THE FOUR CONSPIRATORS!

A Magnificent Long, Complete Tale of St. Jim's versus The Grammar School.

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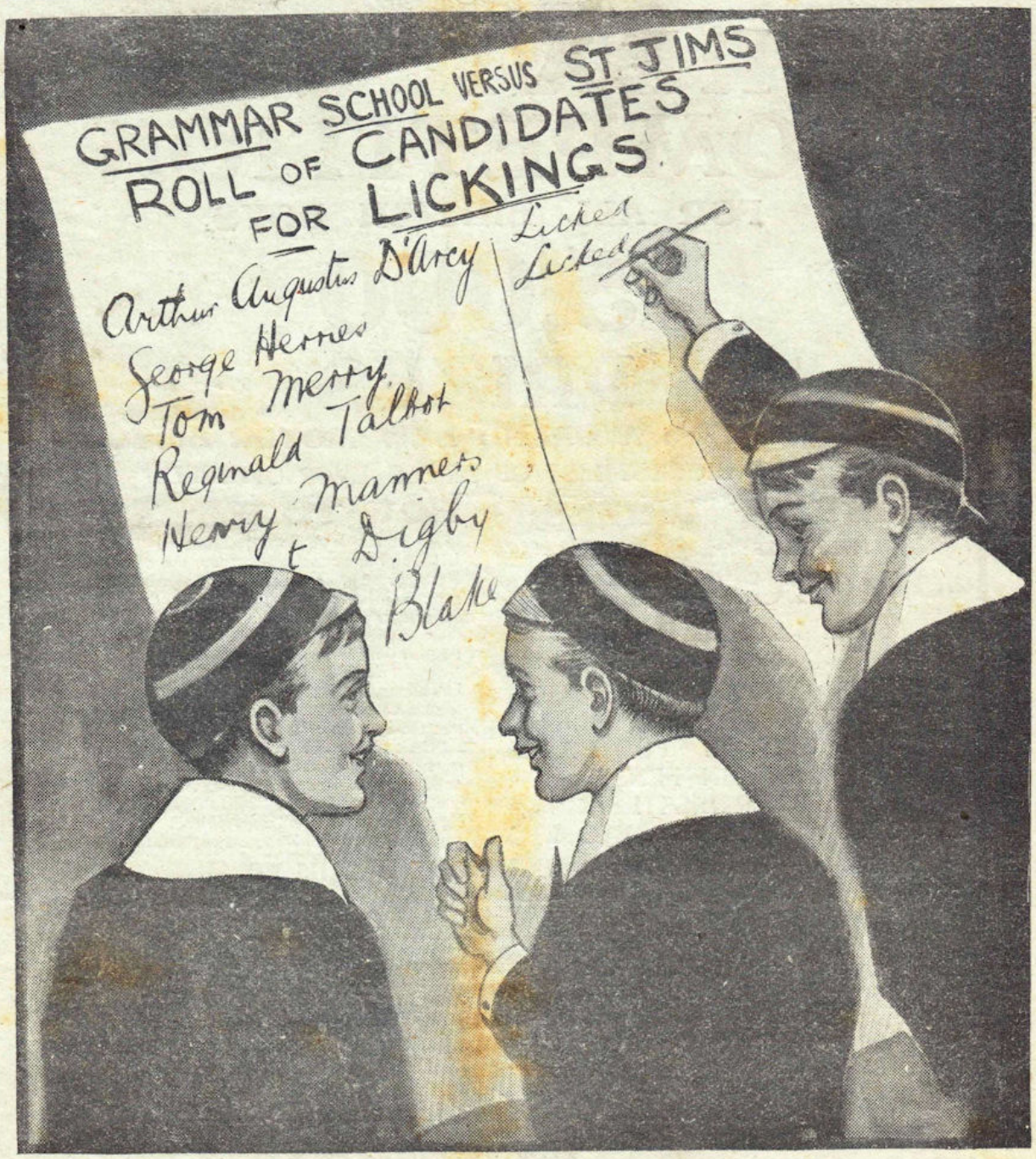

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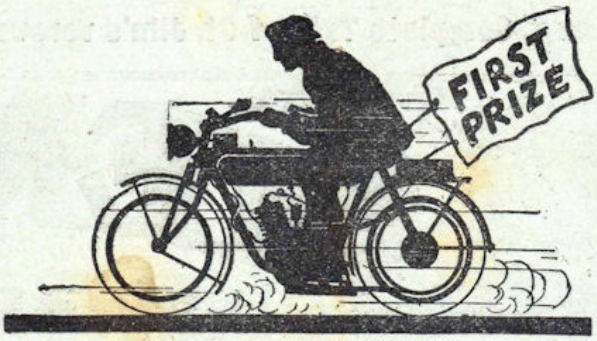

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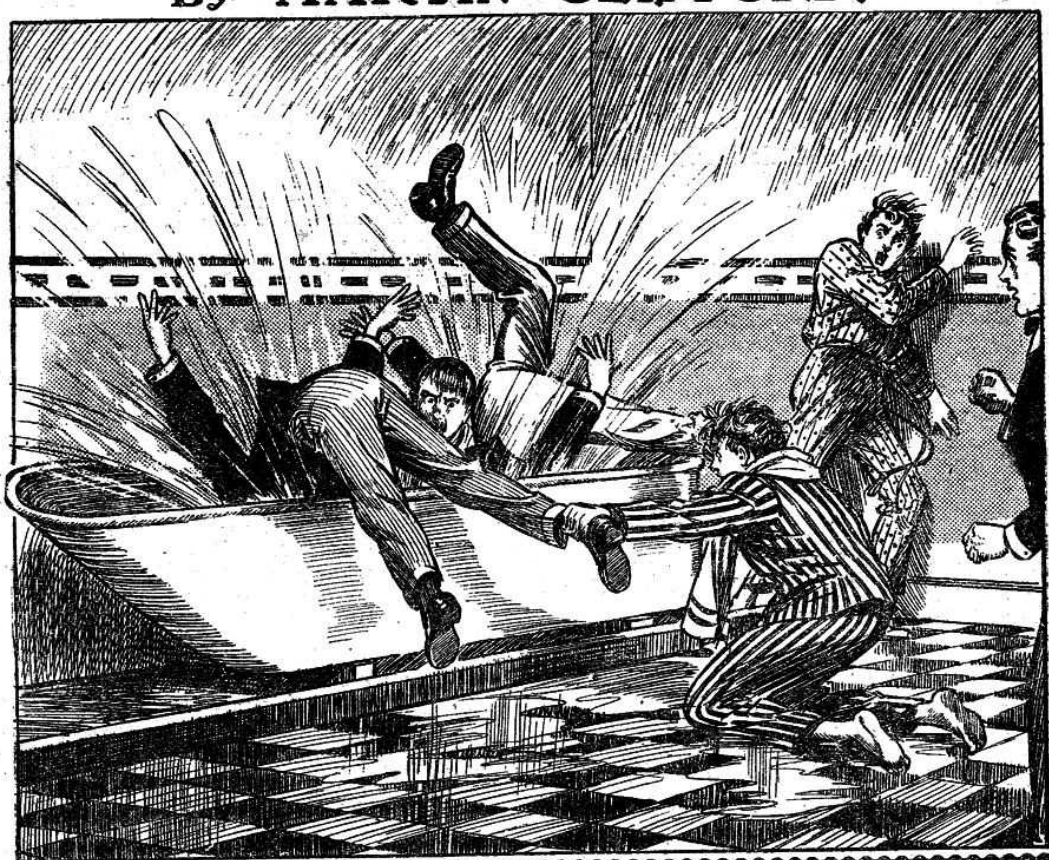
THE FOUR CONSPIRATORS!

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Story of Tom Merry & Co.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.



Herries and Digby were bending over Wootton minor. Carboy saw his chance, and caught Herries by the right leg and Digby by the left, and gave a mighty heave. They splashed into the bath on top of Wootton minor. (See Chapter 10.)

CHAPTER 1.
A Licking for D'Arcy.

"MY hat! Gussy's been in the wars!" said Tom Merry.

"Looks like it," replied Manners.

"Is it our one and only Gustavus? Or is it—— Dashed if I know what it is, if it isn't!"

"Don't twy to be funnay, Lowthah, please! It is not at all pwobable that you will make me laugh, but if you did it would hurt extwemely, I am shuah. It hurts me even to talk."

"I should think it would, with a face like that!" answered Tom Merry. "What's the matter, Gussy, old man? Somebody's been playing soldier's knock on your frontispiece, I can see. But why? Wherefore, oh, Gustavus? And if it was not done in fair fight, show us the miscreant, and we will annihilate him!"

The Terrible Three, on their way to Rylcombe through the wood, had met the Swell of the Fourth, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

No fellow at St. Jim's was more careful about his personal appearance than D'Arcy. To show himself in

Next Wednesday:
"AN AFFAIR OF STATE!" AND "THE CITY OF FLAME!"

