by speaking to them. But during the remainder of the performance his eye was incessantly upon them, and the unlucky juniors realised quite clearly what was in his mind. Mr. Linton intended to hurry back to St. Jim's the moment the performance was over, and ascertain whether the three Shell fellows were still in the Form-room.

And they quaked inwardly. To go out now would be to confirm the Form-master's evident suspicions; and after the performance they had somehow to reach the school and get rid of their disguise before Mr. Linton arrived. And he would lose no time. And they were still trying to think out the problem of escape from their dilemma when the performance ended, and the audience rose to go.

CHAPTER 7.

A Narrow Escape.

THREE old gents hurried through the crowd towards the exit, with a haste that was not at all in keeping with their years and their white whiskers.

Jack Blake suddenly found himself gripped by the arm as he was pushing along with D'Arcy, and he turned his head and recognised the old gentlemen who had given the chums a lift to Rylcombe.

"Hallo!" said Blake. "What's the trouble?"

"Keep Linton back a bit if you can, old chap!" whispered the old gentleman who had grasped Blake's arm.

Jack Blake almost fell over. His eyes grew wide and round as they were fastened upon the old gent.

"Wha-a-at!" he stammered.

"We've got to get back before Linton, or all the fat will be in the fire!"

"W-w-w-who are you?"

"Tom Merry, you ass!"

"Oh crumbs!"

"Tom Mewwy! Bai Jove!"

"Shush! Delay Linton somehow, for goodness' sake!"

"B-b-b-but——"

But Tom Merry was gone. The three old gents shoved their way through the crowd, amid indignant ejaculations from the persons they shoved. But it was no time to stand upon ceremony. They gained the exit, leaving Blake and D'Arcy overcome with amazement.

"Bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus ejaculated, for about the tenth time. "Weally, you know, this is vewy surpwising!"

"That's how they came to telephone for the cab from St. Jim's!" gasped Blake.

"Yaas; and that accounts for the way they were waggin' me in the cab! The wottahs!"

"Of all the japes——"

"It was fwightfully wisky! I wondah if Linton suspects ——"

"Of course he does! That's why we're to keep him back!" chuckled Blake. "He's going to buzz off quick and spot them if he can. We've got to stop him somehow."

"But how, deah boy?"

"Somehow," said Blake.

He looked round hurriedly. Mr. Linton was shepherding the fags out of the hall. He did not take any notice of the Fourth-Formers; indeed, he was looking round to see what had become of three white-whiskered old gents.

Jack Blake uttered a sudden cry, and reeled.

Bump!

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "Blake! What's the mattah? Bai Jove, he's fainted!"

Mr. Linton turned round sharply. A Form-master of St. Jim's couldn't possibly hurry away when a St. Jim's fellow had fallen in a faint almost at his feet.

The Shell master came towards the Fourth-Formers. A crowd of people gathered round quickly. Arthur Augustus was kneeling beside his chum, greatly alarmed. He had never known Jack Blake to faint before.

"Blake, old man! Bai Jove! Old chap——"

"Stand back!" said Mr. Linton sharply. "What is the matter with Blake?"

"He's fainted, sir."

"It must be the heat of the crowd. Stand back! Get some water!" exclaimed Mr. Linton.

And he waved the crowd back, and bent down beside the junior.

Blake's eyes were closed.

"Blake! Some water—quick!"

An attendant hurried up with a glass of water, and Mr. Linton dashed it over Blake's face. There was a formidable yell from the junior.

"Ow! Groo! You silly ass! Ow!"

"Blake!"

Jack Blake blinked at him, wiping the water out of his eyes.

"Ow! Oh! I—I beg your pardon, sir! I—I——"

"You fainted, Blake, and I was restoring you," said Mr. Linton, frowning. "Can you rise?"

Blake moaned.

"I—I don't know, sir! Did I faint?"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus anxiously. "You pitched wight ovah, old chap, just as we were discussin' about——"

"I—I feel better now," said Blake hastily. "I—I think I could get up, if you helped me, sir. Oh dear!"

"Lean on my arm!" said Mr. Linton crossly.

He had to look after the junior, but he did not do it with a good grace. He was greatly annoyed by the occurrence, which had delayed him when he wanted specially to make great haste to return to the school.

Blake leaned heavily on the arm of the master of the Shell.

"Can you walk?" snapped Mr. Linton.

"Ye-es; I—I think so, sir!" murmured Blake.

"Very good! You shall return to the school in a cab with me," said Mr. Linton. "Kindly call a cab, my man!"

"Oh crumbs!" murmured Blake.

He occupied as much time as possible in getting to the cab; but Mr. Linton was not to be trifled with. The junior was bundled into the cab, and Mr. Linton ordered the driver to get to the school as quickly as possible. Rylcombe cab-horses, however, were not first-class animals, and the pace was decidedly leisurely.

They arrived at St. Jim's at last, however, and Mr. Linton, dismissing the cab, hurried at once to the Shell Form-room.

There was a sound of scratching pens as he opened the door.

Mr. Linton gazed into the Form-room.

Four juniors sat there sedately at their desks, with Latin grammars and sheets of impot paper before them. Lowther had a smudge of ink on his nose, as if he had rubbed it absent-mindedly with an inky finger during his labours.

The juniors looked up respectfully as their Form-master came in.

Mr. Linton gazed at them long and hard.

There they were, just as he had left them, and their looks were unconsciousness itself.

A question trembled on Mr. Linton's lips, but he did not utter it.

It seemed too ridiculous to ask these tired, inky juniors whether they had been to Rylcombe in the guise of respectable old gentlemen. He had evidently been mistaken.

Without a word, Mr. Linton stepped out of the Form-room, and closed the door behind him, and four juniors looked at one another with grins of satisfaction.

"Blake must have kept him back somehow," murmured Tom Merry. "If he'd been here five minutes sooner——"

"He'd have found me in footer rig!" murmured Kangaroo.

"And us in white whiskers!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

But Mr. Linton, fortunately, did not think of looking into the Terrible Three's study. He was puzzled, and he wondered who the three old gentlemen were whose voices were so remarkably like those of three boys in his own Form. But he never knew, for he never encountered those old gentlemen again.

CHAPTER 8.

War Declared.

"FEEL all wight, deah boy?"

Arthur Augustus asked the question quite anxiously, as he came into Study No. 6, after his return to St. Jim's, and encountered Blake. Certainly Blake did not look any the worse for his fainting-fit in the Assembly Rooms at Rylcombe.

Blake stared.

"All right?" he repeated. "Of course I feel all right! Why shouldn't I?"

"But you fainted, deah boy."

"Fathead!"

"Weally, Blake, under the circs——"

"Didn't you hear Tom Merry ask me to keep old Linton back?" said Blake witheringly. "I had to faint—it was the only way, ass!"

Arthur Augustus opened his eyes so wide that his eyeglass dropped out and clicked on his waistcoat buttons.

"Bai Jove! Do you mean to say that you were spoofin', you boundah?"

"Do you think I really fainted, you silly ass?" demanded Blake indignantly. "Do you think I'm the kind of fellow to faint?"

"I certainly thought so, deah boy!"

"Then you are a bigger ass than I supposed," said Blake politely. "Catch me fainting!"

"I am not quite sure——"

"Well, you can be quite sure now I've told you," said Blake crossly, naturally annoyed at having been supposed to faint.

"I'm weally not sure——"

"Can't you take my word?" roared Blake.

"I'm not at all sure——"

"My hat! Are you asking for a thick ear?"

"I am not at all sure," went on D'Arcy calmly, "that I appwove of takin' in Mr. Linton in this way."

"Oh, is that it?" snorted Blake. "Luckily I can get on quite comfortably without your approval."

"Weally, Blake——"

"Shurrup, and help make the toast."

"But I considah——"

"Shut up!" roared Blake, exasperated.

"Hallo, trouble in the family?" asked a cheerful voice at the door, as Tom Merry looked in. "Much obliged to you, Blake. You managed to keep him back."

"Yes, rather," said Blake.

"Blake fainted."

"Fainted!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"I didn't faint!" yelled Blake excitedly. "If anybody says I fainted I'll punch his silly nose."

"I should wefuse to have my silly nose punched—I mean my nose punched. I was only wemarkin' to Tom Mewwy——"

"I got up a faint!" Blake explained. "Linton had to look after me, and that crass ass thought it was the real article."

"Yaas, I weally considahed——"

"That only shows that it was well done, and worthy of a

prominent member of the Amateur Dramatic Society," said Tom Merry soothingly. "It was a jolly good idea. We had five clear minutes in the Form-room before Linton got there, and he never said a word—just looked at us, and marched off."

"Good egg!" said Blake.

"Yaas, I offah you my congwats, deah boy, but weally I am not quite sure that I appwove of——"

"And we're just going to have tea in our study, and I've looked in to ask you," went on Tom Merry. "We are celebrating the occasion, and there will be a really good feed. So stop ragging, and come on."

"Delighted, deah boy!"

"Good business," said Blake. "We've only got toast and sardines, and the sardines are a little bit wangy. We'll come with pleasure. But no more about celebrating old Linton's birthday, you know. I'm fed up with Linton."

"Ahem! As a matter of fact, I was thinking——"

Blake held up a warning hand.

"Not about that rotten birthday wheeze?"

"Well, yes."

"Oh, rats!" said Blake. "What do you want to celebrate his silly birthday for, when he's just detained you?"

"I wathah think it's a good ideah," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy thoughtfully. "It will be heapin' coals of fiah on his head, you know. Weturnin' good for evil, and so on, you know; that's a wippin' good wheeze."

"Oh, all right," said Blake resignedly. "Sure it's a good feed?"

"Yes," said Tom Merry laughing.

"Then we'll come, and try to put up with your wheezes."

"That is hardly a gwacious way of acceptin' an invitation, Blake, deah boy——"

"Oh, bosh!" said Blake. "We say what we mean in Yorkshire, where I come from. We're coming, Tommy. I'll tell Herries and Dig. Herries' bulldog can have those sardines, after all."

"Right-ho! Ready in ten minutes," said Tom Merry, and he went his way.

He crossed the quadrangle to the new House, to call on Figgins & Co.

The scheme of celebrating the birthday of the master of the Shell had by no means been given up. It was the special pride of the Terrible Three that they never took up a scheme without making a success of it. The greater the opposition the more determined they were to carry it through. As Monty Lowther remarked, Mr. Linton's birthday was of no more consequence than the birthday of Julius Cæsar or the man in the moon; but it was the principle of the thing. The Terrible Three never backed down.

A misunderstanding had spoiled the whole effect of the first meeting on the subject. That misunderstanding was not to be repeated. While Tom Merry was going round gathering the meeting into the fold, so to speak, Lowther and Manners were preparing a feed on a grand scale in the study in the Shell passage. In the general good-humour and good-fellowship of a really good feed, Tom Merry sagely considered that his scheme had a good chance of meeting with a really enthusiastic reception.

The captain of the Shell found Figgins & Co. at home. The study table in Figgins's apartment presented a festive appearance. Figgins and Kerr and Wynn had been playing footer that afternoon, and it had given them good appetites, and as they happened to be in funds, they were "doing themselves" remarkably well.

Fatty Wynn grinned at Tom Merry over a huge pie as the Shell fellow came in. Figgins & Co. were half through their meal.

"Hallo! What do you want on the respectable side of the quad?" growled Figgins.

"Pax!" said Tom Merry amicably.

"Sit down and pile in," said Fatty Wynn, with great hospitality.

"Thanks; but we're just getting up a feed in our study. I came over to ask you fellows," said Tom, with a rather rueful glance at the festive board.

"Thanks!" said Figgins, in his turn. "But we've started, and we're doing well. Kerr has had a remittance."

"And whacked it out like a man and a brother," said Fatty Wynn. "Do have some of this pie, Tom Merry. It's steak-and-kidney, and simply ripping. You know Dame Taggles' steak-and-kidney pies."

"We've got one," said Tom.

"Have you?" said Fatty Wynn, with interest. "I—I say, you couldn't put off your feed till to-night, I suppose? I'd be glad to——"

"Well, we couldn't, quite."

"Sorry!" said Wynn, with real regret.

"Suppose you put off yours till to-night, and come over and have a whack at ours?" Tom Merry suggested. "We've got a steak-and-kidney pie, and ham and poached eggs, and two kinds of jam——"

Fatty Wynn's eyes glistened.

"I say, Figgy——" he began.

Figgins interrupted him.

"Is it just a feed, or is it a giddy meeting?" he demanded.

"Well, it's a feed, and a meeting as well," said Tom Merry diplomatically. "The feed first, you know, and—and then the meeting."

"About that rotten scheme of yours?"

"Ahem! We were going to moot the subject of a celebration on Mr. Linton's birthday."

Figgins snorted.

"Blow Linton, and blow his birthday! He reported us to Ratty, and we got it bad. And I hear that he's complained to Mr. Railton about our coming over and making a row in the School House. Blow his birthday!"

"But it will bring him round, and make him awfully good-tempered when he finds that we've got up a ripping celebration for his birthday, you know."

"Blow bringing him round—and blow his birthday!" said Figgins obstinately. "We've sworn a solemn swear on that subject. If you start any celebrating about that rot, we're going to muck it up!"

"Oh, are you?" exclaimed Tom Merry, looking warlike at once. "It's a School House scheme; and if you New House bounders chip in, you'll get it where the chicken got the chopper!"

"You wait and see!" said Figgins darkly. "It's up to us now, and we mean business. We'll help you celebrating any other birthday, but not that one. We don't approve of your giddy Form-master. I don't like the way he does his back hair. Rats!"

"Then you can go and eat coke!" said Tom Merry politely.

And he retired from Figgins's study, and closed the door with a slam that could be heard the whole length of the passage.

"I—I say," said Fatty Wynn, with a doubtful glance at Figgins, "I—I think it's rather a pity, Figgy!"

"What's the pity?" roared Figgins. "About Linton's beastly birthday?"

"Nunno! About the feed!"

"Blow the feed!"

"Well, it seems a pity for a good feed to go begging," said Fatty. "We could easily leave this pie for supper, and——"

"Poof!" said Figgins. "I tell you we're up against that silly scheme! Besides, it's a House matter now—New House against School House. If they start celebrating, we'll go on the warpath and make a muck of it!"

"Yes; but——"

"Well, ass, we can't go to the feed and go on the warpath afterwards!"

"Can't we?" said Fatty Wynn regretfully.

"No, we can't!" roared Figgins. "And we're going on the warpath—that's settled! Now shut up, and pass the pie!"