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public otherwise than immaculate as to attire was to him a positive pain. It hurt him in his tenderest feelings.

Yet now his nicely-creased grey trousers were disfigured by green stains. His cherished monocle hung down his back instead of dangling in front. His collar and tie were fastened anyhow.

And his face!

His lips were swollen and puffy. Both eyes were in the first stages of a promising blackness. There was a big bruise on his forehead. And his right ear was at least twice its proper size.

It was not the custom at St. Jim's to make a fuss about hard knocks. But really Gussy looked a little too battered to be at all a fit subject for japing. And the more they looked at him the more sure they felt that he must have been put through it with great thoroughness.

He tried to smile as he answered, but the smile was distorted into a hideous grin by the state of his countenance.

"Thanks, Tom Mewwy," he said. "I'm vewy much obliged to you, I am shuah, but I am afwaid that in the circs nothing can be done."

"You mean you've been licked in fair fight, and there's an end of it?"

"Yaas. At least, I am not exactly shuah that theah is an end of it, because——"

"Going to tackle the chap again, Gussy? It's like your pluck, old man, but I don't think I should if I were you. He's evidently above your weight."

"I cannot agwee, Tom Mewwy. It may be that Wootton majah——"

"Oh, Wootton major, was it? I never thought of the Grammarians. I thought you'd been enjoying a scrap with one of the village louts."

"Queer taste Gussy's got if he enjoyed it," remarked Lowther. "It doesn't look, judging on results, as though it had been quite an enjoyable sort of thing."

"Great Scott, no!" agreed Manners.

"It may be that Wootton majah licked me," went on Arcy, taking no notice of their interruptions.

"May be! Well, unless his own face is at the back of his head, I should jolly well say it must be!"

"Well, then, Lowthah, I admit that Wootton majah did lick me. Theah is no disgwace in being beaten in fair fight, though it is vewy painful. But it does not follow that in the weturn match I may not be able to get even with Wootton majah. So this is not the end of it, I twust."

"Good old Gustavus!" said Tom Merry, slapping him on the back. "That's the spirit! Never say die! All the same, I think someone else should take a turn before you enter the arena again. What do you say, you fellows? There are plenty of us ready and willing if the Grams want that sort of thing."

"Me for one!" said Manners.

"Hear, hear!" chimed in Lowther. "I'm on. Show me them, Gussy. Give me a live Grammarian, and see me chaw him up!"

"What was it all about?" inquired the leader of the Terrible Three.

"Weally, I find it vewy difficult to say. I met them in the village—Gordon Gay, Monk, the two Woottons, Blanc, and a few othahs—and stopped to speak to them."

"Had to, I suppose?" queried Lowther. "Did they hold you upside-down while the conversation went on?"

"Don't be widic, Lowthah! I should not allow myself to be tweated in such an undignified mannah. But they got wound me so that I could not bweak away without looking funkay, and they said oppwobwious things about St. Jim's, and——"

"H'm!" said Tom Merry thoughtfully. "It's struck me lately that the Grammar School fellows have been spoiling for a row."

"If it struck you as hard as Wootton seems to have struck our Gussy, it must have hurt," grinned Lowther.

"They can have it if they want it," went on Tom Merry. "But I don't think this sort of thing is quite up to their mark. It wasn't fair to catch Gussy alone, and hammer the poor old ass into a jelly. And Wootton's more than a match for——"

"Wing off, Tom Mewwy, or I shall wefuse to wegard you as a fwiend! And pway do not accuse the Gwams of unfairness. The fight was quite fair. I offahed to administah a fwightful thwashing to the best man among them, and they put up Wootton majah!"

"He isn't their best man," said Manners. "There's Gay, Monk, Carboy."

"Seems to have been good enough for Gussy, anyhow," remarked Lowther.

D'Arcy used his handkerchief. Not to wipe his eyes, but to wipe his nose. He had to do it very gingerly, for his nose was horribly sore. Wootton major had not spared any feature of his classic countenance, it seemed.

"Drop it, you two!" said Tom Merry, who was disposed to take the matter more seriously than his chums. "The fight may have been fair enough, as a fight. I don't say it wasn't. In fact, I'm sure it was. But where the unfairness comes in is in collaring one of our fellows and forcing him——"

"Oh, Tom Mewwy! You are w'ong. I wasn't forced to fight. I offahed to take on——"

"Yes; but they egged you on first. They stirred your fiery blood until it boiled. We know what you are when your blood gets boiling, Gustavus. And then you had to fight without anybody to back you—see?"

"Monk was kind enough to offah to second me," said D'Arcy simply.

"And Wootton was kind enough to paste you till you were black and blue. There was a heap too much kindness about, I'm thinking. I don't care for it in such whacks as that."

"Look here, old man, what Tom means is that it would have been a bit cheerfuller for you if you'd had anybody by to yell for you—Blake and Dig and Herries, say—or even us three," explained Manners.

D'Arcy's swollen lips worked, and he blinked his eyes in a way that suggested the water was not far off them.

But if he was near to breaking down it was not because of the damage he had taken. It was the sympathy, genuine, though it might be roughly expressed, shown by the Terrible Three.

"I wouldn't wequiah bettah backahs than you thwee," D'Arcy said, his voice a trifle trembly. "Of course, Blake and Hewwies and Dig—— But, theah, you thwee are just as twue chums as they are, I'm shuah. It was a twifle wough. Evewybody wanted me to be licked, you know, and—and that makes a chap feel howwibly lonesome."

Tom Merry slipped an arm through one of his.

"Come along, old man," he said. "Let's go and see about repairs."

"But you were going to Wylcombe. I do not wish——"

"Is there any chance of catching the Grams if we go?" inquired Manners.

"No. I do not think so. They cleahed off aftah——"

"Then we'll come back with you," broke in Lowther.

D'Arcy was glad to have their company, and their sympathy made him feel better—in mind, at least.

"How was it you were down there alone?" asked Tom Merry.

"Blake and Hewwies and Dig were kept in, and I thought I might as well twot down and see if I could get a decent tie."

"But it wasn't a tie after all, but a licking," remarked Lowther, never able to resist the temptation to make a bad joke.

"And it wasn't decent, to my mind," said Tom Merry, without any intention of joking.

But D'Arcy refused to regard himself as a victim. The fight was perfectly fair, he protested, and next time he and Wootton major met the result might be reversed.

That seemed hardly likely. Arthur Augustus was not a specially clever boxer. His pluck was far in excess of his skill.

At the gates they met Blake and Herries and Digby, the three Fourth-Formers who shared a study with D'Arcy. The story had to be told all over again, of course.

"Cads!" snorted Herries.

"Rotters!" said Jack Blake.

"Hooligans!" was Digby's contribution.

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"Hold hard!" said Tom Merry. "That's making out the Grams to be all that. Now we know they're not. They are as decent as we are, though, of course, their show can't hold a candle to St. Jim's. There's one thing I'd like to know—whether this just happened by chance, or if they're starting a new plan of campaign."

"Gussy's a bit trying when he gets on the high horse," remarked Jack Blake, anxious to do justice to the rival crowd.

"He is—to a fellow who doesn't know him well. They do. They know his little ways. I'm inclined to think this was more or less of a put-up job. And I don't like it. I shall tell Gay so when I see him!" said Tom Merry.

"Then there'll be ructions," answered Lowther.

"I don't care. After this bizney I'd be rather glad to see whether I could wipe the floor with Gay."

"Monk's mine," said Jack Blake, with a far-away look in his eyes.

"Bags Carboy!" cried Manners.

"Bit above your weight, old man. I'd better take Carboy," said Herries.

"I like that. You mean that you reckon you're above my weight? Come to the gym and see."

"It's all right in the gym," said Tom Merry. "But this wasn't a glove-fight, or Gussy would never have been so mauled. Now, if you hate a fellow you'd better stand up to him with bare fists and have it out. Chances are you'll think a bit better of one another after it. But the bare fist bizney is a bit off in an affair like this. Gussy would fight as long as he could stand up, and they knew that."

"Tommy, old man, you're taking it very seriously," said Manners.

"I am. I'm not going to have it, that's flat!"

"Well, let's wait a bit, and see what they're after," replied Jack Blake.

CHAPTER 2.
The Second Victim.

THEY waited a bit. They had not to wait long. A watch was kept of fellows going down to Rylcombe alone.

Levison went. He was often alone, no one caring much to chum up with the cad of the Fourth.

Levison came back unmarked.

Of course, it might have happened that the Grammarians had failed to twig him. Tom Merry inquired about that.

"See any of the Gram crowd? Oh, yes!" said Levison. "Gay and half a dozen more of them were in the village."

"Did they say anything to you?"

"No. Why should they? What are you getting at? I don't take much notice of that gang, and they don't take much notice of me."

"They're not such asses as they look," answered Tom Merry, and left Levison wondering.