And Fatty Wynn, still looking a little regretful, obediently shut up, and passed the pie.

CHAPTER 9.

Not Entirely Successful.

THERE were eight juniors in Tom Merry's study, and they were all looking very pleased and good-humoured.

The feed had been a success, in spite of the absence of Figgins & Co.

Under the kindly influence of the feed, the chums of Study No. 6 were prepared to give Tom Merry's scheme a patient hearing—a great concession on their part, as Jack Blake did not fail to make clear.

"Well, what's the idea?" said Blake condescendingly, when he found that he hadn't possible room for another jam-tart.

"Yaas, pile in, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus encouragingly. "I have some suggestions to make myself; but go ahead first!"

Tom Merry coughed as a preliminary.

"Ahem! Gentlemen——"

Blake held up his hand.

"Not a speech," he implored. "We didn't agree to that!"

"Look here——" began Tom Merry wrathfully.

"Ordah, deah boys!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "Blake, pway let Tom Mewwy wun on. A fellow has a wight to talk as much as he likes in his own quartahs!"

"Gentlemen——"

"Oh, keep it up!" said Blake, with an air of resigning himself to his fate.

"Next Wednesday is the birthday of our respected Form-master, Mr. Linton."

"Your respected Form-master, not ours," said Blake. "We're not in the Shell!"

"A respected Form-master, then," said Tom Merry. "Now, as it is his birthday, there is no reason why we shouldn't celebrate it."

"And no reason why we should, either," commented Herries.

"Well, a little celebration breaks the monotony, anyway, and we can't have a celebration without something to celebrate," Tom Merry explained. "A Form-master's birthday is as good as anything else."

"Yaas, that's so."

"Besides, it's a good scheme. We give an entertainment, and charge for admission, and there will be something for the cricket fund."

"Perhaps!" said Digby.

"Depends on the entertainment," said Blake. "If it's going to be some of your blessed amateur dramatic performances, you may have to pay the fellows to come in!"

"Look here——"

"But I'm willing to hear about it," said Blake generously, with a wave of the hand. "Go on; but cut it as short as possible."

"Yaas, don't be all night about it, deah boy."

Tom Merry gulped down some remarks he was about to make, and continued:

"I was thinking of a sort of variety show. Principal item, Professor Buzzle, the famous conjurer. That is bound to be a draw. We can get him here for a guinea!"

"How do you know?"

"I wrote and asked him. He does these things, you know—visits schools and gives shows for the kids. He is willing to give us special terms. Besides that item, there can be selections by the Junior Band——"

"That's not a bad idea," said Blake approvingly. "My flute——"

"My cornet——" said Herries.

"Exactly. And then——"

"I should be willing to give some cornet solos," said Herries.

"Well, we could arrange a cornet solo as the last item on the bill," said Tom.

"Why the last item?" demanded Herries. "The people will be going out then."

"Yes; so they won't mind, you see——"

"Look here," said Herries, in great wrath, "if you're going to be funny——"

"Order! Another item would be dancing the tango——"

"Who's going to do that?"

"Lowther. He's been practising."

"All on his lonesome?"

"No, ass—with Manners. Manners will wear a skirt!"

"Bai Jove! It will be wathah hard to jump about, Mannahs, old man, with a skirt on!"

"I sha'n't jump about, fathead—I shall dance! And a tango skirt isn't much of a thing, anyway," said Manners.

"Well, every silly ass seems to be talking tango now!" said Blake. "Tango will do! I could put in a flute obbligato——"

"Music will be supplied by young Brooke, on the piano," said Tom Merry hastily. "We can think of some other items. Of course, this is only a rough idea, and all suggestions will be welcome. The editor's decision is final—I mean, the decision of the committee is final."

"Who's the committee?" asked Blake suspiciously.

"Lowther, Manners, and myself," said Tom.

"Better put me on the committee. You'll want a chap with some sense to help in making the arrangements," explained Blake.

"Yaas; and I shouldn't object to bein' chairman of the committee."

"The committee would object," remarked Manners.

"Weally, Mannahs——"

"You see, it's up to us to make the thing a success now, as Figgins & Co. have declared against it," said Tom Merry. "It's a question which is cock-house; and we want to show these New House bounders that the School House can manage a thing like this without their rotten assistance!"

"Hear, hear!" said the whole meeting heartily.

"Now, about other items——"

"I was goin' to make a suggestion, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus modestly. "I admit that Pwofessor Buzzle is wemarkably cheap at a guinea; but if the guinea could be saved, it would be all the bettah, wouldn't it?"

"Well, yes; but——"

"I should be willin' to take his place on the pwogramme."

"You!"

"Yaas, wathah! I weally think that I am wathah a dab at conjuwin', you know," Arthur Augustus explained modestly. "It is twue that I haven't twied yet, but I really think I can do it. A chap nevah knows what he can do until he twies, you know!"

"You're jolly well not going to have your first trial at our show, you duffer!" said Monty Lowther warmly.

"I wefuse to be called a duffah! I think——"

"Yes, Gussy, you're offside there," said Blake. "You'd better stick to your tenor solos. They're all the audience can be expected to stand from you!"

"I wepeat that I could do a conjuwin' turn. I have weflected on the mattah, and I am sure that I could work that twick with the watch," said Arthur Augustus obstinately. "On weflection, I think the pwofessah must have had anothah watch about him!"

"Go hon!" said Blake sarcastically.

"You all saw how that twick went down at the show in Rylcombe. Now, I have an old watch—an old thing that is no good," said D'Arcy. "I've got it in my pocket now. I will show you fellows, if you like, how I can work the owacle!"

"Ass! We should see you changing the watches."

"Imposs; I should be awf'ly deep about that. Unless you fellows are willin' to give me a chance, I shall have no wesource but to withdraw fwom the meetin'!" said the swell of St. Jim's, with a great deal of dignity.

"Oh, let him pile in!" said Blake, with a groan. "He won't be happy till he gets it. Somebody lend him a watch!"

Arthur Augustus rose to his feet.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, in a superb imitation of the manner of Professor Buzzle, "may I wequest any membah of the audience to lend me a watch? The same will be weturned safe and sound aftah the twick!"

There was a grim silence. Nobody seemed to want to trust his watch into the hands of the amateur conjurer.

"Weally, you fellows, you might play up! Kangawooh, old man, will you lend me your tickah for the twick?"

"No fear!" said the Cornstalk promptly.

"You may wely upon my assuwance that it will not be harmed. As you fellows are in the secwet, I do not mind your seein' how it is done," said Arthur Augustus. "You can see here that I have anothah watch!"

And the swell of St. Jim's drew a battered old Waterbury, that had long ceased to go, from his pocket.

"As a mattah of fact, I shall have this watch concealed in my sleeve, and at the wight moment I shall substitute it for the othah." Arthur Augustus explained. "There will be no dangah whatevah to the watch. Will you lend me your watch, Tom Mewwy?"

"Thanks; no!"

"Lowthah, old man——"

"Ask me another!" said Lowther affably.

"Blake, deah boy——"

"Go and eat coke!" said Blake.

"Hewwies——"

"Rats!" said Herries.

"Dig, old man, I twust you will have sufficient confidence in a fwiend to lend me your watch," said Arthur Augustus, in a very dignified tone.

Good-natured Digby hesitated a moment, and then took out his watch, and detached it from the chain.

"Here you are!" he said. "If you damage it, I'll scalp you!"

"I assure you that it will not be damaged," said Arthur Augustus. "Gentlemen—I mean, ladies and gentlemen, you see that I have Dig's watch in my hand."

"Oh, yes!" yawned the gentlemen.

"Now I'm goin' to destroy it uttahly, and then westore it to its ownah in its owiginal condish," said Arthur Augustus. "Watch me!"

"Shall we watch you or watch the watch?" asked Lowther.

But Arthur Augustus paid no heed to the humorist of the Shell.

He fumbled with the watch, and slipped it into his sleeve—in full view of the grinning audience.

"Now, gentlemen——"

"Oh, go ahead!"

"Cut the cackle and get to the hosses!"

"Gentlemen, I shall hurl this watch upon the floor——"

Crash!

"Now I shall stamp upon it!?

"Hurray! Go it!"

Stamp, stamp, stamp!

"Ladies and gentlemen, you can all see that that watch on the floor is weduced to wuin."

There was not the slightest doubt upon that point. The watch on the floor hardly bore any resemblance to a watch at all.

"Yes," yawned Blake. "Go it!"

"Quite satisfied, ladies and gentlemen?"

"Yes, you ass! Pile in!"

"Ladies and gentlemen, I shall now pwoceed to westore

Dig's watch in all its pwistine glowy!" said Arthur Augustus. "Heah you are, Dig!"

He slipped a second watch down his sleeve, and handed it to Digby with a graceful bow.

"Quite satisfied, deah boy?" he asked.

Somehow, Arthur Robert Digby did not look satisfied. A really terrific expression was gathering on his face as he gazed spellbound at the watch in his palm.

He found his voice at last.

"You idiot!" he shrieked.

"Weally, Dig——"

"You howling lunatic——"

"I wefuse to be chawactewised as a howlin' lunatic!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus indignantly. "What is the mattah?"

"Look!" yelled Digby.

He held up the watch D'Arcy had handed to him. It was an old, battered Waterbury, that had seen its best days, and seen the last of them. It was, in fact, the second watch with which the amateur conjurer had provided himself for the performance.

The juniors gazed at it, and burst into a yell of laughter. Evidently Arthur Augustus had got the watches mixed. He had kept the wrong watch in his sleeve, and the hopeless wreck on the floor was all that was left of Digby's ticker.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Blake, almost sobbing. "Oh crumbs! You'll be the death of me yet, Gussy! That isn't Dig's watch!"

"There's Dig's watch!" shrieked Tom Merry, pointing to the wreck on the floor.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, in dismay. "I—I must have got the wotten things mixed in my sleeve. Bai Jove! I'm sowwy, Dig! But, aftah all, a twick is vewy liable to go w'ong at the first wehearsal, you know. Next time——"

"Next time!" gasped Blake. "Do you think there is going to be any next time, you frabjous fathead?"

"Weally, Blake——"

"I want my watch!" bawled Digby.

"I am weally sowwy, Dig, but——"

"My watch!"

"Undah the circs, it is imposs for me to westore it; but I will twy again. Will you lend me your watch, Blake?"

"Will I?" sobbed Blake. "No; I don't think I will! I don't quite think that I'll lend you my watch, Gussy!"

"My word!" roared Digby. "I told you I'd scalp you if you didn't hand it back! My hat! I'll—I'll pulverise you! You—you chortling ass!"

"Weally, Dig—— Gweat Scott! Keep him off! Weally, you awful ass—— Ow, ow, ow!" roared Arthur Augustus, as Digby rushed upon him. "Hands off! Gweat Scott! Murdah! Help——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was no stopping Digby, and the other fellows were laughing too much to think of trying to stop him. He went for his noble chum like a hurricane. Arthur Augustus tore open the study door and fled. After him went Digby, breathing vengeance.

In Tom Merry's study all business was at an end. The meeting rocked with laughter, and the howls that rang out from the study seemed to indicate that it was a meeting, not of School House juniors, but of excited hyenas.

CHAPTER 10.

Solo.

"I WANT your advice, deah boys."

Thus Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, in Study No. 6, a day or two after the meeting in Tom Merry's study.

Arthur Augustus had an enormous pile of music upon the study table, and he was turning it over with a thoughtful air.

Blake and Herries and Digby were roasting and eating chestnuts, and talking football, and Arthur Augustus's remark passed unheeded.

The swell of St. Jim's looked round.

"Will you chaps give me some advice?" he asked reproachfully.

"Certainly!" said Blake. "Dry up!"

"I'm thinkin' about the celebwation on Wednesday aftahnoon. You see, as we have given the thing our support, it's up to us to make it as gweat a success as possible, for the cwedit of the studay."

"Yes; that's so," said Blake, with a nod. "That's all right. I'm going to do a flute solo with Tom Merry punching the piano. That's sure to go down."

"Ya-a-s; but I was thinking of my part."

"Your part!" said Blake thoughtfully. "Lemme see; your voice is a tenor, isn't it?"

"You know it is, you ass!"

"Well, I know you've told me so!" admitted Blake cautiously. "You really want to make the thing a success, Gussy?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"You want to put the audience into a good temper, and everybody feel satisfied with things generally?"

"Yaas."

"Then I can give you a good tip," said Blake heartily. "Have anothor engagement that afternoon!"

"What!"

"Go and see your tailor, or be called away to the bedside of a sick relative!" said Blake. "I will do a bit extra on the flute, to take the place of the tenor solo——"

"You uttah ass!"

"Well, you asked for my advice," said Blake. "That's the best advice I can think of! The audience would be pleased——"

"I was thinkin'," said Arthur Augustus, with dignity, 'that a tenah solo is hardly suffiish. I was thinkin' that it would be a good ideah to change the whole entahtainment into a sort of wecital!"

"My hat!"

"I should be vewy pleased to contwibute a sewies of solos——"

"You might be," agreed Blake. "But isn't it rather selfish to think only of your own pleasure, Gussy?"

"The audience would be pleased, too, you ass!"

"Better suggest it to Tom Merry," grinned Blake. "I can see him changing his entertainment into a one-man show—I don't think!"

"I have suggested it to him."

"And what did he say?"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy coughed.

"Well, as a mattah of fact, he said 'Wats'!" he admitted.

"Good!" said Blake heartily. "I endorse Tom Merry's remark! Rats, and many of them!"

"I was thinkin' that you fellows might bwing your influence to beah on Tom Mewwy, and induce him to see weason. There is no weason why the audience should have to tolewate a squeaky flute when they can get a weally good tenah solo——"

"What!"

"And it is wathah wuff on them to have to listen to a hooty cornet instead of a wippin' song——"

"What!" snorted Herries.

"As for Dig's banjo and song, that is weally hardly up to the mark. And Dig could take his place in the audience, and lead the applause for my solos——"

"Yes; I can see myself doing it!" grunted Digby.

"If you fellows wefuse to see weason, we may as well dwop the subject. My ideah is to make the thing a success," said Arthur Augustus loftily. "Howevah, I shall not insist. Suppose you give me some advice about my song? You've heard me sing the 'Flower Song,' in 'Carmen,' Blake?"

"I've heard you wheeze it," said Blake.

"You have heard me sing 'Libiamo,' from 'La Twaviatah,' Dig?"

"I've heard you bark it," said Digby.

"You have heard me sing 'La Donna e Mobile,' Hewwies?"

"I've heard you murder it," said Herries.

A prophet, it is said, is not honoured in his own country. Certainly it seemed that a really magnificent tenor was not honoured in his own study. Arthur Augustus simply glared through his eyeglass at his unsympathetic and unadmiring chums.

"If you cannot talk sense——" he began. "Weally, I think a chap might wely on his own chums for advice at a time like this. I want my song to be a success, and I should like you to advise me which song to select."

"A short one," suggested Blake.

"A very short one," said Herries.

"An extremely short one," said Digby.

"Couldn't you manage one of those songs without words, you know?" asked Blake, as if struck by a really brilliant idea. "That would spare your voice and the ears of the audience."

"I wefuse to discuss the mattah any further with a set of sillay asses!" exclaimed the swell of St. Jim's indignantly. "Why, even Mellish has more appweciation for music than you have. He asked me to sing a solo to him in his studay yestahday."

"Did he?" said Blake, in wonder. "Gammon!"

"It is a fact!" said Arthur Augustus, with dignity.

"Did he borrow anything of you afterwards?"

"Yaas; as a mattah of fact, he bowwowed five shillings. But I do not see what that has to do with the mattah."

"I do, though," grinned Blake. "If you ask me, I think Mellish earned the five bob."

"I wegard you as a suspicious beast, Blake. Mellish is

wathah a wottah, but he has a yah for music. You fellows have no yahs. Now, stop wottin', and tell me what you think of this. I'm goin' ovah a song."

"Mercy!"

"Upon the whole, I think that Verdi is the thing. Verdi is wathah catchy, you know, and he will go down bettah than Wagnah with a youthful audience. It will also be easiah for the accompanist. I have heah a tenah awiah from 'Otello'—'Owa eper sempwe'——"

"'Ora e per sempre!'" said Blake. "What on earth does that mean?"

"It means 'Now and for evah,'" said Arthur Augustus, "Of course, I shall sing it in Italian. The fellows won't undahstand the words, but that doesn't mattah. You see, there's a vewy gweat advantage in singin' in Italian, because if you forget the words you can put in anythin' you like, and the audience is none the wisah. Now, you fellows shut up a bit, and heah me go thwough this."

"You—you can't sing without an accompaniment," murmured Blake feebly.

"Yaas, that's all wight. Just to go ovah it, you know."

Blake closed one eye at Herries and Digby. The chestnuts were finished, and the chums of the Fourth were ready to leave the study. They were not strongly tempted to remain and hear the solo.

"Right-ho!" said Blake, getting up. "Better stand up to it and take it in style. Face the window, as if it were the audience, you know."

"Wight-ho, deah boy!"

"Keep your eyes fixed on the audience—I mean the window," said Blake.

"Yaas."

"Now pile in."

Arthur Augustus piled in.

"Owa e per sempwe, addio!" trilled the swell of St. Jim's.

As soon as he was fairly started, Blake and Herries and Digby tiptoed behind him noiselessly to the door.

"Sante memowie," went on Arthur Augustus. "Addio, sublim incanti del pensier——"

Three noiseless juniors tiptoed out of the study, and Blake gently drew the door shut. Arthur Augustus, in blissful ignorance of the silent departure of his chums, sang on. The three juniors went chuckling down the passage, and in Study No. 6 Arthur Augustus's tenor voice rang on in melody.

"Addio, schiere, fulgente, addio vittorie, Dardi volante, e volante corsier—Addio, addio, vessillo trionfale e——"

The dead silence in the study struck the soloist, and he turned his head.

"Bai Jove!"

The tenor solo came to a sudden stop.

"Gweat Scott! Blake—Hewwies—Dig——"

Arthur Augustus turned his eyeglass round the study in amazement. Then, as the truth dawned upon him, he became quite crimson with indignation.

"Oh, the awful wottahs!"

He tore open the study door and glared into the passage.

"You feahful wottahs! You spoofin boundahs!"

But Blake and Herries and Digby had vanished.

Half an hour later, when Jack Blake encountered his noble chum, he inquired affably how the tenor solo had got on. Arthur Augustus gave him a withering look and declined to reply.

CHAPTER 11.

Done on the 'Phone.

"THOSE School House bounders really mean business," said Figgins, with a snort.

And the Co. grunted.

Having declined to give their valuable support to the celebration of Mr. Linton's birthday, the New House Co. were "out of it." Great preparations were going on in the School House. Now that it had become a House matter, a good many of the School House fellows were joining Tom Merry heartily to make the thing a success. If the entertainment was a success, it would be one up against the New House. So fellows who cared no more for Mr. Linton's birthday than for the birthday of Nebuchadnezzar piled in to help the Terrible Three.

"If the thing goes they'll crow over us!" said Fatty Wynn, with a shake of the head. "Really, Figgy, you were rather hasty."

Figgins gave another snort. Perhaps he had been rather hasty; but he was not in the least inclined to admit the fact.

"We could have had good places on the programme," said Fatty Wynn, "to say nothing of the feed——"

"If you mention the feed again, I'll thump you!" exclaimed Figgins, exasperated. "Anybody would think you never got enough to eat."

"Well, I never do," said Fatty Wynn pathetically. "Look at what I had for dinner to-day. Only three helpings of Irish stew, and a couple of plum-puddings, and a few apples! If I hadn't had a snack at the tuckshop afterwards I couldn't have gone through afternoon lessons. I tell you, a feed isn't to be despised. Besides, that feed was a jolly good one. They had steak-and-kidney pie——"

"Oh, cheese it!"

"And ham and poached eggs——"

"Shut up!" roared Figgins.

"And two kinds of jam—strawberry and raspberry—a whole jar of each kind——"

Figgins made a rush for his fat chum, and Fatty Wynn dodged round Kerr. The Scottish junior interposed.

"Order!" he said. "No time for ragging now! The question is, how are we going to put those School House bounders in their places? They're not going to bring off that entertainment."

"No fear!" said Figgins emphatically.

"They haven't even offered us free seats," said Fatty Wynn. "It's sixpence admission for everybody below the Fifth, and we've got to pay a tanner each to go in—if we go! Fancy paying a tanner to hear Blake squeaking on a flute, and Gussy slaying a tenor solo!"

"And Lowther and Manners dancing a silly tango!" grunted Figgins.

"It would be eighteenpence for the three of us," said Wynn. "Think of what you can get for eighteenpence! Eighteen tarts——"

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

"Or nine twopenny ones——"

"They've got one jolly good item," said Kerr. "Tom Merry's got Professor Buzzle to agree to come and give a conjuring show. Lots of fellows haven't seen him in Rylcombe. You can't get in there for a tanner. There'll be a rush for that, and the fellows will put up with the rest of the programme."

Figgins rubbed his nose thoughtfully.

"Yes; that's where they score," he confessed. "I've been thinking about that. I say, Kerr, you remember once they were going to have an entertainer chap down, and we disguised you and passed you off as the chap? What price that?"

Kerr shook his head.

"They hadn't seen that chap," he said. "They've seen this Buzzle man."

"But you could make up——"

"I couldn't make myself six inches taller."

"N-n-no; I suppose you couldn't," agreed Figgins.

"Hey presto! Knots, untie!" exclaimed Mr. Bulger, waving his hands. "Cords, vanish!" But the knots did not untie, and the cords did not vanish. "Dear me!" said the performer. "I'm afraid something has gone wrong!" "What!" roared Blake. (*See Chapter* 15.)

"I suppose that idea is no good. We shall have to think of something else."

Kerr reflected. A sudden glimmer shot into his eyes.

"I say," he exclaimed, "we might work it another way! I understand that Tom Merry fixed this up with the professor by telephone."

"Yes. What about it?"

"Suppose the professor were taken suddenly ill, and couldn't come?" said Kerr.

"But he won't be."

"And suppose he telephoned that he was sending another in his place?"

"But he won't!"

"I know he won't, fathead; but anybody can use the telephone call-office by paying twopence. I suppose it's worth twopence?"

Figgins jumped.

"My hat! I never thought of that!"

"Lucky you've got a Scotsman to think of things for you, then," said Kerr.

"But that wouldn't do," said Figgins, with a shake of the head.

"Why wouldn't it?" demanded Kerr warmly.

"Because the professor wouldn't really fall ill, you know; and it would be no good getting his substitute here if the real article came along as well."

"That settles it," said Fatty Wynn.

"Ass!" said Kerr politely. "Of course, the professor would have to be prevented from coming."

"But it's arranged, and he's going to get a guinea."

"We could pay him the guinea. We could raise that among the fellows to do the School House in the eye. I should say it was worth it. Of course, we couldn't put the man to a loss over it."

"Oh, blow the guinea! A tanner each all round would make that up. But how are you going to stop him coming? He wouldn't break the engagement if we asked him."

"He would if Tom Merry asked him."

"But Tom Merry won't!" roared Figgins, in perplexity.

"Fathead!"

"Look here, Kerr——"

"Haven't we got a telephone here?" demanded Kerr. "Can't we telephone to the professor as if it were Tom Merry telephoning?"

"Oh!"

"We can tell him that it's been decided not to put in

that item after all. That will be strictly true, because we've decided it, haven't we?"

"Ha, ha! We have!"

"We tell him we're going to pay the agreed-upon fee all the same, and send him the guinea by post. He couldn't possibly be dissatisfied then, and he couldn't suspect anything. The cash will settle all that."

Figgins rushed at his chum and hugged him.

"Kerr, old man, you're a giddy genius! Come on! Old Ratty's out now, and we can use his 'phone."

"Good egg!" said Kerr. "The entertainment comes off to-morrow, and we'll nip the professor in the bud to-day. You can keep watch in the passage, Fatty, in case Ratty comes in."

And Figgins & Co. proceeded to their Housemaster's study. It was a somewhat risky proceeding to use Mr. Ratcliff's telephone, but the risk had to be run. Fatty Wynn remained on the watch in the passage, and Figgins and Kerr entered the study.

"You know the number?" asked Figgins, thinking of that rather important point for the first time.

"Yes. He uses the telephone at the Assembly Rooms, of course. That was where Tom Merry 'phoned him."

"Suppose he isn't there?"

"If he isn't there we shall have to try again. But he's almost certain to be there at this time, getting ready for his evening show."

"Good!"

Kerr rang up the exchange, and was given the number.

"Hallo!" he said into the receiver. "Is Professor Buzzle there?"

"Hold on a minute. I will call him," came the reply.

"Well?" said Figgins eagerly.

"They're fetching him to the 'phone," said Kerr.

"Oh, good!"

Kerr waited a few moments. Then a voice came along the wires:

"Hallo!"

"Hallo! Is that Professor Buzzle?"

"Yes. Who is it?"

"This is St. Jim's—the school, you know."

"St. Jim's? Yes. Is it Master Merry speaking?"

"I'm speaking—about your engagement, you know. Sorry to say it won't be possible to include that item in the programme. Can't get permission from Mr. Figgins."

Figgins chuckled softly.

"Indeed! I am sorry."

"Yes, it's a shame. But there you are!" said Kerr. "Mr. Figgins is down on it. Won't allow it on any terms."

Professor Buzzle probably thought that "Mr. Figgins" was one of the masters at St. Jim's. But that was not Kerr's affair.

"Of course, it won't make any difference as far as the fee is concerned," went on Kerr. "We beg you to accept that all the same, professor."

"Ahem! I fear that I cannot accept a fee without services being rendered," came the professor's reply.

Kerr grinned. He knew what that meant. The professor was a stickler for professional dignity, but he intended to have the guinea all the same. Kerr did not think of taking him at his word; he did not want to put the worthy entertainer to any loss.

"My dear sir, we have—er—wasted your time in making the engagement, and so on, we shall really take it as a favour if you will accept the fee," he said.

"Ahem! Well, perhaps, as you put it like that——"

"You will allow us to send it by post?"

"Very well."

"And we're so sorry the engagement can't be kept; but Mr. Figgins simply won't hear of it."

"Very well," repeated the professor. "Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!"

Kerr hung up the receiver.

Figgins chuckled joyously.

"We'll get a postal-order this evening, before the post-office closes, and buzz it off," he said. "That will be all right for the professor. And——"

There was a warning cough from the passage. Figgins and Kerr jumped away from the telephone only just in time. Mr. Ratcliff came into the study. He raised his eyebrows as he saw the two juniors there.

"If you please, sir," said Kerr hastily, "would you mind giving us a pass-out of gates for this evening, sir?"

"For what purpose?" asked Mr. Ratcliff coldly.

"To—to go down to Rylcombe, sir, to—to see the entertainment at the Assembly Rooms," said Kerr.

"No, I will not, Kerr. I do not approve of these entertainments. You may leave my study," said Mr. Ratcliff frigidly.

Figgins and Kerr were only too glad to leave the study. In the passage Figgins clapped his chum on the back.

"Good man!" he murmured. "I should never have thought of that in time. Ratty hasn't a suspish that we've been using the 'phone."

Kerr chuckled.

"And as we don't want to go to the show, we don't want a pass-out," he remarked. "Still, it makes Ratty happy to refuse somebody something; and it's our duty to confer a little happiness when possible on a harmless and necessary Housemaster."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

So all parties were satisfied.

CHAPTER 12.

A Broken Engagement.

"I HAVE a tang to tango!" sang Monty Lowther, to the tune of "I have a song to sing, oh!" "Tang me your tango!"

It was Tuesday evening.

In blissful ignorance of the fell designs of their rivals of the New House, Tom Merry & Co. were making their arrangements for the morrow.

The programme had been filled.

As head-cook-and-bottlewasher, so to speak, Tom Merry had a great deal of responsibility on his hands.

He had to consider what the audience were likely to like, and what they were likely to stand; and he had to consider, also, the claims of the various assistants who were willing to give tenor solos, bass solos, baritone solos, flute obbligatos, pianoforte solos, banjo dances, impersonations, and so forth. There was no lack of talent.

It was difficult to decline the services of a fellow who was firmly convinced that, to make the thing a howling success, all that was needed was to put him on with his "little bit."

But Tom Merry, like Pharaoh of old, hardened his heart. He had to. Otherwise, the programme would have been long enough to last through the afternoon and night of Wednesday, and well on into Thursday morning.

Which was clearly not to be thought of.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was gently but firmly refused permission to turn the affair into a song recital. Blake was restricted to a single performance on the flute. Herries' projected series of cornet solos was cut down to a single one—and that not a long one. Digby was given exactly ten minutes for his song and dance with banjo. Kangaroo was allowed the same space of time for a performance with an Australian stock-whip.