Gore went, and returned unscathed, though he admitted having passed several of the Grams.

"Either Gussy's case was just luck," said Tom Merry, "or else it isn't St. Jim's they've declared war on, but just our lot."

"You mean," answered Blake, "that they don't take any notice of outsiders like Levison and Gore?"

Tom Merry nodded.

"Look here, old man," said Talbot, "what's St. Jim's mean to the Grams? A couple of dozen or more fellows here who are more or less chummy with one another, and always ready to join together against them! Isn't that it? The seniors are outside their rivalry; the mere kids are beneath notice; it's just the Fourth and the Shell, and not all of them. Now I think it looks suspicious that they're continually hanging about the village."

"Yes, that's a bit off their usual line," remarked Manners thoughtfully.

"My hat, I believe you're right!" said Tom Merry. "We three and you, Talbot; the chaps in No. 6; Figgins, Wynn, Kerr, Redfern, Lumley-Lumley, Hammond, Glyn, Kangaroo—oh, we know the crowd that they're up against! Not Gore or Levison or Crooke, or any such rotters, because that isn't worth their while. Now, ought we to tip the wink to the New House bounders, or wait and see what happens if one of them toddles into Rylcombe on his lonesome?"

Opinions were divided. If there was to be another sacrifice, it was just as well the New House should supply it. So held the majority.

A minority was composed of the fellows who wanted to take on the risk themselves. Tom Merry, Talbot, Blake, and Herries, were those really keen to do this. Others were willing, and no one would have refused; but only the four named seemed at first specially keen.

"See here," said Manners, "this is all rot! Tom or old Talbot or Blake is jolly well a match for their best, and they know it. That only leaves Herries——"

"I'm as good as you, anyway!" snapped Herries.

"Don't say you're not. Perhaps as you're the one to go——"

"Who says I'm the one to go? Do you boss this show, Manners?"

"Oh, wing off, deah boys! Don't get watty with each othah!" pleaded Arthur Augustus.

"Of course, you're the one to go, Tom Merry and Blake and Talbot being out of the question," went on Manners.

"And the rest of you being funky!" snorted Herries.

"Rats! I'm no more funky than you are. I'll toss you to see whether it should be you or I."

Herries relented at that. He and Manners were about a fair match, as both knew, and they were very good friends in the ordinary way.

"I'm in it, if it comes to that," said Lowther.

"Me, too!" put in Digby.

"And natchuwally I——"

"Oh, no, you don't, Gussy! You've had your whack," said Tom Merry.

"And his whacking," added Lowther.

"Then we four will toss," Herries suggested. "What do you call, Manners?"

He spun a sixpence in the air and caught it as it fell on the back of his hand, covering it quickly.

"Tails!" cried Manners.

"It's heads," said Herries. "So I go."

"Oh, that's rot! The fellow who loses goes, of course!"

"New system of tossing you've invented, haven't you, Manners?" asked Jack Blake.

"The question is which is the prize—going or staying?" said Talbot.

"Judging from what happened to Gussy, I should say——"

"Oh, dwop it, Tom Mewwy—do dwop it! I'm howwibly fed up with all this japing! Evewy time I look in the glass I'm weminded of it. Ewewy time I blow my nose or smile or open my mouth my face hurts most howwibly. Cawwington's dwopped on to me about it. Evewybody gets at me about it. I do think you chaps might give me a west!"

"Never mind, old chap," said Tom Merry; and an arm flung round Gussy's shoulders for a moment made him feel better.

"Well, anyway," put in Lowther, "Dig and I have got to toss. We'll have an understanding first. Talbot, you spin the coin. Now, Dig, if it's heads, you; if it's tails, me. Is that a go?"

"What's the coin, Talbot?" asked Digby.

"A bob. Biggest I've got."

"Then I bag tails! Silver comes down tails more often than it does heads."

Lowther didn't know whether that was correct; but he wasn't willing to give Digby the supposed advantage.

"I said I'd have tails," he objected.

"Oh, rats! Why should you do just as you like? You Shell bounders——"

"Yes," said Herries. "Pack of silly asses! No reasoning with 'em. No——"

"That's enough!" cried Tom Merry. "We didn't ask you chaps here to be insulted!"

"Then why do you let these two bounders do it?" asked Herries.

"I meant, to insult us."

"And, anyway, who's insulted anybody?" demanded Manners. "Now then, you two, settle which is to toss with me!"

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"Not jolly well likely! With me—that's the ticket!" shouted Herries.

At that moment Kerr came along.

"Hallo, you fellows!" he said. "What's the giddy row?"

"Oh, it's nothing much!" answered Talbot. "Only four of them squabbling about which is to go into Rylcombe to get a thick ear!"

"To Rylcombe?" said Kerr. "That's rummy! Because old Fatty's just been in, and has come back——"

"With a thick ear?" inquired Tom Merry.

"With two thick ears. Likewise, with a black eye or so. Also with—well, multiply Gussy by two, because Fatty's got more face to be operated on, and there you have poor old Fatty!"

"Grammar School fellows?" asked Talbot.

Kerr nodded.

"I'm going to avenge this!" said Herries, with a snort. "And I'll bet they won't bar my choice!"

"Why not?"

"Because I shall go for Gay!"

Jack Blake and Tom Merry slapped him on the back together. They slapped so hard that they fairly set him coughing.

"Bravo, old man!" cried Blake.

"You're a Briton, Herries!" said Tom Merry. "You'll get licked, of course."

"How do you know I shall get licked? Who says I'm going to get licked? You're not the only chap who can use his fists, I suppose?" Herries snorted angrily.

But everybody believed him sure of a licking. They knew something of Gordon Gay's capacity.

"Most important question is—when?" said Kerr.

"After classes this afternoon," Herries answered. "I'm not going to put it off!"

"Suppose there aren't any of them about?" inquired Digby.

"Then I shall walk into the playground at their rotten show, and tell 'em I've come!" answered Herries.

CHAPTER 3.
The Third Victim.

HERRIES' resolution did not fail him.

He marched off after classes, his chin up.

Disappointment awaited him at Rylcombe. Not a Grammarian was to be seen in the whole length of the High Street.

But Herries was not going back to St. Jim's to report "drawn blank."

He made his way to the Grammar School.

The fellows were just coming out. No doubt they had been in detention for some cause or other.

Herries walked straight into the playground. He had thought out a plan of action.

Gordon Gay, Frank Monk, Carboy, the two Woottons, Blanc, and the rest of the set which waged war—hitherto friendly war—with St. Jim's, spotted him, and came towards him.

"So your fellows have sent us another, have they?" asked Wootton major. "Well, D'Arcy put up a better show than I'd have thought likely, and that hippopotamus of yours stood up to it not so badly, though I can't remember that he ever hit Carboy. But they've sent us a real soft thing this time, haven't they, you chaps?"

At that Herries fairly foamed with rage.

This was not according to programme. It was very far indeed from being according to programme.

He had meant to keep quite cool. He had meant to ask Gordon Gay for an explanation. Of course, he hadn't expected to get one. But the refusal of it would have made a fair cause of quarrel, and he could have challenged Gay.

"I'll show you whether they've sent you a soft thing!" Herries cried. "I'll fight the best man among you; I'll fight you, Gay!"

"Well, you needn't howl about it," drawled Gay. "We knew all that before, you know. Even if it was news, it wouldn't be worth shouting. But it isn't news."

Herries was puzzled. He felt that he ought to ask what Gay meant, but he was much too furious for that.

There seemed some sort of mystery. But hang their mysteries! He wasn't there for that sort of tosh. It would have suited Kerr to get to the bottom of it, no doubt, but he wasn't Kerr.

He was there to fight, not to talk.

"Come along!" he said hotly. "I suppose you don't mean to bring it off here, unless you want a master to blow in and stop it. But I dare say that would suit your book all serene!"

"Oh, no doubt!" Gay answered, smiling. "If I was going to fight you, Herries, I should simply pray for a master to blow in and stop it. Because I'm too young and lovely to die, you know, and, though you mightn't think it, I enjoy my life. But I'm not going to fight you, you see."

"Not going to fight me?" roared Herries. He tried to get closer to Gay. He wanted to punch his head, pull his nose, do anything that would force him to combat.

But the rest kept him off. They did not use any roughness. They simply put themselves between him and the Australian in a seemingly casual kind of way.

"No, I'm not going to fight you," Gay answered, smiling still.

"Are you funky?"

"I've admitted it, haven't I? Of course, I'm funky! The very look of you, when you get up and prance on your hind-legs like that, would scare a regiment of veterans! Horribly funky, I am—my word, yes! But that's only one reason."

"It seems a good enough one," answered Herries.

But the attempted sarcasm fell flat, because Herries knew Gay was not afraid of him, and Gay knew that Herries knew it, and all the rest knew that they both knew it.