The offer of Reilly, Kerruish, and Ray to provide a screaming sketch to occupy about an hour and a half was refused. So was Skimpole's offer to contribute a short lecture on geology, with specimens. Gore was quite persistent in his conviction that he would simply "knock" the audience with an artistic rendering of "Flanagan's Sunday Trousers." But Gore and "Flanagan's Sunday Trousers" were both excluded from the programme.

It had been decided to give the entertainment in the Form-room. The lecture-hall would really have been better, but the lecture-hall was wanted that afternoon for some trivial lecture or other; and, as Lowther remarked, it was no good asking the Head to put off a silly lecture because the juniors wanted the room.

After all, it was agreed that the Form-room would be all right.

The forms were there, ready for the audience to sit upon, and chairs could be begged, borrowed, or stolen, from all quarters.

Screens—also begged, borrowed, or stolen—would partition off the green-room from the audience, and that would also be all right.

The piano could be carried in out of the music-room. The Housemaster had given the required permission.

On Tuesday evening there was to be a rehearsal of the programme, from which all but the performers were excluded.

Tom Merry, with a managerial eye, scanned the Form-room. It was a spacious room, and there was plenty of accommodation for all the audience they were likely to get.

"There won't be many seniors here, I'm afraid," Tom Merry remarked. "It's beastly unlucky that the Head is giving a lecture to-morrow—something about beastly Greek plays, or something. The Sixth will all have to turn up to it. Of course, they'd rather come to our show."

"Ahem! Of course!" said Blake, with a cough.

"Well, I suppose anybody would prefer a good variety show to a rotten lecture," said Tom. "But they have to go to the lecture for the look of the thing. A lot of the Fifth will go, too. It's rather rotten."

"Yaas, it's wathah thoughtless of the Head to be givin' a lecture to-mowwow aftahnoon," Arthur Augustus D'Arcy remarked. "I suppose it would be no good givin' him a hint to put it off."

"Not much!" said Tom Merry sarcastically.

"We could put it to him as an old sport, you know."

"That sounds to me like sour gwapes——"

"Ass!" said Tom Merry, again. "We shall get a good crowd, anyway. Most of the New House chaps will come just to see what it's like. Figgins says he's going to be here."

"I twust those New House boundahs will behave themselves," said Arthur Augustus, a little anxiously. "If they intewwupt the performance——"

"They'll go out on their necks if they do."

"Yaas, but——"

"There will be plenty of our chaps here to see fair-play. We're going to let the fags in at half-price, too; that will make a good crowd," said Tom Merry. "Young Wally has promised to give a hiding to every chap in the Third who doesn't come."

"That's all wight. You can wely on my minah."

"Now for the rehearsal," said Tom Merry. "Some of you chaps lend me a hand to get the piano in. Hallo, what's wanted?"

Clifton Dane looked in at the door.

"Outside!" called out Blake. "Only members of the company allowed in here."

"I'm not coming in!" grinned Dane. "Tom Merry's wanted—somebody's asking for him on the telephone."

"All right. I dare say it's Professor Buzzle—something about to-morrow," said Tom. "You fellows can get the piano in while I'm gone."

"Wight-ho!"

Tom Merry hurried away to the prefect's room, where the telephone was. The juniors were allowed to use the telephone on special occasions. This was one of the special occasions. Kildare of the Sixth was in the prefects' room, talking to Darrel, when Tom Merry came in.

"Somebody's ringing you up, Merry," he said, with a smile. "I took the call. It's somebody named Fuzzle or Wuzzle, or something."

"Professor Buzzle!" said Tom. "He's coming here to-morrow to give us a show."

He took up the receiver. He wondered what Professor Buzzle had to say, and he felt an inward uneasiness that the professor might be going to cancel the engagement. At that time of day it would be impossible to replace him, and the loss of the professor would be a serious matter.

"Hallo!" said Tom Merry. "Professor Buzzle! Are you there?"

"Is that Master Merry, St. Jim's?"

"Yes."

"Master Merry speaking?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"I'm sorry I sha'n't be able to give a performance to-morrow afternoon," came a wheezy voice, as if the speaker were suffering from a cold. "Quite impossible!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Under the circumstances I shall not accept the guinea fee."

"That you jolly well won't!" murmured Tom Merry wrathfully.

"But I am sending a substitute, who will give a performance quite equal to my own—a gentleman upon whom you can have every reliance, and you may be sure that he will give satisfaction."

Tom Merry's face brightened up. The matter was not so bad, after all. He would rather have had the professor himself; but if the professor couldn't come, a substitute upon whom reliance could be placed was almost as good.

"Oh, all right!" said Tom.

"The gentleman will arrive at the time arranged."

"Three o'clock," said Tom Merry.

"Exactly. Expect a Mr. Bulger. Got the name?"

"Mr. Bulger? Yes."

"You may rely upon it that Mr. Bulger's performance will create a sensation—quite equal to any that I could give."

"All right," said Tom Merry. "If you can't come I suppose that's the best thing that can be done."

"It would be no good my coming with a bad cold."

"I suppose not."

"But Mr. Bulger will be quite satisfactory. Unless you are satisfied with his performance you need not pay him."

"Oh, we'll pay up," said Tom Merry. "I dare say it will be all right."

"Then good-bye."

"Good-bye!"

Tom Merry hung up the receiver.

"Something's gone wrong?" asked Kildare.

"The professor's got a cold, and can't come," said Tom Merry. "But he's sending a substitute just as good, he says. I say, Kildare and Darrel, if you'd care to cut the Head's lecture to-morrow afternoon, we'd be jolly glad to see you in the Form-room for the entertainment."

"Thanks!" said Kildare, laughing. "But——"

"It will be a good entertainment—a really ripping show," said Tom. "Prefects are admitted on the nod—I mean, special seats are reserved for such honoured guests——"

"Thanks awfully, but I'm afraid we shall have to turn up in the lecture-room. Wish you every success."

And Tom Merry returned to the Form-room. The juniors were not there, however. They had gone to the music-room to negotiate the piano, and Tom Merry followed them there. The piano had been dragged out of its place, and was standing in the middle of the room, with a crowd of red-faced juniors round it in their shirt-sleeves.

"Well, what was it on the 'phone?" asked Blake, pausing in his labours.

"Buzzle can't come—got a cold!"

"Oh, rotten!"

"But he's sending a substitute to take his place—a chap, he says, will be quite as good," said Tom Merry. "I dare say it will be all right. There are lots of entertainers of that sort as good as Buzzle."

"If ness, deah boy, I should be willin' to give a conjuwin' performance as well as a tenah solo. In fact——"

"Rats! Lend a hand with the piano!" said Tom Merry. "Now, then, all together!"

And the upright grand slid towards the door in the midst of a crowd of shirt-sleeved juniors.

CHAPTER 13.
A Moving Job.

"STEADY on!"

"Weally, Blake——"

"Don't shove, ass!"

"I wefuse to be called an ass!" said Arthur Augustus, stopping. "Unless you desist fwom makin' personal wemarks, Blake——"

"Come on with it!" said Tom Merry impatiently.

"Unless Blake desists fwom makin' personal wemarks——"

"Look here, Gussy, it isn't time for your solo yet. Dry up!"

"Weally, Lowthah——"

The juniors halted in the doorway with the piano. Fortunately it had seen service, and so a few more knocks would not be likely to show. Indeed, there were the initials of a good many youthful musicians carved on the case, and the scratches of many boots could be seen round about the pedals. The piano had an iron frame, and was altogether very heavy, and the juniors found some difficulty in handling it. It ran on castors, or once had done so, but one of the castors had long been missing, and as a rule it was propped up in one corner with a Latin grammar. The castor was not missed when the piano was being practised on, but it was a little awkward to wheel about without it.

"It will have to be carried along the passage," said Tom Merry, panting. "We aren't allowed to scratch the beastly linoleum—as if it mattered."

"Oh, blow the linoleum!" gasped Blake.

"Well, you know what Linton said last time."

"Blow Linton!"

"Up with it," said Tom Merry. "All of you get round the beastly thing, and put your beef into it."

"Hold it so that I can slip undah it, and take the weight on my shouldahs," said Arthur Augustus. "I've seen movin' men do that."

Tom Merry snorted.

"Do you think you could bear the weight on your silly shoulders, fathead?"

"I suppose I can do what a movin' man can do?" said Arthur Augustus, with dignity. "It is as much knack as strength, you know!"

"Shurrup! Now, all together!"

With a deadlift effort, the piano was borne through the doorway. Then it bumped down in the passage with a heavy bump.

"Oh, you duffers!" said Tom Merry. "What about the linoleum——"

"Bust the linoleum!" howled Blake.

"It seems to me that you're trying to bust the piano. All of you stand round it, and lift it, and don't let it drop again."

Six or seven juniors grasped the piano, and it was slowly raised from the floor. They staggered under the weight, gasping. Arthur Augustus pushed up the lid to get a better grip, and let it slip, and it descended with a terrific bang. The startled juniors let the piano bump down again. The three castors dug three fresh holes into the linoleum on the passage floor.

"You ass!" yelled Blake.

"It was your fault, deah boy—you moved it——"

"Ain't we trying to move it, idiot?"

"I wefuse to be called an idiot——"

"Oh, come on!" shouted Tom Merry. "We shall be all night about it at this rate. If you make all that row, Linton will be coming along, or somebody!"

"Let 'em all come!" snorted Blake. "I don't care! If I ever hear you talking about celebrating rotten birthdays again, I'll take you into a quiet corner and suffocate you. Yah!"

"All together! Steady on!"

Up went the piano again, in the grasp of the perspiring juniors. Arthur Augustus did not take hold this time. He felt that it was better to give directions.

"That's wight!" he said. "Keep cleah of the wall—you'll bust the wall through if you wush at it like that, Blake!"

Blake had his hands full, or Arthur Augustus would certainly have received a thick ear at that moment. As it was, Blake murmured things.

"Pway keep your tempah, Blake. It is silly to lose one's tempah ovah a job. Pway go a bit more steadily, Lowthah—you'll have the whole thing ovah in a minute!"

"I'll have you over in a minute, if you don't shut up," said Monty Lowther sulphurously.

"Put your beef into it, Hewwies, deah boy!"

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

"I do not wegard that as an intelligent wemark, Hewwies. Digby, old man——"

"Shut up!" roared Digby.

"Weally, you know. I——"

"Get out of the way!" panted Tom Merry. "Shift off, you dummy! Can't you see you're standing in the road, you thousand kinds of an ass?"

"I am givin' diwections——"

"Buzz aside, dummy!"

"Weally, Tom Merry—— Ow, don't wush into me—yawoooh! Gweat Scott! Oh, you asses! Bai Jove—oh!

The piano-movers collided with the swell of St. Jim's, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was hurled against the wall. He leaned on the wall gasping, and the moving job passed him at a run. The piano was fairly going now, and the juniors kept on the run down the passage, anxious to get their heavy burden landed in the Form-room.

It was sheer bad luck that brought Mr. Linton along the passage just then to see what the uproar was about.

He came round the corner, striding along with rustling gown and frowning brow, just as the piano came rushing along in the grasp of six or seven breathless juniors.

Mr. Linton crashed into the piano, and the piano crashed into Mr. Linton. The musical instrument swayed, and bumped once more on the floor. Mr. Linton landed on the floor with another bump.

He sat there and glared at the piano. Round the landed instrument the juniors stood and gasped for breath.

"Wha-a-at does this mean?" stuttered Mr. Linton.

"Sorry, sir——"

"Didn't see you coming, sir!"

"We—we're moving the piano, sir!"

Mr. Linton staggered to his feet. His face was like a thundercloud. He had had a bad shock, and his temper had already been a little edge-wise.

"You—you—you stupid young rascals!" he gasped. "You—you——"

"So sorry, sir——"

"What are you moving the piano at all for?"

"Mr. Railton gave us permission, sir," said Tom Merry hurriedly. "We're giving an entertainment in the Form-room to-morrow afternoon to celebrate a—a birthday, sir!"

It did not seem a judicious moment for telling Mr. Linton that it was his birthday that was to be celebrated.

"What utter nonsense!" snapped Mr. Linton. "I do not approve of anything of the sort. However, if Mr. Railton gave you permission to move the piano, you may do so; but you will take a hundred lines each for making so much noise, and if there is any further disturbances, I shall cane you."

And Mr. Linton strode angrily away.

"Lovely kind of chap to celebrate the birthday of, I don't think!" murmured Blake. "Why didn't you tell him it was his giddy birthday?"

"Might have made him waxier!" said Tom Merry ruefully. "Come on with the piano. If D'Arcy comes near it again, punch him!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"Clear off, you ass!"

"I am givin' diwections! Oh—ow—yah!"

The juniors were exasperated, and Arthur Augustus came along just in time to furnish them with a victim for the expression of their exasperation. They threw themselves upon him, and bumped him on the floor, and left him gasping; and then turned their attention to the piano again. With a final effort, it was conveyed into the Form-room, and planted safely there.

"It's all right!" gasped Tom Merry. "Only a scratch or two, and one of the pedals twisted. Thank goodness it's no worse! Now for the rehearsal!"

And in a somewhat breathless state the juniors started rehearsing.

CHAPTER 14.

Mr. Bulger!

THE next day, after dinner, Figgins & Co. left the New House quietly, and walked out of the gates. Figgins was carrying a large bag in his hand. Nobody paid any special attention to the departure of Figgins & Co. Tom Merry & Co. were far too busy in making the final arrangements for the performance to bestow a single thought upon the heroes of the New House.

But Figgins & Co. were thinking of them.

"They've got a programme up in their blessed House!" Figgins remarked, with a chuckle, as the three juniors walked down the lane. "I cut across to see it. They've got the name of Bulger written over that of Professor Buzzle."

The Co. chuckled.

"It worked like a charm!" said Kerr. "They never smelt a rat!"

"Well, I don't see how they could," remarked Figgins. "I think we should have been taken in, in their place, by that telephone trick. Now all we've got to do is to send them Mr. Bulger, the professor's substitute."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I've got all the things here, and when I'm ready, you fetch the cab from Rylcombe," said Figgins. "It can pick me up in the lane."

The three juniors left the road, and crossed a field towards the old barn, half-way to the village.

Safe inside the barn, Figgins opened the big bag.

He turned out a variety of "props" belonging to the New House Junior Dramatic Society, the rival organisation to the Junior Dramatic Society of the School House.

So far, the deep-laid plot had been successful. Professor Buzzle had been prevented from coming. Tom Merry & Co. were unsuspiciously prepared to receive his substitute, a gentleman of the name of Bulger. And, needless to say, the gentleman of the name of Bulger was to be a New House junior got up for the occasion. On account of his great length, which made it easier for him to pass as a man when disguised, Figgins had been selected to play the part. He had the necessary height, and when sufficiently padded out, he would have the width to match.