"Ah! I dare say it does seem so," drawled Gay, looking at Herries as a mastiff might look at a cheeky terrier.

"Well, what's the other reason?" demanded the champion of St. Jim's.

"Simply that Carboy is still on the list. His little affair with your roly-poly pudding in trousers isn't allowed to count. It was too easy. So we haven't scratched Carboy off."

Again Herries was puzzled. What was at the back of this talk? He could not understand at all.

But he would not bother his head about it. He saw plainly that there was no chance of getting Gay into the ring.

Well, it wasn't his fault. He had been quite prepared to face Gay—and a certain licking.

Now he had to face Carboy, and with Carboy he reckoned he had a chance.

If it could not be Gay, he would have preferred Carboy to any of the rest.

It was Carboy who had knocked Fatty Wynn about, and Herries, like the rest, was genuinely indignant at what had been done to Fatty.

They had resented D'Arcy's treatment, but not in the same degree.

Arthur Augustus was not really quarrelsome. He was, on the contrary, full of the milk of human kindness.

But it had to be confessed that he trailed the tails of his coat now and then, inviting someone to step on them. He was fond of talking about administering thrashings. The blood of his noble ancestors was apt to reach boiling-point very speedily.

Fatty Wynn never wanted to quarrel with anybody. He was by nature peaceful and easy-going. When anyone forced Fatty to fight they were doing him a wrong. Fatty was not a combative animal.

The St. Jim's juniors felt this, if they couldn't exactly express it, and Carboy's name had a black mark against it in their book.

"Well," said Herries, "I reckon you'll be able to scratch Carboy off after this!"

That much he might say without boastfulness. It was well he said no more.

"Come along," said Gay, seizing Herries by the arm—

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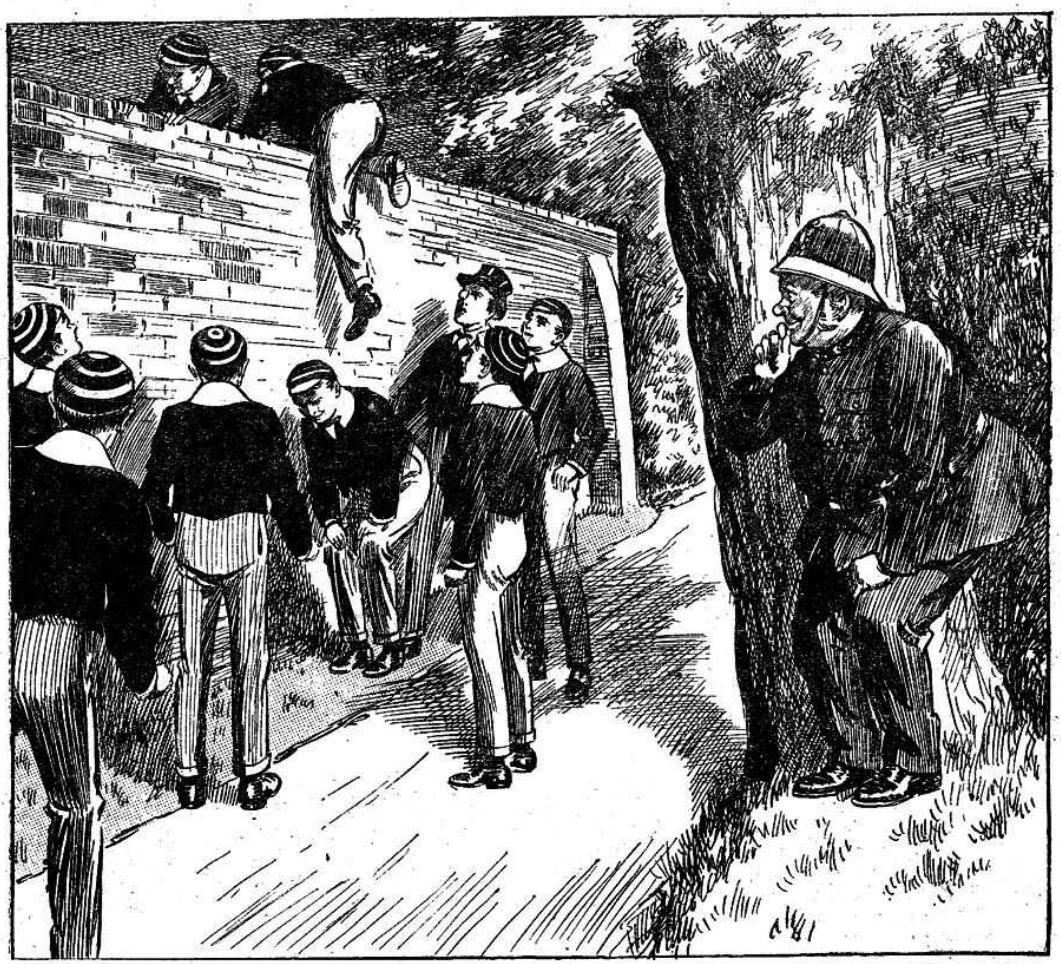

One by one the juniors clambered over the wall. In the shelter of a tree hard by the eagle eye of P.-c. Crump took in the proceedings. (*See Chapter* 10.)

a familiarity to which the Fourth-Former strongly objected at such a moment. "Don't look so fierce! There's the Head cruising about, and if he spots the fury on your noble features he'll smell a rat. Whereas, if you tried to smile—but don't do it if it would hurt your face, because that's going to get hurt fast enough when Carboy piles in—he'll think you've only run over for an ordinary friendly visit or with a cricket challenge."

Herries saw the force of the argument, but was far too angry to look pleasant. However, Dr. Monk went on his way without suspecting anything, and the Grammarians, with Herries in their midst, went on their way.

This led them to a field with high hedges on all sides, some two hundred yards or so from the school. Now Herries began to feel something of the loneliness that he knew D'Arcy and Wynn must have felt.

He had believed himself proof against it. He had thought that he could play a lone hand, not only with credit but with cheerfulness.

Well, he wouldn't funk, anyway! If he were going to be killed, he wouldn't funk it! But it was a bit miserable. Look where he would, he saw only enemies' faces—the faces of fellows who expected to see him licked, would revel in seeing him licked!

He took off jacket and waistcoat without delay, but with no undue haste, and turned up his shirt-sleeves.

"You must have a second," said Gay. "Anybody you like, except me. I'm referee."

"There isn't much choice," growled Herries. "I don't care whether it's Von Kluck"—he nodded towards Wootton major—"or Von Tirpitz"—he indicated Monk.

Neither looked pleased, but Monk agreed to act.

The two combatants were fairly well matched, though Carboy had a little of the best of it both in weight and length of arm. Herries was tough and wiry, however, and by no means a duffer at boxing.

He thought there was quite a good chance of his licking Carboy.

That was before they started.

He thought he might possibly lick Carboy.

That was after the first round.

He wondered whether by any chance he could lick Carboy.

That was after the second round.

He knew that he had not the slightest hope of licking Carboy.

That was after the third round.

He wondered how long he could go on standing up—

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with intervals of lying on his back and gazing at a sky that seemed made of brass—to Carboy.

That was after the fourth round.

But Herries was game. He fought till he could fight no longer—till he went down once too often, and was counted out. And Carboy did not escape without punishment. He got in two punches to every one Herries got in, and they were heavier punches; but Herries got in enough to count, and every one of them hurt.

At the outset the Grams had shouted for Carboy—had gloried in the punishment Herries was getting.

But towards the end there was no shouting. It would have been little better than treason to have backed up Herries, they held. But there was not one among them who did not admire him, and, somehow, they did not care to shout any longer. They wanted the end to come.

But Herries had made up his mind that the end should not come while he was able to stand up and fight on, and he stuck to his resolution.

When he had been counted out there followed a few minutes, or seconds—Herries didn't know—during which he lay with closed eyes, trying to summon up strength to rise unaided. And those few minutes—or seconds—were a bad time for the Grammarians.

Long before this Monk had sent Wootton major for a sponge and a tin can of water. Now he sponged the face of Herries, and Tom Merry or Talbot could not have done it more tenderly.

"Don't!" protested Herries feebly. "I don't want help from any of you!"

"But it was a fair fight, old man," said Monk. "You won't say it wasn't fair, now? And there's Carboy waiting to shake hands. And you fellows asked for it—you know you did!"

Again that mysterious something that needed explaining! But Herries was far too weak and tired to think about it just then. It was bound to stay in his memory, though.

"I'll shake hands with Carboy all serene," he said. "I've no grudge against him. He's licked me"—Herries's voice trembled a little—"but it was all fair enough."

"See here, old chap," said Carboy, shaking hands. "You'd have been a long sight worse off if you had tackled Gay, as you wanted to, you know. I'm a bit too good for you; but Gay can simply knock me into a cocked hat any day of the week."

But Gordon Gay shook his head. It would not really have been so bad for Herries, he knew, because he would have made much quicker work of it than Carboy had done.

"Will you let one or two of us go back with you?" asked Monk. "You're hardly fit——"

"No!" snapped Herries, then added, in milder tones: "No, thanks! It's very good of you, I dare say; but I'd rather not."

He stumbled off alone. Both eyes were closing fast, and his knees were horribly groggy.

"I say, Monk," said Gordon Gay, "I don't half like this. We're carrying the thing too far. It's savagery! We ought to have insisted on the gloves."

"I don't like it myself, somehow," answered Frank Monk. "But they asked for it, and Herries came on purpose."

"What's that you've got there?" demanded Gay of Carker, who had taken a note-book out of his pocket, and was crossing off something on its pages.

Carker handed it over, grinning.

The page contained nothing but a list of names. They were all names of St. Jim's juniors, with Tom Merry's at the head of the list, Talbot's next, then Figgins, Blake, Kerr, Digby, Herries, Lowther, Manners, D'Arcy, Wynn, Noble, Redfern, Glyn, Hammond, Lumley-Lumley, Kerruish, and so on.

A curious examiner might have noticed that the names of Levison, Gore, and Crooke were conspicuous by their absence.

D'Arcy's name had a line drawn through it. So had Wynn's. Carker's pencil had just struck through that of Herries.

Carker's grin faded, for Gay seized him by the collar, turned him round, and kicked him vigorously. Then he flung the book into the hedge.

"That about puts the lid on the thing!" he said. "It's organised barbarity, Monk! What did he call you—Von Tirpitz? And I suppose he'd cast me for the part of the Kaiser!"

"They asked for it, old man," replied Monk.

"Well, they're getting it! I hope it's satisfactory to them, but I can't say I'm enjoying it myself!"

CHAPTER 4.

Something Must Be Done.

HERRIES came back by way of Rylcombe Wood, and met nobody until he had nearly reached the gates. He saw nobody, anyway. But he might have passed people without seeing them, for both his eyes were so nearly closed up that he found it difficult to see anything.

He might not have perceived Levison but that the cad of the Fourth spoke to him.

"I say Herries," said Levison, "you've been getting it in the neck, haven't you?"

He tried to make his voice sound sympathetic, but Herries wasn't having any.

"What's that to do with you?" he growled.

"Oh, nothing, of course!"

"Well, then, don't meddle with what's no concern of yours."

But Levison was not to be choked off quite so easily.

"Who did it?" he asked.

"Did what?" snapped Herries.

"Made your face like that," returned Levison, grinning spitefully.

"Is there anything the matter with my face?"

"Oh, no—not as a curiosity. But as a face it's a bit the worse for wear."

"I'll give you a jolly good hiding, Levison!"

"Not just now you won't," Levison answered. "Why, I could lick you with one hand tied behind me!"

It was true at the moment, but that didn't make it any the more pleasant.

"Oh, buzz off!" said Herries scornfully. "You're not worth arguing with!"

And that was true, too, which didn't cause it to be any the more palatable to Levison.

He stood watching Herries' somewhat groggy progress towards the gates, and there was an evil smile on his face as he watched.

Levison was going downhill fast. The marvel was that he managed to stick on at St. Jim's. He owed several escapes from the sack to the generosity of fellows against whom he had done his worst. But he felt no gratitude. Gratitude was not in Levison's nature.

Once a spark of it had seemed to wake within him, and for a time Talbot had arrested the downhill progress. But the spark had flickered out.

"It's worked like a charm!" he muttered to himself. "I thought it was a good notion, but I didn't count on it turning out quite so well. D'Arcy, Wynn, Herries—I wonder whose turn it will be next? Can Gay lick Tom Merry or Talbot? I hope so, and I hope he'll do it, too!"

There was nobody in the quadrangle. It was tea-time, so perhaps that was not surprising. But Herries felt it just a trifle chilling. They might have waited for him—Blake and Gussy and Dig., anyway!

He made his way to No. 6.

Nobody there!

What on earth could it mean?

It wasn't worth bothering about, anyway. If they were going to desert him because he had been licked let them! He didn't care.

So he told himself. But he did care—very much.

He dropped into the easiest chair in the room, and when Arthur Augustus stole in a minute or two later his arms were down on his knees and his head was in his hands.

"Hewwies, old man!"

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Gussy's arm was round his chum's neck, and Gussy was down on his knees on the floor, spoiling the hang of his nicely-creased trousers in the most reckless fashion.

Herries could not speak. His shoulders shook with a great, dry sob.

"Hewwies, deah old chap! Hewwies, don't! You'll make me blub, too, Hewwies!"

But Herries wasn't crying. The face that he lifted now was free from any trace of tears.

"Go away, Gussy," he said. "I'd rather be alone."

But he did not speak impatiently.

"Wot! Uttah wot! Why, there's no end of a spwead in Tom Mewwy's den, and we're only waitin' for you!"

Even that failed to make Herries much better, it seemed.

"I don't think I can eat anything," he said.

"Oh, wats! You can do your share if you twy, deah boy. Come along, and let's see to your face before the othah chaps look in."

But the other chaps—or some of them—appeared at this moment.

There were only three—Blake, Digby, and Tom Merry.

"Did you lick him, Herries?" asked Tom.

"Looks like it—I don't think!" answered the defeated champion, with just a touch of bitterness.

"My hat, old man, you needn't mind! Licking Gay's a pretty big order for any fellow of his size."

"It wasn't Gay at all; he wouldn't fight. I shouldn't have minded so much if it had been Gay."

"Who was it?" asked Blake.

"Carboy."

"What, Carboy again? Why, it was he who pasted Fatty!" said Digby.

"Yes, and now he's pasted me. I thought I'd got a chance when he started, but I hadn't. He'd lick me every time, so it's no good pretending anything else. He licked me fair and square, and Monk seconded me, and they were all very decent, in a way—after the first, that is—and—and——"

Herries' head went down again. No, he was not crying. That was not his style. But he had taken his licking very keenly to heart, and this coming back to find no one on hand to greet him had been the finishing touch.

"We didn't expect you back just yet, old chap," said Blake.

It was not quite true. They had thought that possibly Herries might prefer to get in unseen, for none of them had any delusions as to the likelihood of his licking Gay. Somehow they understood now that they were wrong—that the absence of any welcome had been an addition to his woes—and they were sorry, and wanted to make up to him for their mistake.

Blake and D'Arcy took him off to the dormitory and applied all remedies available. Tom Merry and Digby returned to Study No. 1.

Talbot, Manners, Lowther, Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn were gathered there. The table was laden with good things.

"He's come back," said Tom Merry.

"Licked, of course!" returned Talbot. "I can see it by your face. Poor old Herries! He can stand it, though."

"He's taking it pretty hard," Digby said. "It wasn't Gay, you know. Herries wouldn't have minded that so much."

"Who was it?' asked Lowther.

"Carboy," answered Tom Merry. "I should have thought Herries was a match for Carboy, but he admits he isn't."

"Much battered?" Figgins asked.

"Worse than me?" inquired Fatty Wynn.

"My hat, yes! Oh, I don't know, though. There's such a lot of your beaming old face, Fatty dear! But Herries seems to have put every inch of his hard up against Carboy's knuckles several times over."

Fatty felt his face tenderly, and murmured:

"If he's worse than me——"

"He is. I say, you fellows, let him down a bit easy. You twig? He feels all broken up; I never expected to see Herries like it. This thing's getting on my nerves!"

At that moment Herries came along, with Blake and Arthur Augustus. They gave him a place of honour and crowded good things upon him to an embarrassing extent.

"This is my notion, deah boys," exclaimed D'Arcy suddenly. "We send then a challenge——"

"Hold hard a jiff!" interrupted Tom Merry. "I tell you straight, this don't sound promising. There's been a heap too much of the challenging business lately, I reckon!"

"But this challenge will come fwom us, Tom Mewwy. That makes all the diff."

"Don't see it. I'm not laying it down that a chap should never fight. It's necessary sometimes. But there's no necessity at all for the sort of thing that's been done lately."

"Let me speak, pway, Tom Mewwy! We send them a challenge——"

"You said that before, and I tell you it's no go."

"We send them a challenge," persisted D'Arcy. "A dozen of our best to fight a dozen of their best—with gloves, if you think it bettah form. I should pwefer gloves myself."

He felt his face as he spoke, and the right hands of Fatty Wynn and Herrics went to their faces, as if they couldn't keep them away.

"H'm! I can't say I think it's bright, or that it fits the case," said Tom Merry, "but I've heard you talk bigger rot, Gussy!"

"And who would be our dozen?" asked Manners.

"Oh, Tom Mewwy, natchuwally."

Everybody agreed to that.

"And Talbot, and Blake, and Figgy—that's four."

"Go to the top of the form, Gustavus," said Lowther. "You've counted right."

Thus far, no one dissented from his choice. But now, as he began to look round, some there grew fidgety. It was like D'Arcy's cheek to think he could pick and choose among them!