Kerr was a past-master in the art of making up, and his artistic hands were soon at work upon Figgins.

In frock-coat and trousers and white spats, Figgy's appearance was much changed, and Kerr proceeded to age his face with a few clever touches, and then attached a curling black moustache and a short, ruffled beard, which gave Figgins an exceedingly Frenchified appearance.

Figgins grinned as he surveyed himself in the glass, when the transformation was completed.

"My hat, that's ripping!" he exclaimed. "That beats anything they can do in the Dramatic Society in their blessed Old House, anyway!"

"Yes, rather!" said Fatty Wynn heartily. "You look a treat! I shouldn't know you if I met you in the street."

"I wish it wasn't in daylight," said Figgins, rather anxiously. "Do you think the make-up's likely to show, Kerr?"

"No, that's all right. You'll be indoors, too, and you can wear a muffler till you get in—it's cold enough!"

"Right!" said Figgins.

Kerr departed, to fetch the cab from Rylcombe. Figgins waited for it in the lane. Old George came up with the cab at last. He looked curiously at the black-bearded and moustached gentleman who was waiting.

Evidently, however, he did not recognise him, or suspect that he was anything but what he appeared to be.

"Here's your cab, sir," said Kerr, for the benefit of old George, as he jumped out.

"Thank you, my lad!" said Figgins, in a deep voice.

Figgins stepped into the cab.

"Where to, sir?" asked o'd George.

"St. Jim's—the School House."

"Yessir."

The cab drove off. Fatty Wynn came out from behind the hedge and joined Kerr, and the two juniors, chuckling, strolled after the cab towards the school.

Figgins, in spite of his nerve and his confidence in Kerr's powers of make-up, felt a slight inward tremor as the cab reached the gates of St. Jim's.

If only he passed muster with the School House fellows, all would be plain sailing. He was to give a conjuring performance in the place of Professor Buzzle, and he intended it to be a performance that would astonish the natives. But would he pass muster?

Figgins could not help feeling a little uneasy.

The cab drove in, and stopped outside the School House. Two or three juniors were on the steps waiting for it.

"Here's old George's rattletrap!" Blake remarked. "That must be Bulger. I shouldn't wonder if Gussy's with him. It's time he got back."

"Gussy out?" asked Lowther.

Blake snorted.

"Yes. He had to go down to the tailor's about his things for this afternoon. I shouldn't wonder if he's late for the show. He's not in the cab, I see—only an old johnny there."

Mr. Bulger stepped from the cab. Blake ran down the steps to meet him.

"Mr. Bulger?" he asked.

"Yes," said a deep voice.

"Good! This way, sir!"

And Blake led the black-bearded gentleman into the School House, and to the Shell Form-room. All the performers were there; it was getting near time for the beginning. Some of the audience were already in their seats.

Two-thirds of the Form-room had been crowded with forms and chairs. At the door Clifton Dane and Bernard Glyn were stationed to take the gate-money and to eject with violence anyone who tried to enter "on the nod." The yells of a fag in the passage showed that they were nobly doing their duty.

"Here's Mr. Bulger!" exclaimed Blake, as he piloted the gentleman into the Form-room.

Tom Merry hurried to meet them.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Bulger! You're in good time? This way, please! The green-room's behind that screen."

Mr. Bulger followed the Shell fellow.

"You haven't brought anything with you?" asked Tom Merry, noticing that the gentleman's hands were empty. He had expected to see Mr. Bulger with a bag.

"Ahem! No!"

"Have you got a cold, Mr. Bulger?" asked Tom anxiously, as he noted the huskiness in the visitor's voice.

"Not at all, Master Merry. I—I presume that you are Master Merry?"

"Yes, I'm Tom Merry. Don't you need anything for the tricks?" asked Tom.

"Ahem! No! My performance will be a very simple one. I—I do not require anything. If I should require a few things, I dare say you can provide them."

"Oh, certainly! We've got you down second on the programme, Mr. Bulger. I give a piano solo to play the people in, and then you get to the wicket."

"Ahem! Quite so."

"Would you mind waiting here?"

"Certainly not, Master Merry."

Tom Merry left the gentleman in the green-room, and rejoined his comrades. His expression was a little doubtful.

"Blessed if I think very much of Bulger," he said. "He seems to have a cold, though he says he hasn't; and he can't look a fellow in the face. I believe his moustache is false."

"Well, no harm in that, so long as he gives a good show," remarked Manners.

"I hope he'll do that," said Tom dubiously. "Anyway, it can't be helped now. We must hope for the best. The audience is coming in, that's one comfort."

Fellows were coming in quite thickly now, paying out their sixpences cheerfully at the door. A gratifying feature of the proceedings was the fact that a goodly number of New House fellows came in. Indeed, nearly all the juniors of the New House seemed to have made up their minds to come to the entertainment.

Redfern and Owen and Lawrence marched in first, grinning; then came Thompson of the Shell and Pratt and Diggs, also grinning. Later came Kerr and Wynn, grinning. Quite an army of New House fellows followed, all grinning.

Tom Merry observed the wide grins of the New House contingent, and they puzzled him. He did not see anything to grin at, as he remarked to Lowther.

"They think it's going to be a frost," was Lowther's opinion. "Let 'em grin. They'll grin on the other side of their chivvies when they see us bring down the house. My tango will fairly knock them, I know that."

"And my tenah solo——"

"The seats will all be taken," said Tom Merry. "I'll go and see Linton now. He was so crabby this morning I didn't like to ask him; but he must come."

And Tom Merry hastened away to the Form-master's study. He knocked, and Mr. Linton's sharp voice bade him enter.

The master of the Shell did not look very amiable. As a matter of fact, he had two or three bumps from the collision with the piano on the previous evening, and they had not improved his temper.

"Well, Merry?" he said acidly.

"If you please, sir——" murmured the captain of the Shell.

"Please come to the point."

"Ahem! We are giving a show this afternoon, sir—a little entertainment——"

"Well?"

"To—to celebrate your birthday, sir."

Mr. Linton stared.

"My birthday!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, sir. M-m-many happy returns, sir!" stammered Tom Merry.

"Oh!" said the Form-master.

His severe expression softened considerably.

"Do you mean to say, Merry, that this celebration is on account of my birthday?" he exclaimed.

"Certainly, sir."

"Indeed! Thank you very much!" said Mr. Linton, very much relaxed now. "I was not aware of that circumstance. You need not—ahem!—do the lines I imposed upon you last evening."

"Thank you, sir!" said Tom, feeling that he was getting on. "May we hope, sir, that you will—ahem!—honour the entertainment with your presence, sir? It would—would give it a tone, sir; and—and as it is in your honour, we have reserved the best seat specially for you, sir."

Mr. Linton smiled.

"You are very kind, Merry. Under the circumstances, I cannot refuse your invitation. I will come, with pleasure."

"Oh, good, sir!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "We start in ten minutes, sir."

"I will be there."

"Thank you very much, sir."

And Tom Merry left the study, delighted. He had more than a suspicion that the New House juniors had turned up in such strong force with the intention of starting a "rag." But with the Form-master in the audience, a rag would be out of the question. Figgins's faithful followers would be compelled to observe order and decorum in the presence of Mr. Linton.

"He's coming," said Tom Merry. "It's all right."

"Hear, hear!"

"Where's Gussy?" asked Tom. "Hasn't he turned up yet?"

"The ass has gone down to his tailor's!" growled Blake. "He said he'd be back in time. If he isn't——"

"If he isn't, we cut out the tenor solo. The audience won't mind. By Jove, what a splendid crowd!" said Tom, running his eye over the audience. "About time I got to the piano. Tell Bulger to be ready to start as soon as I've chucked it."

"Right-ho!"

And the strains of the piano floated through the Form-room, mingled with the buzz of voices and the sound of coughing and chuckling.

CHAPTER 15.

A Peculiar Performance.

MR. LINTON, looking unusually good-humoured, sat down in the front row of seats while the piano solo was thumping its way through. There was an immediate cessation of the buzzing and chuckling. The most unruly fags realised that they had to keep order in the presence of the master of the Shell.

The piano was silent at last.

Then Mr. Bulger came out from behind the screens. He was not in evening-dress, as the audience expected to see him—but perhaps that was because it was afternoon. There was a dutiful murmur of applausive greeting from the School House section of the audience. Kerr and Wynn clapped the appearance of Mr. Bulger—for reasons of their own. They were looking forward to his performance with peculiar interest.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Mr. Bulger, recklessly regardless of the fact that there were no ladies present. "Ladies and gentlemen, I shall now proceed to perform a few simple tricks."

"Oh, rot!" murmured Gore. "We want more than a few simple tricks for a tanner a time!"

"Will some member of the audience kindly step on the platform to help me?" said Mr. Bulger. "Perhaps Master Merry will oblige?"

Tom Merry was on the stage with Mr. Bulger. He came forward.

"I shall now," continued Mr. Bulger, "perform the magic ink trick. This trick is very seldom performed, for reasons that will be apparent hereafter. Master Merry, kindly stand facing the audience."

Tom Merry faced the audience. Mr. Bulger drew from his pocket a bottle of red ink and a camel-hair brush of large size. Tom Merry gazed at them rather nervously.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I shall now paint Master Merry's face a bright red——"

"Will you, by Jove?" ejaculated Tom Merry.

"And then, with a wave of the hand, I shall cause the ink to disappear, leaving Master Merry's face exactly as it was before," continued Mr. Bulger.

There was a buzz of applause. If Mr. Bulger could do that, it was evident that he was a first-class conjurer and beat Professor Buzzle hollow. Only Tom Merry felt somewhat uneasy.

"I—I say, I suppose it's only a trick?" he whispered

"Certainly, my lad."

"You can really do it?"

"You will see."

Mr. Bulger uncorked the bottle of red ink and dipped the brush into it. There was a giggle from the audience as he drew the inky brush down Tom Merry's face, dividing the junior's countenance with a bright red line.

"By Jove, that's genuine, enough!" exclaimed Blake. "He must be a jolly good conjurer if he can get that off with a wave of the hand."

"This beats Buzzle," Digby remarked.

"By George, it does!"

Mr. Bulger proceeded industriously to paint Tom Merry's face red. Tom felt that he had to submit; he could not refuse to help in the performance of the conjurer he had himself engaged. But he felt uneasy and disquieted. It was not a sham ink of any sort that was being applied to his face; it was very real. Some of it was trickling down into his collar, and felt very real indeed. How was Mr. Bulger to charm that ink away from his face, unless, indeed, he was really possessed of magical powers?

It seemed impossible that it could be done; but, on the other hand, this was doubtless a regular trick, and Mr. Bulger must be supposed to know the business of his own profession. Still, Tom felt ill at ease.

In a few minutes Tom Merry's face was glowing red, and presented a most weird aspect. The audience yelled with laughter at the sight.

Mr. Bulger laid down the bottle and the brush. He turned to the audience, and pointed to the crimson-faced Shell fellow.

"Ladies and gentlemen, you observe that Master Merry's face is now perfectly red, and you can all testify that real ink has been used."

"Yes, yes!" shouted the audience.

Mr. Bulger turned to Tom Merry again. He made several passes with his hands before the crimson face, and exclaimed:

"Hey, presto! Ink, vanish!"

The audience gazed on breathlessly.

The ink did not vanish.

Tom Merry's face glowed as crimson as before.

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed Mr Bulger. "The ink is still there!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the delighted audience. Tom Merry's face was a study—a study in crimson.

"Ahem! Of course, sometimes a trick will go wrong," said Mr. Bulger modestly. "I do not claim to be infallible, by any means."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am sorry to say that this trick must remain uncompleted, owing to circumstances over which I have no control."

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked the audience.

"Do you mean to say you can't get the stuff off?" shrieked Tom Merry.

"I am truly sorry——"

"Get it off!"

"I am sorry to say that that is impossible. Unfortunately, the trick cannot be completed on this occasion. However, with plenty of soap and hot water you will undoubtedly be able to remove the ink in the course of time," said Mr. Bulger calmly.

"You—you—you villain——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You spoofing idiot——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The crimson-faced junior seemed about to commit assault and battery upon the conjuring gentleman on the spot. Lowther and Manners rushed up in time and dragged him away.

"Take it easy," whispered Manners.

"I—I—I'll smash him!" panted Tom Merry.

"Go easy! Don't spoil the show!" said Lowther anxiously. "The New House chaps are nearly killing themselves laughing already."

And Tom Merry allowed himself to be led away, and for some time after that he was busy with hot water and soap in the nearest bath-room. Meanwhile, the conjuring performance went on, amid a buzz of applause from the audience. The mishap to Tom Merry seemed to have delighted the juniors far more than the most successful trick could have done. They were quite enjoying Mr. Bulger.

But when Mr. Bulger called for someone to help him in his next trick there was a very perceptible hesitation on the part of the audience. Nobody wanted to risk sharing the unhappy fate of Tom Merry.

"Ladies and gentlemen," repeated Mr. Bulger, gazing round at the grinning spectators, "I am about to perform a far superior trick, which I think will surprise you. I require the assistance of one person. Perhaps Master Blake will oblige?"

"Rather a big 'perhaps'!" grinned Master Blake. "I'm not taking any."

"I cannot perform the trick without assistance," said Mr. Bulger.

There was a pause.

"Go it, Blake! Go it, Lowther! Go it, somebody!" shouted the audience. "Pile in! We haven't come here for nothing. Help your man, can't you?"

The chums of the School House hesitated. It was their own conjurer, and he declared flatly that he could not go on without an assistant. What was to be done? It was necessary for one of the Co. to throw himself into the breach, as it were, and Jack Blake heroically made up his mind to do so. But he approached Mr. Bulger in a state of great uneasiness.

"Look here!" he whispered. "If you're not certain about this blessed trick, don't do it. And I'm jolly well not going to have my chivvy painted, anyway."

"This is quite a different kind of trick," said Mr. Bulger blandly. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is the magic knot. I shall tie up Master Blake, and any member of the audience will be allowed to attempt to untie the knots. Two minutes will be allowed to each attempt. Then by a wave of the hand I shall cause the cords to fall away."

"Bravo!"

Mr. Bulger had drawn a coil of whipcord from his pocket.

"Kindly hold out your hands, Master Blake."

"Look here! Are you sure——"

"We are wasting time, Master Blake."

"Oh, go ahead!" said the junior resignedly.