"I should considah Noble as entitled to a place; also Wedfern."

Still no one objected. It was not to be supposed that the dozen could be drawn entirely from those assembled there, especially as there were only eleven of them.

"And Kerr and Weilly and Dane."

Kerr bowed politely. Reilly and Dane, not being present, didn't.

"That's nine. See here, Gussy, I don't know whether you twig it, but you're shaping jolly well for a bumping!" said Lowther.

"Do not wowwy, Lowthah! You are my next choice."

"And a good thing for you, old chump!"

"That's ten!" growled Manners. "Where do I come in?"

"I am not shuah that you come in at all, Mannahs. No; I cannot find woom for you. I am sowwy, but it can't be done. Dig is my eleventh man!"

Digby unclenched his hands, and drew a deep breath.

"What about the twelfth?" asked Tom Merry, grinning.

"Weally, Mewwy, my natchuwal modesty made me pwefer that someone else should name him."

"You mean——"

"Well, I considah that I should have a place, especially as the ideah was mine. I don't think anybody can weasonably disagwee with that."

Then uprose Manners in wrath, and held his fist within a short inch of D'Arcy's classic nose.

"See that, Gustavus?" he snorted.

"I see it, Mannahs. It might be cleanah, but there is no difficulty in seeing it."

"Well, what do you mean by leaving me out? That's what I want to know. What do you mean by it, you fatheaded chump, you burbling owl, you blithering tailor's dummy?"

"I decline to answah questions couched in such extwemely wude and offensive language!" answered Gussy, with dignity.

And he turned his back on Manners.

That brought him face to face with Herries.

"Now, then, you prize lunatic!" said Herries. "What do you mean by leaving me out? Blake and Dig and you are all in. But where am I? Do you think I'm dead and

done for because I've had a whacking? Haven't you had a whacking, too, idiot?"

"Weally, Hewwies, I am sowwy if I hurt your feelings. But—well, you see, you've had wathah a doing to-day."

"Ass! Burbler! Didn't Wootton major give you socks?"

"Yaas, he did. But that was some time ago. I have wecovahed."

"You won't 'wecovah' in a hurry if I get any more of your cheek, so I tell you!"

"Oh, ring off!" said Tom Merry. "Your plan's no good, Gussy!"

"I say, Fatty," remarked Figgins, "he left you out too. Aren't you going to do anything about it?"

"No, Figgy; I'm not going to do anything," answered Wynn calmly. "I'd rather he left me out. I dare say I'm very tame-spirited, and all that, you know. But fighting's not my line. I wasn't built for it, I think."

"Nobody's going to fight," said Tom Merry, with decision. "Gussy's scheme is just hot air. But something's got to be done."

CHAPTER 5.

Manners Takes a Photograph.

"WHERE are the other fellows?" asked Talbot, looking into Tom Merry's study next day.

Manners alone was there, busy developing photographs.

"Gone out with Blake and that lot. I couldn't go—too busy."

"Where have they gone to—Rylcombe?"

"No. Other way, I fancy. What is it, Talbot?"

"Well, I want to go down to the village. I'm not exactly afraid of the Grammarians——"

Manners grinned. It was an article of faith among the St. Jim's juniors that Talbot wasn't afraid of anything. He had given plenty of proof that he possessed courage beyond the ordinary.

"But, as we've all promised each other not to go down there alone, I had to ask somebody."

"All serene! I'll come," said Manners, with just one regretful glance at his developing-baths.

He wouldn't have done it for anybody else, except Tom Merry or Lowther, perhaps.

"Don't if you'd rather not, old chap."

"Oh, I don't mind! I'll bring my Kodak along. May happen on something worth snapping."

The two went out together. Nobody was about in the quadrangle except Levison, who paced moodily up and down like one possessed by an unquiet spirit.

"I'm almost sorry for that chap," said Talbot quietly.

"I'm not!" answered Manners, staring at him.

"He's having a putrid time of it, you know."

"Well, suppose he is? Brought it on himself, didn't he?"

"I'm not denying that," answered Talbot slowly, weightily, as if he was considering each word as he spoke. "But don't you think, Manners, that the misery a fellow brings on himself is often the hardest to bear? I know it is."

"You? Why, you and Levison aren't as much alike as—as a German and a good Englishman! Everybody knows what a straight, decent chap you are, and everybody knows what a rotter he is!"

"But everyone knows, too, that I wasn't always straight and decent, and no one can know what Levison might become if he tried."

Manners shook his head. Comparison between Talbot and Levison seemed to him absurd.

"You did your best for him," he said.

"I don't know. I tried to do something. It wasn't much. And I've been rough on him more than once. Oh, I know he deserved it! But, you see, Manners, I know how a fellow might eat his heart out, deserving what he is getting all the time—more, perhaps. And——"

"See here, Talbot, you're too jolly charitable by half. Ask me to begin to believe in Levison when you catch him out doing a decent thing, that's all. Then I'm with you. Until then—'nuff said!"

The difference of opinion did not lead to unpleasantness. It was harder to quarrel with Talbot than with most fellows. He had strong passions, but they were kept well in leash.

They reached Rylcombe, and visited the outfitter's. Then Manners suggested that they should go to the Grammar School.

"What for?" asked Talbot. "Are you spoiling for a fight?"

"Nun-no! At least—well, I wouldn't mind much. But I've a notion that the Grams would fight shy of two among us, and you're one of the two."

"Tom Merry being the other, I suppose? And you think you'd like to put it to the test—at my risk? Well, I don't mind, Manners. But I'm not sure what Tom will think of it."

"Tom Merry be frizzled!" answered Manners. "He can't have everything his own way!"

They passed on towards the Grammar School. Before they reached it, however, they met Gordon Gay and Frank Monk.

Manners waited to see what Talbot would say or do. Talbot did nothing, and said nothing except:

"Hallo, you fellows!"

He spoke in quite ordinary tones, too.

Guy answered in rather a different way. He was not uncivil, but there was something curt about his:

"How do, Talbot?"

Talbot stopped. Manners stopped, too, of course. So did Gay and Monk.

For a moment the four eyed one another rather like chance-met dogs who don't know whether to fight or to be friendly.

Then Talbot said:

"Doing a good deal of boxing up at your show just now, aren't you?"

"Oh, a fair amount!" answered Gay. "Why?"

"Nothing; only I gather Carboy's come on a bit lately."

"A bit," said Monk. "Oh, Carboy's no duffer! He fairly wiped the floor with your man Herries."

"Herries was at a bit of a disadvantage, wasn't he?" asked Talbot.

"How?" returned Gay, still civilly, but not in quite friendly fashion.

"Why, fighting alone like that, without anyone to give him a shout!"

"It was his own choice," said Monk. "He came, stood up, and went down. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look here, Talbot, do you mean Herries hadn't fair play?" inquired Gay. And again there was an edge to his tone.

"No; I'm quite sure he would have that among you fellows."

"Well, then, what were you grousing about?"

"Was I grousing? I didn't know it, really."

Again Manners noted how difficult it was to quarrel with Talbot in these days. It had not always been so, perhaps.

Gay looked better-tempered, and Monk a trifle relieved. The latter said, almost apologetically:

"Herries only got what he was set on having. He wanted to fight old Gay. Now, you know as well as I do that he wouldn't have had an earthly with Gay!"

As Talbot ran his eye up and down Gordon Gay's lithe figure, Manners found himself wondering whether he would ever see those two standing up to one another, and, if so, which would win.

Talbot, he thought. But not without a hard struggle.

"No, I don't think Herries could smash Gay," answered Talbot. "But there's something about this bizney that we don't quite follow, you know."

"What is it?" asked Gay again, curtly and sharply.

"Difficult to explain, I'm afraid. Never mind! If you don't care to say anything——"

"I don't see why we should tell you what you know perfectly well already!" rapped out Gay.

"Do I know it? That's the question."

"And the answer is—yes!"

Honour bright—that wouldn't be my answer," said Talbot quietly, but with real seriousness.

The two Grammarians looked puzzled.

"Got that thing in your pocket, Monk?" asked Gay.

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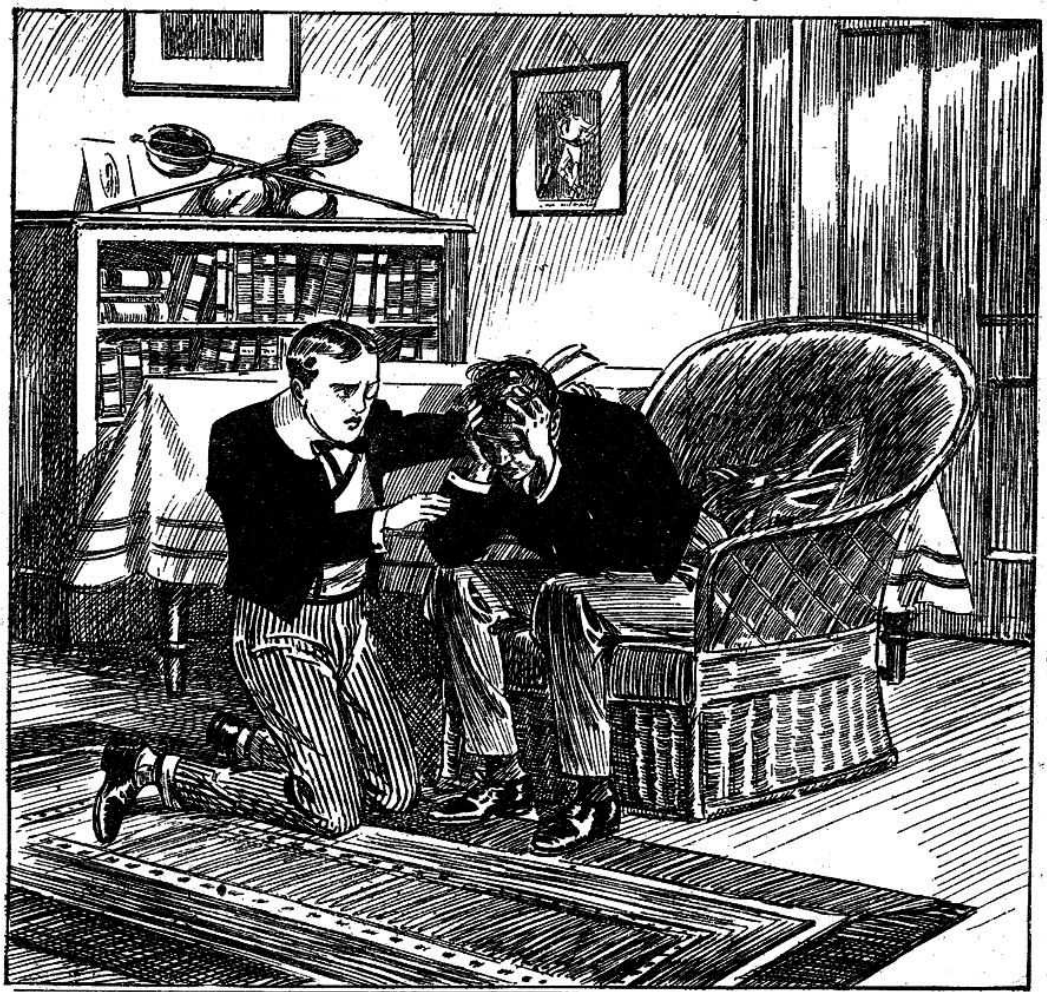

"Hewwies, old man!" Gussy was down on his knees on the floor, and he placed his arm round his chum's neck. But Herries did not speak! (See Chapter 4.)

Monk nodded.

"Well, pull it out, and let's see if they'll own to it."

Frank Monk took a pocket-book from his coat, and from inside the pocket-book he produced a doubled-up sheet of foolscap.

Talbot stepped forward to take it in his hand.

"No!" snapped Gay. "You sha'n't touch it. You fellows will have that back—when we've finished. Do you recognise it, or don't you?"

"No. And I haven't the least idea what it is," answered Talbot.

Monk held it at arm's length, and there was sufficient space between the two St. Jim's boys and the two Grammarians to render it impossible to see more than that some dozen or so lines of writing across the sheet were followed by what might have been a list, or perhaps a number of signatures.

The eyes of both Talbot and Manners were as good as eyes need be; but the sun was in them, and they could not read a word.

Gay and Monk looked distinctly incredulous. Both fastened their gaze on Talbot, who was evidently to them a more important personage than Manners.

Manners didn't mind that, as it was Talbot. Moreover, it suited Manners very well that they should not try to bore holes in him just then with angry glances, as he said afterwards. For Manners had a thing to do.

"You don't care to take my word for it?" asked Talbot, after a moment's pause.

Gay and Monk looked at one another. Neither seemed keen to answer.

"I don't see how we can," said Gordon Gay at length. "No, we can't—that's flat!"

Manners saw Talbot's hands clench. He guessed at the struggle that was going on in his chum's mind.

Talbot came out of it victorious. He had practically been given the lie, and his first impulse was the natural one to dash his fist into the face of the fellow giving him it.

But he realised that there was some mistake here, and he had learned in a hard school to govern himself.

"Very well!" he said, in a queer, strained voice. "Come along, Manners! I'll speak to these fellows again after they've apologised to me!"

Neither Talbot nor Manners said a word till they had covered fully half a mile, though Manners scarcely knew how to keep in so long something that he had to tell.

"It's all serene, old man!" he blurted out at length.

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"Their giddy secret won't keep much longer. We'll get to the bottom of the mystery. For while you were talking to those two bounders, and Monk held the blessed paper up, I snapshotted it, and as soon as ever I can develop the negative, we shall know all about it!"

CHAPTER 6.
Tom Merry's Scheme.

THERE was a good deal of excitement in the council when Manners and Talbot told their tale.

Tom Merry was not the only fellow there who flushed up to his eyes. For there had been a time when all St. Jim's except only Tom Merry had believed Talbot guilty of a crime he had never committed, but of which there seemed absolute proof against him.

It was not often Talbot referred to those days. Perhaps he meant no direct reference to them now. But some of them thought he did, and D'Arcy felt very uncomfortable indeed, and Blake and Manners and Lowther were not too happy.

"It wasn't very decent of them not to take your word, Talbot," persisted Tom Merry.

"Oh, never mind that! I've admitted I felt mad at the time, but that's all over. You see, they didn't take it because they couldn't, and I suppose there was some good reason why they couldn't."

"My hat, yes! That paper Monk showed you was the reason, of course. But the thing that licks me is this—none of us know anything about it. At least, I don't, and I'm sure of most of the rest. Straight now—have any of you fellows sent anything in that line to the Grams?"

Some shook their heads. Some said "Not likely!" Others merely kept silence. But it was clear that no one there knew anything.

"What was it like, Talbot?" asked Kerr.

"I couldn't read a word. The sun was in our eyes. But I'll show you how it looked if Tom has a bit of foolscap handy."

The paper was produced, and a space at the table was cleared by the unceremonious hustling off it of half a score or so of the crowd.

Talbot sat down, and scrawled a dozen lines or so, putting down anything that came into his mind, and not troubling to be particularly legible. But when he came to the lower part he paused a moment. It seemed somehow that the contents of the paper were more definite to him in memory than when he had seen it. He felt sure now that the lower part was made up of a number of signatures—or, at least, of names.

"Get on, old man!" said Blake.

Talbot started to write again. He wrote "T. Merry," and underneath that "R. Talbot." Then he went on writing down the names of all those in the room, with an occasional glance at the fellows present to make sure he omitted none.

"Wait a jiff!" he said, when they tried to crowd in that they might see it. "Clear back, will you? As far back as you can."

"Can't get much farther back unless we push the giddy wall down," said Herries. And, in truth, Study No. 1 was a very tight fit for the throng assembled in it.

"You'll push me through the wall, Herries, if you aren't careful!" said Fatty Wynn, in plaintive protest.

"Now, then, Manners, does that look about right?" asked Talbot, showing the paper to the only other fellow who had seen that which it was meant to represent.

"Rather! I shouldn't know but what it was the same," replied Manners.

"All serene. I'll hold it up over the mantelshelf. Now, then, which of you fellows can make out anything?"

"It's some sort of a manifesto-challenge—defiance—anything you like to call it—signed by a lot of chaps," said Tom Merry.

"That's tolerably easy guessing. Anybody see anything—that's what I want to know."

"I can see my own name," spoke up Figgins.

"Your eyes are all right, then, and no mistake! Which line?"

"The fourth in the lower part."

"You're right, too! But yours is an easier name to spot than most, because of the capital 'F' and the two 'g's.'"

"I wathah think I can see mine," said D'Arcy.

"Where?"

"Next to Figgay's, if I'm not w'ong."

"But you are wrong, and I believe you're only guessing, for that's Blake's, and it don't look a bit like yours."

"Mine's eighth—no, ninth!" cried Noble.

"Advance, Australia! You're right, Kangaroo!"

Talbot lowered his arm, and brought the paper down—rather to the disappointment of several who wanted to prove that their eyes were as good as Figgy's or Kangaroo's.

"Then there seems very little doubt that what the Grams have is a paper signed—or, rather, supposed to be signed—by us fellows," said Tom Merry.

"And there seems no doubt at all about what was in it," remarked Kerr. "Because what was in it made them start on their career of frightfulness."

"But none of us signed any such paper, or saw it, or even thought of it!" said Figgins. "That's where the mystery comes in."

"Did the Grams cook the thing up themselves?" asked Glyn.

"Not in their line," returned Tom Merry.