Mr. Bulger went ahead. He unrolled the whipcord and fastened Jack Blake's hands together, knotting the cord with great care. The audience looked on with keen interest. It was evident that the knots were genuine. Then Mr. Bulger fastened Blake's ankles together, and then he tied and knotted the cord about him, snipping it into various lengths for the purpose, till the junior seemed to be a mass of whipcord, and could hardly breathe.

When Mr. Bulger had finished, Jack Blake could scarcely move a finger, and he found it somewhat difficult to keep upon his feet.

The multifarious knots Mr. Bulger had placed upon him would certainly have taken a long time to untie, excepting by a person gifted with magical powers. Certainly no member of the audience was likely to be able to untie them in the allotted space of two minutes.

"Ladies and gentlemen, kindly try your powers upon those knots!" said Mr. Bulger, with a wave of the hand. "I wish all to see that the trick is perfectly genuine."

A dozen fellows came forward willingly to test their skill on the whipcord.

One after another they essayed, Jack Blake glaring at them meanwhile, his temper suffering a good deal in the process.

But they strove in vain.

Each fellow undid a few knots, but with difficulty, for they were tied hard. At the end of ten minutes Jack Blake was still a helpless prisoner. The interest of the audience was at its height now. If Mr. Bulger could undo those knots with a wave of the hand, he was a wonderful conjurer indeed.

"You are satisfied?" asked Mr. Bulger. "Then kindly stand back! Master Blake, I shall now proceed to the completion of the trick."

"Time you did!" gasped Blake. "This ain't comfortable."

Mr. Bulger waved his hand.

"Hey, presto! Knots, untie! Cords, vanish!" he exclaimed.

But the knots did not untie, and the cords did not vanish. In spite of Mr. Bulger, the things remained exactly as they were before.

"Dear me!" said Mr. Bulger. "Again it has gone wrong."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The audience simply yelled.

Jack Blake glared at the conjurer with an almost homicidal look.

"Can't you unfasten me?" he roared.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I am truly sorry; but, as I said, the trick has gone wrong," said Mr. Bulger calmly. "It will probably take someone an hour to unfasten those knots. Perhaps, however, someone will oblige you by fetching a knife and cutting them. Meanwhile, I will continue my performance. I shall require the assistance of four persons for my next trick."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I hope you may get it," chuckled Digby. "I'm not one of the four, at any rate."

"Ladies and gentlemen, I require the assistance of four—oh, my hat!"

The Form-room door was thrown suddenly open.

As the audience looked round, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with his face blazing with excitement, burst into the room.

He rushed towards the stage, and his right hand was raised dramatically to point to the startled Mr. Bulger.

"Collah him!" he exclaimed. "He is an impostah!"

"What!"

"What's the matter?"

"Gussy——"

"He is an impostah!" shouted Arthur Augustus, wildly excited. "There is no such person as Mr. Bulgah at all. He is a New House wottah takin' us in! Collah him!"

"Great Scott!"

"My hat!"

"Collah him!" yelled Arthur Augustus.

Mr. Bulger made a wild leap towards the door. But he did not reach it. Many hands closed upon him on all sides, and he was dragged back, and he disappeared upon the floor in the midst of a struggling heap of juniors.

"His beard's false!" roared Herries, as that appendage came off in his hand.

"So's his hair!"

"And his moustache!"

"Great Scott!"

Mr. Bulger was dragged to his feet. With beard and moustache and wig gone, the juniors were able to recognise him, in spite of the grease-paint. And there was a roar!

"Figgins!"

CHAPTER 16.
A Success After All.

FIGGINS stood panting in the grasp of the juniors.

He was fairly bowled out now.

The great scheme for "dishing" the School House entertainment had proved a fiasco after all, and all through Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

A crowd of New House fellows had jumped up to rush to the rescue of Figgins, but Mr. Linton had risen, had raised his hand. The juniors had forgotten the presence of the Form-master for a moment. The uproar died away. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's voice was heard, chirruping with triumph.

"I've bowled the boundah out! It's all wight, Tom Mewwy." Tom Merry, with a shining, newly-scrubbed face, had come in after D'Arcy. "It's all wight! Buzzle's comin'."

"Buzzle coming!" exclaimed Tom. "But he 'phoned——"

"He didn't 'phone!"

"What?"

"You see, it was a twick, a wotten New House twick!" explained Arthur Augustus, while Figgins grinned and gasped for breath. "You are awah that I have just been down to my tailah's. As I came out I actually wan into Mr. Buzzle, and, undah the circs, bein' surpwised to see him, I asked him if his cold was gone, and he weplied that he hadn't had a cold."

"Great Scott!"

"So I asked him why he wasn't comin' to give the performance, and he weplied that he had been 'phoned fwom the school by Tom Mewwy——"

"By me!" roared Tom Merry.

"Yaas; to tell him that the performance couldn't be given, as Mr. Figgins wouldn't allow it!"

"Mr. Figgins!" gasped Tom.

"Yaas, wathah! He supposed that Mr. Figgins was one of the mastahs."

"M-m-my hat!"

"So I knew at once it was a New House jape, and that the substitute would be some New House boundah!" said Arthur Augustus. "So I wan back heah—I wan like anythin'—and Professah Buzzle is followin'. I explained to him that it was a wotten jape, and that he was to come all the same."

Tom Merry slapped the swell of St. Jim's on the back.

"Good old Gussy!"

"Ow! Pway don't bweak my beastly backbone, deah boy. It's all wight. Pwofessah Buzzle will be heah in a few minutes. He's comin' in a cab. He only wushed off to get his bag," said D'Arcy.

"Hurray!"

"You—you unspeakable bounder, Figgins!" said Tom Merry. "So this was one of your little japes, was it?"

Figgins chuckled.

"Yes; and it would have worked like a charm if that silly ass hadn't gone to his silly tailor's, and run into that silly conjurer by a silly accident."

"Will some silly ass get a knife and let me loose?" came in a sulphurous voice from Jack Blake, who had been forgotten in the excitement, and who was still writhing in the bonds placed upon his limbs by the pretended conjurer.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"By Jove, Blake, deah boy!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus, turning his eyeglass upon his wriggling chum. "What are you doin' that for?"

"Fathead! It was Figgins. I'll thump him pink and green when I get loose!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"This is—is most extraordinary!" exclaimed Mr. Linton, who was frowning. "Figgins, this action on your part is most reprehensible——"

"Oh, sir, it's all right!" exclaimed Tom Merry hastily. "It was only a joke, sir. Clear off, Figgy, you ass!" he added, under his breath; and Figgins took the hint and promptly disappeared.

Mr. Linton, whose sense of humour was limited, might have been inclined to pursue the matter further, but just then Professor Buzzle arrived, and the audience resumed their seats, and the professor took the stage.

So Mr. Linton sat down.

Professor Buzzle's entertainment passed off very well, and Tom Merry and Blake both recovered their good humour, and felt that they could forgive Figgins. Figgins, divested of his disguise, and in his own proper person, came in a little later, paying his sixpence at the door like the rest of the audience. And Figgins, in spite of the fiasco of his own scheme, generously applauded every turn on the programme afterwards. Professor Buzzle retired amid a storm of applause, though he had not caused so much laughter as his extra ordinary substitute during Mr. Bulger's short innings.

The entertainment, as was admitted on all hands, was a great success. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had saved the situation—by accident, it is true—but still he had saved it. And the School House fellows, in recognition of the fact, encored D'Arcy's turn, and the swell of St. Jim's gave a second solo with great effect, feeling that the St. Jim's fellows were developing a "yah" for music at last.

And so the celebration of Mr. Linton's birthday turned out, after all, a triumph for Tom Merry & Co., and Figgins & Co. had to admit that their counter-scheme was No Go!

(Another grand, long, complete tale of Tom Merry & Co. next Wednesday, entitled "THE NEW CAPTAIN," by Martin Clifford. Please order your GEM Library in advance. Price One Penny.)

SECRET SERVICE!

The Opening Chapters of a Grand New Serial Story. By AGENT "No. 55."

NOTE! **The author has, for obvious reasons, to conceal his real identity under the pen-name of Agent "No. 55." Concerning his position, I am allowed to say no more than this: that if his real name were revealed it would cause something like consternation in Diplomatic and Secret Service circles.**

THE EDITOR.

THE FIRST INSTALMENTS.

Jerry Osborne, a young Britisher who is employed as a clerk in London by a German named Muller, goes to Berlin on a holiday, and there meets with an adventure which alters the course of his whole life. Chance throws him into the company of Max Elton, a famous British airman and inventor, who has established himself on the German coast in order to keep an eye on the secret preparations for war with Britain, which Germany is carrying on on a huge scale. Osborne joins Elton in his work, and learns that the airman is in danger of his life from German Secret Service agents, of whom Jerry's own employer, Muller, is the chief.

The two become fast friends, and go through many adventures together, finally coming back to England, where Elton becomes one of the advisers of the Cabinet. Various disasters happen to English arsenals and dockyards, but still no suspicion is breathed against Germany.

One night the motor-car of the Foreign Secretary, Sir Edmund Black, with Elton at the wheel, is waylaid on a lonely coast-road by Muller's emissaries, but after a sharp fight the Germans are beaten off. Meanwhile, Jerry, lurking in the neighbourhood, has seen Muller arrive by aeroplane, which he abandons on the marshes. Jerry disables the 'plane, and then, with Elton, goes in chase of Muller.

They stumble across Muller's discarded airman's outfit, which Elton dons. Then a whistle warns them that someone else is approaching. Elton, impersonating Muller in the darkness, goes to meet the new-comer, who is none other than the German ambassador. Elton receives a packet of secret papers, and when the ambassador at length becomes suspicious, bolts off into the darkness with Jerry. They gain the inn where they are staying, and proceed to examine the papers, which are in cipher. Elton, however, reads their secret, which proves to be a message to the German Government of momentous importance. While Elton and Jerry are discussing this discovery, the Germans quietly surround the inn.

(Now go on with the story.)

Jerry's Discovery!

"A stroke of luck, old fellow!" replied Elton, smiling at the frank and enthusiastic admiration of Jerry. "I happen to know this system cipher, but the credit of the business is just as much yours as mine, coming to that. But for your assistance I shouldn't have had the opportunity of solving the cryptogram. But you and I, Jerry"—and here Elton stood up, one hand on his friend's shoulder—"don't need to worry about the credit or to whom it it due. We're working for our country, not for our own profit or honour. Neither you nor I had a thought how much we are going to make out of this night's work; it's Old England's advantage that is our thought."

He held out his hand, and Jerry gripped it, saying:

"And the quicker we set to work to obtain that advantage the better, eh?"

"You're right, Jerry. This communication has to be with the Premier or Sir Edmund Black without any delay. The Cabinet will get a nasty shock to learn how thoroughly the Germans are acquainted with what must be their most confidential intentions. I'd give half the money I own to know how Von Krantstein obtained his information. Must be a traitor somewhere. Good heavens, Jerry! Think what it would mean if Muller had carried off this message to-night to Berlin. Here we're in the first week of May; in a fortnight's time the invasion of England would be ready to take effect, and ourselves ignorant and unprepared. Great Scott, it makes me cold even to think of it!"

"We must lose no time in conveying our knowledge to London," said Jerry. "Think we ought to go at once—one or both of us slip away now, not waiting until morning."

"Honestly, I don't like the idea of holding the responsibility of the secret for an hour longer than is necessary!"

"How can we do it?" Jerry looked at his watch. "A quarter past midnight. I say, isn't there an early morning train from Colchester?"

While he was speaking he had dug out a Great Eastern time-table, and was hastily turning over the pages.

"Here you are, Max!" he cried. "Train at 1.44—does the journey in a little over a couple of hours!"

"And the ten or eleven miles from here to Colchester?" asked Elton.

"Can't walk it. But we could run. Eleven miles in an hour and a half—I should think we're good for that!"

"Might be, though I'm nothing great as a distance runner. But if both go—in case of accidents, you know—yes, Jerry, I think that's the best for us. Wished we'd a motor—even a bike!"

"Or one of your flying machines!" And Jerry laughed. The excitement was telling on him.

"Ah, well; let's get ready!"

And then, although there was no reason for doing so, Jerry walked to the window, and, drawing back the curtain, looked out.

Suddenly, and without haste—hours seemed to have passed, but in reality he had not been looking through the glass twenty seconds—he turned away from the window. Elton, engaged in lacing a pair of light shoes, for which he had exchanged his thick boots, glanced at him, and suspended the lacing.

"What's the matter, Jerry?" he asked, with sudden concern. "Ill?"

"There was a queer expression on Jerry's face, one such as Elton had never before seen.

"There are men outside," Jerry replied, oddly calm. "One of them is Muller. I caught the moonlight on his face!"

"Muller!"

There was silence in the bed-room.

Elton's Peril.

A door at the rear of the inn opened softly, and a man, cat-footed, crossed swiftly to a blurred range of outbuildings twenty feet distant. Without noise he swung open a door behind which, in darkness barely relieved by a poor lantern, some seven or eight men were dimly visible. Two of these came forward quickly.

"Well?" asked one quickly, the bigger man, wearing a long, thick overcoat.

"Both of them are there," replied the new-comer, the well-spoken helper about the stable.

"What are they doing?"

"There are papers on the table. They seem busy, herr. I saw a wrapper lying open."

Count Friedrich von Krantstein uttered a stifled exclamation. A fourth man joined the little group.

"Herr," he said, in a low voice hurriedly, "what if the packet be opened? They cannot read it."

"Blitzen! Who can say that?" was the furious rejoinder.

"The cipher is not one that they can possibly know," murmured the secretary.

"But one who can read it may be found, Muller."

"Your Excellency?" And the spy came eagerly forward.

"The two men in the gasthof—the inn yonder—must not leave it alive!" cried Von Krantstein impressively. "The packet must be taken from them at all costs—at any sacrifice! You understand me? The safety of our country demands it! Whatever happens—whatever is done, the despatch must be returned to me. You have friends here; set to work at once! At once! You hear me?"

"Ja, Herr Graf! And with great pleasure!" Muller answered. "But it will not be easy. This Herr Elton I have known before—he is no easy man to circumvent. Once—O weh!—I thought I had him safe from further mischief, and the one with him, this junker Osborne. It will not be easy!"

"Easy or not, it must be done!" said the ambassador imperiously. "Before I go from here the stolen packet—ach, Himmel!—must be in my hand!"

For a while Muller stood in deep thought; then he beckoned to Carl—to which name the fresh-faced young man answered—and spoke to him earnestly in low tones, Von Krantstein, his face livid, and lips working, walking feverishly to and fro, glancing at them from time to time. Ruin and disgrace were assured did those cipher-covered sheets leave the inn in the possession of either of the two Englishmen; but to do him justice, it was of his country's loss that the ambassador was thinking most.

Presently Carl hurried from the barn, and Muller came towards the count.

"It will be all right, Herr Graf," he said. "These men cannot escape; and in but a little while you will have the so much desired papers stolen from you, Germany will have made helpless two of her most deadly and treacherous enemies, and I will have found my long-sought revenge. Potztausend, it is for those who laugh last to laugh the longest, and that is ourselves."

"And the others—the people of the house?" asked the secretary.

"They will not trouble, herr. The man and his wife, no more, and we are ten men. And when all is done we leave here quickly. The game, herr, is in our hands. Hallo, you!"

The other men hurried from where they had been idly whispering, and to them Muller gave his directions quickly. Then all made haste into the yard, where it was seen that Carl had already found and brought a couple of rough, strong ladders.

"We take them so easily, Excellency," said Muller, in a low voice of triumph. "There are two windows to their room, one at each end. We put up our ladders and break in. We summon them to surrender. If they refuse, we shoot! And then you take your letter. They can get no help!"

"But if they have already gone?"

"They have not; the doors have been watched."

And then the ladders were taken and set up against the windows of the bed-room, and men, well armed, made ready to mount.

It was a minute or so before this that Jerry had caught sight of Muller. When the men on the ladders drew level with the window-sills, it was to find that both windows had been barricaded. Those within meant fighting. But their chance was a poor one, and they had recognised as much.

Elton broke the silence following upon Jerry's discovery.

"We're in a tight corner," he said.

"And will have to get out. We've been in them before."

"For how long can we hold this place? Not long enough against men who mean business, and Muller will have several at the back of him. It may be he and Von Krantstein have met; if so, Von Krantstein will stick at nothing to get back his despatch. He cannot afford otherwise. Jerry, it'll be one of us will get out of this corner—God willing!"

"What d'you mean?" asked Jerry, in wonder.

"And that one must be you!" went on Elton. "Both of us can't slip out, and I have doubts of my running, anyway. Besides, to gain time is precious. It's you to go, Jerry!"

"And take the cipher with me?" said Jerry, after a moment's silence.

The idea of leaving Elton alone to face the danger was hateful, but he could see the importance of the intercepted packet.

"No," said Elton, smiling oddly. "You'll leave the cipher here!"

And then he spoke for a few seconds in whispers.

Three minutes later, the man at the top of one of the ladders hurriedly descended and reported to Muller that the obstruction at the back of the window he had forced open was too stout to be shoved aside.

No wonder. Elton had placed against it the heavy wooden bedstead turned on end, and reinforced it by every article of furniture in the room.

Against the second window was only a mattress, and when Muller's man had thrown up the unfastened frame and pushed aside the obstruction, it was to find himself covered by a pistol held by Elton.

"Don't move or I shoot!" the Britisher said calmly, and the German took care to obey. Stupidly he stared at the threatening circle of steel. "You're only one of the underlings," went on Elton. "Go down and tell your master I will parley with him!"

The man backed down quickly, reported, some whispering took place, and then Muller advanced to the foot of the ladder. Elton could see him distinctly.

"Will you surrender?" said the German.

"I want an explanation of this extraordinary attack."

"Extraordinary!" Muller laughed, as though pleased. "Mr. Max Elton, be so good as to understand that ignorance will not serve you. You are known. You do know me?"

"The German spy I have been hunting."

"And you the Britisher I promised should be dead before last November. Well, luck has favoured you so far. Now it is my turn. You are a too dangerous man, Herr Elton, for my comfort, and this time there will be no mistake. You have thwarted me, driven me away, but now it is I that holds the trump cards."

To and fro they talked, the German exultant, Elton with calm defiance. And then Count Von Krantstein impatiently came to the ladder-foot.

"Is it you who stole that which was not intended for you?" he cried furiously. "And though you have to be killed, I will have the letter back again!"

"You would commit murder, Count Von Krantstein?"

"Ach! Then you know me?"

"I have had the honour of meeting you, count. At the King's levee in August last was the last occasion."

"Ach!" ejaculated the count significantly.

"And I warn you that this is a dangerous game you are playing," Elton said earnestly. "I will defend myself to the last extremity. The law——"

Down went Bolsover major at last, battered, beaten, and breathless; licked as thoroughly as any fellow had ever been licked. Then Esmond—the Funk!—picked up a ruler, whirled Bolsover over on the floor, and proceeded to whack the bully with all his remaining strength. "Ow! I give in!" roared Bolsover. (*For this exciting incident, see the grand long complete tale of Harry Wharton & Co., entitled: "The White Feather," in this week's issue of "THE MAGNET" Library. Now on sale. Price One Penny.*)

"Pfui! For the law I care nothing! But the packet you stole—"

"If you want it, you must come and take it!" said Elton resolutely.

They showed they meant to do so. There was a brisk exchange of shots. Men climbed upon adjoining outhouses in the hope of sending a disabling shot into the bed-room.

For such a sure shot as Elton, he made poor shooting. Though he fired much, he failed to make a single hit. The innkeeper and his wife, awakened by the surprising uproar, found themselves locked in their bed-room—Carl's work—and helpless, afraid and amazed by the extraordinary proceedings.

It was a stubborn, if bloodless, defence Elton made, and the anxiety and impatience Von Krantstein felt increased until he was beside himself.

Not until over an hour had passed did it occur to Muller that the bed-room had a door that could be broken down. Five men entered the inn, and began an assault on this defence.

Elton did his best to defend door and window, but a simultaneous attack found the door broken down and the defender covered front and rear with revolvers.

"I surrender!" he said, and dropped his own weapon on the floor.

And then Muller's voice rang out loudly.

"Where's the other? Where's Osborne? I know he was here with you!"

"Oh, he didn't like the shooting, and thought it best to clear out!" replied Elton indifferently.

Muller looked sceptical, and gave prompt orders to two of his men, who at once left to make a thorough search of the house, for he believed it impossible Osborne could have got away without detection. But he demanded of Elton when and how his companion had disappeared.

"About an hour ago, I should say," replied Elton, speaking like a very tired man. "How he got away I don't know. He went from the room, telling me he meant escaping somehow."

"And why didn't you try to follow him?"

"I was afraid you'd get me. I thought I was safer here!"

"Ach, and so it would appear!" the German jeered. "He thought he could keep us from getting in," he said in German to his companions. And then an angry oath escaped him as he realised the possible consequences of Jerry's escape. "Where has he gone?"

"As though I could inform you," Elton answered, dropping into a chair.

While they had been talking, Von Krantstein had entered the room. The table, with its litter of papers, had at once caught his eye, and, careless of all else, he had rushed to it for a hasty examination.

A cry of expressive joy suddenly broke from him, and he turned to the secretary, who had followed him into the room.

"Lieber Gott! It is here! It is safe!" he cried.

And he held up the three sheets of paper covered by the cipher message.

"Heaven be thanked!"

"And look you, look at the table!" the count cried excitedly. "The papers with these attempts at deciphering. The Englander has tried to read it, but has failed!"

"That is so," agreed the secretary, who had been closely scrutinising the slips of paper covered with fragmentary words and hundreds of separate letters. "This Elton is not clever enough, sir. There has been no harm done."

The papers so clearly showed that attempts made to decipher the cryptogram had been ineffective that the officials had no doubt in the matter. There was nothing to indicate that the work of solving the riddle of the message that the attack on the bed-room had so obviously interrupted had even approached success. Count Von Krantstein and his secretary drew a long breath of relief. They were as men from whose minds the weight of a crushing fear has been removed.

When Muller came to inform the count that one of the Britishers had succeeded in escaping, the latter received the news with indifference.

"It is a little thing," he replied carelessly. "The message is here. It has not been read. That is sufficient. The rest——"

He waved one hand, as though dismissing the matter.

But he could not deny himself the satisfaction of walking across to where sat Elton, and, smiling ironically, condole with him for his wasted time.

"So much trouble for nothing, Herr Elton. We know of you as a clever man—a too clever one, if all that is said of you be true. But it seems there are even limits to your powers."

"Count, it is not given to a man to know everything!" replied Elton. "The shrewdest have their limitations. And now, may I inquire what is to be done with me, now that your Excellency has obtained what you wanted?"

"That you will learn. But we of the German Empire have so great interest in you, Herr Elton, that the opportunity of cultivating your close acquaintance must not, I think, be wasted."

"In other words, count, you mean I am to remain a prisoner?"

"In my country, herr; yours would be hardly safe."

Elton shrugged his shoulders as a man who resigns himself to the inevitable. Von Krantstein left the prisoner, and Muller went to speak to him.

"I offer you my advice, Herr Elton," he said warningly. "You are leaving here with us. A trip to Germany may be necessary, and for your own sake I advise you to attempt no escape. In Germany we would wish to keep you alive, for you are a clever man; but I assure you as a German that you will be more useful to my country dead than once more free in England."

Elton said nothing. With him his country stood before all, and he was not one to whine because the consequences of the sacrifice he had chosen to make for his country were likely to be disagreeable.

On Board the Waterfly.

Four thousand feet in the air, above the chain of islands that lies beyond the northern coast of Holland, the Waterfly was flying in long, sweeping curves. In the pilot's seat was Jerry Osborne, and with his powerful Zeiss glasses he continually swept the western sky and the flattened, grey expanse of ocean beneath.

"Will they come? Oh, I wonder if they'll come?" he muttered to himself for the fiftieth time.

Hope deferred was making his heart sick.

Dropping the strap-suspended glasses, he reached out his hand towards a lever and pulled gently. There was a louder hum from the buzzing engines, and under the guidance of the steering-wheel the hydro-aeroplane swung round as though on a pivot, and shot off at a good ninety miles an hour in a northernly direction. Presently Jerry moved another handle, the forepart of the structure tilted, and the Waterfly glided down to a thousand feet lower, at which altitude Jerry checked her, and continued his course.

For the past three hours had Jerry been thus engaged, patrolling the line that, somewhere or other, must be crossed by an aircraft flying from England to Germany.

He was alone, but his confidence was unshakable. Only four hours' tuition under Max Elton had he had in driving the Waterfly, but she was as easy to handle and guide as a perambulator, thanks to the marvellous simplicity of construction, and the placing and action of the controls. Eighty miles on the water, and one hundred and twenty miles an hour in the air, were easily possible, with the wonderful engines, four hundred horse-power, yet incredibly light of weight, that Elton had designed.

"Surely they will come this way—they must!" Jerry again told himself after further use of the glasses five minutes later. "They dare not try to keep Elton in England, so they must bring him with them; and they'll have moved heaven and earth to get their precious message to Berlin without further delay. But this waiting and uncertainty is awful."

Jerry was feeling worried, and looked it. He was also tired, but that he hadn't realised, and wouldn't have admitted. Never had he passed through such a period of stress, mental and physical, as the past twelve hours.

Days seemed to have passed since he had shaken Elton's hand, and, gaining the inn-roof by a trapdoor, had jumped to the ground on the further side of the inn from where Von Krantstein, Muller, and their followers were gathered. Then had come the eleven-mile race against time to catch the train at Colchester Station. And during the two hours' run excitement had prevented him from sleeping.

From Liverpool Street Station a belated taxi-driver had taken him to the Downing Street residence of Sir Edmund Black. The Foreign Secretary, but recently returned home himself, had been astonished to learn who it was that demanded to see him without any delay. He had been still more amazed when he received the translation Elton had made of the cipher despatch from the German Ambassador. Yet his face had hardly moved a muscle, and his first words concerned Max Elton.

"So Elton is a prisoner? Now, Osborne, tell me what I can do to release him. Make any suggestion you please, and I will use my authority to see that it is carried out. Mr. Elton is a national asset England cannot afford to lose, and is unable to replace."

"The Germans know that, sir, as well as we do!" Jerry replied. "If you were to send a special force at once to the inn, neither Elton nor his captors would be found there. They'll take him across to Germany, and they'll lose no time."

"A fast cruiser——"

"They will hardly go by sea!"

"What, then, do you wish?"

"An airship that will take me at once to Haisbro', sir. Mr. Elton's Waterfly is there, and with her I think I can do something. Please God, I may be in time; and whether in the air, or on the sea, the Waterfly should be a match for Muller."

"You shall have it."

And Sir Edmund Black went himself with Jerry to the Government aerodrome at Wormwood Scrubs; the swiftest flyer was requisitioned, and by seven o'clock in the morning Jerry was at the private hangar on the Norfolk coast where a month before Elton had left the Waterfly to undergo some trifling repair.

Alone, he had started to intercept those whom he felt sure had been straining every nerve during the past few hours to devise a means for taking Elton to Germany.

And for three hours he had been waiting in vain to sight an east-speeding 'plane.

To the extremity of the island chain Jerry flew, hope growing fainter and still more faint. Once more he turned about, flying slowly. Suddenly he sat upright in his seat.

"Oh, by George! Why didn't I think of it before? Of course that's the way they'll take. What a fool I've been!" he cried aloud.

The German occupation of the Zuyder Zee had just occurred to him. To fly across the Zee was the shortest route to Berlin from England. And he had been wasting time too far north!

And then the Waterfly really began to move, the engines working at their utmost speed. Past the last of the islands he drove furiously, and then checked his speed to a gentle twenty miles an hour as he went down the coast, dropping so low that through his glasses he could easily make out the long, straight dyke-road along which he had pedalled so madly to reach Elton's house in time. The coincidence appealed to him.

At Hook of Holland he turned about, having seen nothing,

the Waterfly tilted, and he rose to two thousand feet. The glasses were now continuously at his eyes.

All at once a trembling seized him, and, snatching out his handkerchief, he rubbed at the lenses. He was not skilled airman enough to be able to judge heights, and the speck the Zeiss had revealed might be a seabird on the wing or an aeroplane. Turning almost at a right angle, he flew towards the speck.

Five minutes told him the truth; the moving speck had grown into an easily-distinguished flying-machine. Another two minutes, and he was aware the 'plane held three men. Then he flew directly towards it, dropping to reach the same level.

"Hurrah! Not too late after all!" he shouted.

Muller was the man in the pilot's seat, a stiff, rigidly-set figure in a larger seat was that of Max Elton, and sitting beside him was a man whom Jerry did not recognise.

Muller's 'plane was of large size, and of the open box-like body design long since abandoned by aerial engineers, with the motor behind the pilot, who was perched in the centre. No doubt Muller had had to be content with the machine easiest to be obtained. And Jerry had learned sufficient of flying matters to recognise the gyroscopic attachment that guaranteed stability in face of any accident.

Full towards Muller's 'plane Jerry drove. Compared with the Waterfly, the speed of the other was a joke; Elton's machine could have made literal rings round her and disabled her in an instant. For the Waterfly was no toy. Forward of the pilot's seat was shipped a light gun, and without moving from his position Jerry could have loaded and fired her, discharging a shot or shell that would have crumpled up Muller's 'plane like a house of cards.

But with Max Elton a helpless occupant, this was the very last thing Jerry desired to do. Whatever happened, Elton's life had not to be endangered. And that this was in Jerry's mind Muller very quickly appeared to realise.

"Surrender!" yelled Jerry across the intervening space, bringing the Waterfly racing alongside. "Stop!"

Muller looked up, laughed, and shook his head.

"No, no; I stop in Berlin!" he shouted back. "I have my passport all right!" And he jerked a thumb towards Elton, whom Jerry now saw to be firmly strapped to the framework of his seat.

"Stop you somehow!" growled Jerry to himself.

And he began to manœuvre in front of and above the German's 'plane, forcing her out of her course, and by the fear of a collision, driving her downward.

It was as though a forty-knot motor-launch were darting around a four-knot clumsy barge. Here and there swept the Waterfly, up and down, curving and circling, swooping and stabbing, feinting direct attacks that Muller clumsily tried to evade but dared not meet. Not only was his prisoner to be safely kept, but Count von Krantstein's despatch to be conveyed in safety. Whatever happened, that was not to be risked. The superiority of his adversary's 'plane he had quickly realised, and he did not dare to imperil the important issues hanging to his safe crossing, to risk his own craft on the chance of destroying Osborne's.

The result was that, headed off, he was compelled to fly back. Over his shoulder he called to the man beside Elton.

"The next time that plane comes within range, Kurt, put a bullet through the fellow," he directed.

"Ja Herr." And the man took from his pocket an automatic magazine-pistol.

He did not have to wait long for the chance of using it. Back came the Waterfly, almost brushing the front balancing-planes and forcing Muller to drop twenty feet. Almost immediately Kurt opened fire, but the bullets went wide, whistling through the Waterfly's stays but doing no damage.

"The gun, Jerry!" yelled Elton suddenly. "Never mind me!"

Jerry heard all right, and he had not forgotten the gun, but meant using it only in the last extremity. Slowly but surely he was driving Muller downwards, and when she was near enough to the sea he meant disabling his craft.

"The gun!" yelled Elton as his friend swept past.

"Still!" growled the man beside him, with a threatening movement of the pistol.

With the tail of his eye Jerry caught the motion, and, swinging the Waterfly in a wide semi-circle, he made up his mind to something that he had hoped to avoid. Rather than permit Elton to escape, Muller was ready to kill him, and to prevent that Jerry would shrink from nothing. To Elton he already owed his life. Elton, by remaining at the inn and holding the attention of the attackers, had made possible his escape. For Elton's sake he would not hesitate.

(This grand serial will be continued in next week's issue of The GEM Library. Order NOW.)

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SOMETHING FOR EVERYBODY.

"Wonderful things, ain't they?" Jim remarked to his pal, while glancing at his morning paper. "Something for everybody, in fact. What with racing, stories, and cookery hints, what more could one wish for?"

"You're right," agreed Bill, being rather interested. "But what's this 'ere blank column doing here?" he asked, pointing to the "Stop Press" news.

"Oh," remarked Bill, "that's for them that can't read."—Sent in by L. C. Fowler, Bedford.

BUSINESS IS BUSINESS.

Magistrate: "How did you manage to extract this man's watch from his pocket, when it was provided with a safety-catch?"

Prisoner: "Excuse me, sir, that's a professional secret; but I am willing to teach you, however, for two guineas."—Sent in by J. W. Macgowan, Edinburgh.

HE KNEW ONE.

[illegible]mar lesson was in full swing, and the teacher was [illegible]g the meaning of adjectives.

"[illegible] adjectives," he said, "are made from nouns, such [illegible]rous, meaning full of danger; and hazardous—full of [illegible]. Can any boy give me another example?"

"Yes sir," answered a fat boy at the end of the form. "[illegible] full of pie."—Sent in by W. Wilson, Dundee.

BAD POLICY.

[illegible]er: "Waiter, this is the first time I have really had a tender steak here, I must say!"

Waiter (aghast): "Good gracious, sir! I must have given you the proprietor's portion by mistake!"—Sent in by C. Wood, Sussex.

BETTER VALUE.

"How much for the puppies, laddie?" asked an old gentleman of a small boy.

"One's 'arf-a-crown, sir, and t'other's three bob."

"Oh! And why is one sixpence more than the other?" the old man queried, appearing rather surprised.

"'Cos 'e 'as jest swallowed a tanner!" the youngster replied.—Sent in by Alfred Harris, Bradford.

KNEW HIM TOO WELL.

William Thomas Judd had got on in the world. He was worth a million pounds, and could call streets his own. One day he took it into his head to visit the little village where he was born.

Tears welled into his eyes as he gazed upon the little red-bricked schoolhouse, the little church where he was [illegible]ened, the pump where he used to draw water for his [illegible]. But there was not [illegible] familiar face amongst the passers-by.

Suddenly he felt a tap on the back, and, glancing round, found himself face to face with one of the oldest inhabitants.

"Why, Bill Judd! I knew ye the minute I set my eyes on ye," said the new-comer. "Do ye recall the time I trusted your father with a codfish in 1883? 'Cos, if ye've got the money handy, I'd be obliged if ye'd settle for it!"—Sent in by F. Wyburn, Southfields, S.W.

ALAS!

She took my hands in sheltered nooks;
She took my chocolates and my books;
She took my flowers without demur;
She took the gloves I sent to her.

She took my ring with tender smile;
She took my time for quite a while;
She took my kisses sweetly shy;
She took, I must confess, my eye;
She took my gifts whatever I'd send;
She took my rival in the end.

—Sent in by R. E. Kelly, Scarborough.

A FOWL JOKE.

"Dennis darlint—och, Dennis, what is it you're doing?"

"Whisht, Biddy! I'se trying an experiment."

"Murtha! What is it?"

"What is it, did ye say? Why, it is giving hot water to the chickens I am, so that they'll be afther laying boiled eggs!"—Sent in by C. B. Hughes, Whitkirk, near Leeds.

A MODERN HERO.

He draws his breath in quick, short gasps,
His brow is damp, his eyes are dim.
Close to his beating heart he clasps
The load which means so much to him.

Behind him his pursuers pound,
He hears their frenzied, furious cry;
He hurls himself upon the ground—
Vanquished? Oh, no!—He scored a try!

—Sent in by D. E. Frodin, Warwickshire.

HIS MARVELLOUS ROOSTER.

The talk had now turned to hens, when one of the company, wishing to have his say, said:

"Talking of hens! Why, it reminds me of an old friend of mine who had partaken of a farm out Dakota way, having an old hen that would hatch anything from a tennis-ball to a lemon. In fact, she sat on a piece of ice and hatched out two quarts of hot water!"

An Irishman, who had been listening attentively, spoke of the club-footed hen his old mother had.

"They had been feeding her on sawdust instead of the usual barley by mistake," he said, "with the result that she laid twelve eggs and sat on them, and when hatched eleven of the chickens had wooden legs, and the twelfth was a woodpecker!"—Sent in by Miss Walah, Cardiff.

TRY THESE.

Question: What is a button?

Answer: A small event that is always coming off.

Question: Why is a fishmonger never generous?

Answer: Because his business makes him selfish.

Question: Why is a good actor like an architect?

Answer: Because they both draw good houses.

Question: Why is a lover of "smokes" like a tallow candle?

Answer: Because he will smoke when he is going out.

Question: What is pronounced quicker by adding a syllable to it?

Answer: Quick.—Sent in by G. Gentin, S. Africa.

MONEY PRIZES OFFERED!

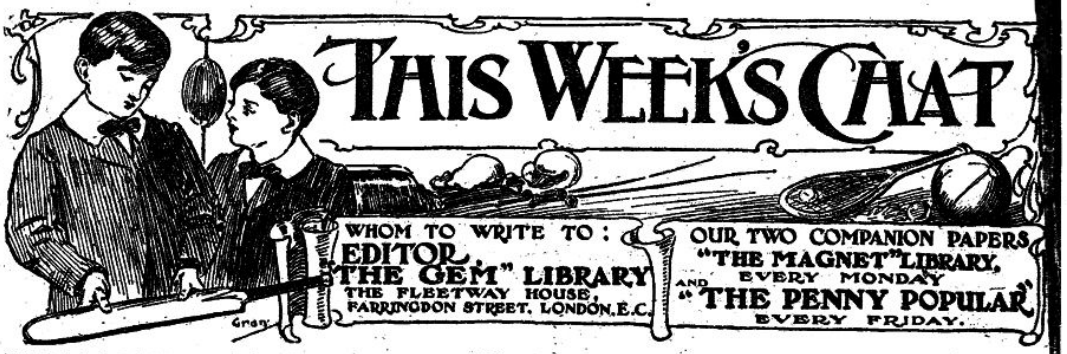
Readers are invited to send ON A POSTCARD Storyettes or Short, Interesting Paragraphs for this page. For every contribution used the senders will receive a Money Prize.

ALL POSTCARDS MUST BE ADDRESSED The Editor, "The Gem" Library, Gough House, Gough Square, Fleet Street, London, E.C.

THIS OFFER IS OPEN TO READERS IN ALL PARTS OF THE WORLD.

No correspondence can be entered into with regard to this Competition, and all contributions enclosed in letters, or sent in otherwise than on postcards, will be disregarded.

OUR SPECIAL WEEKLY FEATURE——



For Next Wednesday,

"THE NEW CAPTAIN!"
By Martin Clifford.

In this splendid long, complete tale of the chums of St. Jim's, a sensation is caused by the announcement that Kildare, the popular captain of the school, has had to pack his traps and hurry away, in response to an urgent telegram. Kildare is unable to say definitely how long his enforced absence will last; but it is obvious that a new captain will have to be elected by St. Jim's in the meantime. The old school, therefore, gives itself up to the excitement and bustle incidental to such an important election. The most peculiar feature of the contest is the absence of a really popular candidate. This makes the election a very uncertain affair up to almost the last moment. Then a bombshell is suddenly sprung upon the school—a popular candidate is discovered, duly proposed, and elected with acclamation.

Then is there great consternation and dismay in the ranks of the Upper School, for

"THE NEW CAPTAIN!"

is a junior!

MORE GOOD THINGS FOR MY CHUMS!

There are some good things coming in the four companion papers, so it behoves my chums to keep a sharp look-out, and not miss a single number of either "The Gem," "The Magnet," "The Penny Popular," or "Chuckles!" In next Monday's "Magnet," for instance, another grand serial by Sidney Drew, entitled:

"THE BLUE ORCHID,"

will commence. There is no need for me to enlarge upon the merits of famous Sidney Drew. As an author of adventure stories of the most thrilling and powerful type, he simply stands alone; and my chums may rest assured that in

"THE BLUE ORCHID"

I have secured the best example of his work that it has ever been my luck to read.

Then for "The Gem" Library I have in preparation a series of

SPECIAL ARTICLES ABOUT CANADA

by a man who went out a year or two ago as an ordinary emigrant, and wooed and won fortune in the great Far West. These articles are more than usually interesting, containing much first-hand information and sound advice, and will be a reliable guide to all who have any thoughts of emigration or are interested in Canada in any way; while the true tales of the author's actual experiences make fascinating reading for all. I will have more to say to my chums about these special articles shortly.

"The Penny Popular" has been increased in interest by the addition of an Editorial Chat column, entitled:

"BETWEEN OURSELVES,"

while this week's three complete stories are simply grand, and embrace every type of fiction—school, detective, and adventure as well. I have no hesitation in saying that our splendid Friday companion paper, the good old "Penny Pop," is now better than ever.

As for "Chuckles," our Saturday halfpenny companion, there is simply no stopping it—it is bounding ahead like a racehorse, and its popularity and circulation are increasing literally hourly! Such a success has exceeded my most sanguine anticipations, and can only be accounted for by the assumption that the splendid programme of funny pictures, bright colours, good jokes, and first-class stories have met with universal appreciation; in short, my chums and their friends, and the fiction-loving public generally, realise that for real, solid value in exchange for one halfpenny

"CHUCKLES" CANNOT BE BEATEN!

HOW TO TRAIN DOGS TO DO TRICKS.—No. 1.

There are two questions which a dog trainer always has to answer when he is being "interviewed" by a novice at dog keeping. "What sort of a dog should I have? How old should the dog be before I start to teach him?"

The choice of dog must depend entirely upon circumstances. One has to rule out big dogs, because they cannot be kept in a house; and if you want your dog to be thoroughly clever at tricks, he should be constantly with you. Then, again, if you want to give yourself the minimum amount of trouble with regard to the keeping of dogs, you will not have a long-haired dog, because their coats require constant attention, and in bad weather their coats get very muddy and bring mud into the house.

Thoroughbred or Mongrel?

Another consideration—shall it be a thoroughbred dog or a mongrel? Everybody will tell you that a mongrel is the cleverest of dogs. When people say that to me, I say, "Not necessarily." You might almost as well say that men with big noses are always the cleverest of men, and you could easily quote examples of men with big noses who are very clever. Similarly, people who tell you that mongrels are very clever also tell you that the highly-trained dogs you see on the music-hall stage are always mongrels. As a matter of fact, they are not; but if they were, the reason would not be far to seek. A man who is going to train a dog for the stage naturally does not want to spend more than he can help on experiments, and each dog is more or less of an experiment. Therefore, the trainer usually goes for the cheapest dog, which is a mongrel, and as long as it has a fairly presentable appearance he asks no questions as to its parentage. He likes a dog about six months old, with a good broad head. Some dogs learn before that age; some are of no use till they are about a year old.

To sum up, with regard to the choice of a dog, I should say: Don't be put off having a thoroughbred dog if you see one you like. On the other hand, you are just as likely to get a dog that will be good at learning tricks for a few shillings as you will for a few pounds. The poodle is popularly supposed to be the most intelligent of all dogs; but a thoroughbred poodle is not a very companionable dog. There is an old saying among fanciers that you can teach a poodle to do anything except love its master. A half-bred poodle, however, is generally a very intelligent and a very companionable dog.

(Next week: another special article on "How To Train Dogs To Do Tricks.")

Yours Editorially,

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