"I'm quite sure they didn't," Talbot said. "If I thought so——"

He checked himself, but they knew what he had been going to say. If such a thing had been done, Gordon Gay and Frank Monk had put a gross insult upon him. Their doubting—or pretending to doubt—his word was not the sort of thing that could be passed as a joke, after all that had happened.

"Besides, what of a score would it be over us if they had?" asked Lumley-Lumley.

"Then somebody here must have done it!"

"I say, Tom Merry!"

"Ring off!"

"That's a bit too thick for anything!"

"Asses! I don't mean in this den. We're all victims, more or less. I mean somebody at St. Jim's."

That was another matter altogether. It seemed probable—more than probable—almost certain.

"Tell you what," remarked Manners, "three chaps here owe the rotter who did it a jolly good hiding!"

Herries fairly yelped at that.

"My word, yes!" he cried. "And I'll give it to him when we find him, for one!"

"I quite agwee, Hewwies! But I think you will gwant that I have a wight to administah the first feahful thwashing to the low boundah, and that Wynn comes second."

"I don't agree to anything of the sort, Gussy! I'm not jolly well going to wait till you've parted your hair and brushed your eyebrows and put a little touch of rouge on each cheek, and——"

"Don't be widic, Hewwies!"

"And I don't agree, either," said Fatty Wynn. "Unless the chap will take his hiding without wanting to fight. Because I've had some of that—enough to last me this term, anyway."

"That sort of rotter never wants to fight," answered Tom Merry scornfully.

"Have you made up your mind who it is, Tom?" asked Lowther.

"No, I haven't. How could I? When I said 'that sort of rotter' I meant—oh, I meant that sort of rotter! I didn't mean anybody in particular. It wouldn't be fair to single a chap out when we haven't even the slightest evidence to go on."

"Well, I know one chap who's more likely than anyone else," said Manners, "and that's——"

He had been going to say "Levison," but he caught Talbot's eyes, and he stopped dead, for he knew Talbot was right. If Levison was innocent—and he might be, for all Manners knew—it would be, in a way, even more unfair to name him than another, because so many there

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would be ready to jump at belief in the theory of his guilt.

So Manners dried up. And though others knew, or thought they knew, what name had been on his lips, it had at least not been spoken, while he was by no means the only one there who thought of Levison first as a natural thing when the question arose as to who could have been guilty of some underhand action.

"As soon as you get that snapshot done, old man, we may get a clue," said Kerr to Manners.

"How?"

"The writing. I don't suppose there's anybody at St. Jim's who is quite such a skilful forger that he could keep his own little ways of forming letters out of anything so long as that."

"Good egg!" answered Manners. "I believe I got a first-rate photo, and with a magnifying-glass—of course, it will be rather small—we can examine it to rights."

"I say, Merry," Figgins said, "what's the wheeze you had in your curly noddle before Manners started in about the photo dodge?"

"A raid. Oh, I know we've raided them before, and we haven't always come out on top, either; but this is to be an extra-special, gilt-edged, jewelled-in-ten-holes, double-barrelled, self-cocking, hair-spring raid—a really frabjous raid!"

"How are you going to work it?" asked Kerr.

"If only masters and that sort of narrow-minded creatures could be wiped off the face of the earth for twenty-four hours or so, I should say, seize the Grammar School, and hold it against them. But Dr. Monk might have something to say about that."

"He might," answered Talbot drily. "Also Carrington, and our Head. Yes, I think it's possible they'd interfere. They are apt to take narrow views of anything like that."

"But it would be a simply gorgeous score!" said Figgins, with a sigh of regret for the thing that might not be.

"Never mind! I don't think the scheme I really mean is so very much behind it; and it will be done quicker, and, with a bit of luck, we may get through it without bringing any of the beaks on the scene."

"That would be better," said Fatty Wynn. "I don't mind owning that I like a tuck-in better than I do a caning any day. Carrington's so generous when he gets really going. If it was pie he was serving, I wouldn't mind; but when it's a caning——"

"Shurrup! It's Tom Merry we want to hear, not you, fat old chump!"

"Right-ho, Figgy! I want to hear Tom Merry, too; but I didn't know I was dumb in this act."

"It means an expedition after lights out, but it won't be the first, will it?" said Tom Merry.

"Not by long odds!" answered Blake.

"But rather on a large scale," remarked Talbot, looking round the crowded study.

"That's no great odds, if we're careful."

"There's one thing you're forgetting," Kerr put in. "The Grams go to bed as early as we do."

"No, I hadn't forgotten. My plan is to raid their dorm!"

"Oh, good egg!" cried Herries. "And cart along something to pour over the beggars or to souse them in!"

"Boiling oil—in a sieve!" Talbot suggested.

"I don't think that will do, Herries. We don't want them to get into a giddy row next morning. No, I think we'll cut out that notion, though I must say a bucket or two of mixed delightfulness to treat them to would kind of tickle me."

"What shall we do to them, then?" asked Digby.

"You leave that to your uncle, Dig! I'll tell you when the time comes—not before. Got to keep something up my sleeve, you know."

They were full of curiosity, naturally; but they had boundless faith in Tom Merry, and as he would not tell them, in spite of all their questions, they had to be content with remaining in ignorance for the present.

"I don't believe old Tommy's got any scheme at all," said Lowther. "He's just trusting to an inspiration later on."

"Rats, old man! You don't catch me that way. Now clear out, you chaps—unless you all like to stay to tea!"

"Oh, rather!" came a chorus.

"Right-ho! There's best part of half of a loaf, no butter, and yesterday's tea-leaves. It isn't a banquet, but you're very welcome."

However, it turned out a little better than that. There was plenty of butter—after requisitions had been made on other studies. There was also enough bread, and the tea did not fail. There remained from the feast of a day or two earlier a big cake, and Figgins & Co. contributed a tin of biscuits, while Arthur Augustus weighed in with three pots of raspberry-jam. Altogether, if it wasn't a banquet, it was quite a decent meal, and nobody grumbled.

Except Manners, who told Tom Merry that he ought to have cleared them out.

"How am I ever going to get that film developed?" he groaned. "And I'm just aching to see the thing, too!"

CHAPTER 7.

One Negative Makes a Thief.

WHILE the band who owned the leadership of Tom Merry were at tea, another, but much smaller, gathering was taking place in the study which Levison, Mellish, Lumley-Lumley, and Blenkinsop shared.

There were only four present. Two were among the regular inmates of the den—Levison and Mellish. The other two were Gore and Crooke, both of the Shell.

Lumley-Lumley was numbered among the followers of Tom Merry, and the artless Blenkinsop had gone to tea with a chum in another study.

Levison, Mellish, Gore, and Crooke—a promising crew! They were not all of one complexion; but out of the Shell and the Fourth it would have been impossible to pick a quartet of whom one could as safely prophesy that something shady would result from their putting their heads together.

"The scheme's worked very well so far," said Levison. "Three of those rotters have got it in the neck, and that's good enough to be going on with. But I don't like this. Are you quite sure it's a snapshot of—of that paper they've got, Mellish?"

"Am I sure? Of course I'm sure!" answered Percy Mellish, blinking his eyes nervously. "I can trust my own ears, can't I?"

He should have been able to. They had practice enough. Mellish was a confirmed eavesdropper.

"What's the odds?" demanded Gore. "They can't fasten it on to us."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," said Crooke. "If they've got the evidence, that is."

"Well, they've got it!"

"Not yet, Levison—not yet. They haven't got it till the snapshot's developed. That won't be till to-morrow, or perhaps next day. Plenty of time!"

"Time for what? I don't understand you, Crooke."

"To sneak it, idiot! Collar the thing, and burn it!"

"Oh, all serene, if you're game to do that!" said Levison.

"Rats! I didn't say I was going to do it!" answered Crooke, in haste. "I rather reckon I've done my share. The scheme was mine to start with."

Levison might have argued that point. The scheme had been at least as much his as Crooke's. But as things were he did not care to dispute the honour of it. He began to wish himself well out of the whole affair.

"I tell you straight," said Gore. "I won't sneak it. I never was very keen on the bizney. I haven't so much against those fellows as some of you have, and I find Talbot, for one, very decent on the whole. I looked at the thing as a giddy jape. When it comes to boning things——"

"Don't talk such rot, Gore!" Crooke broke in roughly. "You can't call it boning in the case of a silly trifle like that!"

"What do you call it?" asked Gore, with gloomy brow. Gore was not quite straight—never had been. But association with Talbot and Skimpole had kept him from dropping quite to the level of Levison. Skimpole

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might be an ass, but he was as honest as the day, and incapable of a dirty action.

"Anything you like. If you come to that the thing's more ours that theirs. Besides, you've not been asked to bone it."

"You're not going to do it, you say, and Gore's not," said Levison. "See here, Crooke, that leaves it between me and Mellish. I don't mind if it's Mellish, but I'm hanged if I'm on!"

Mellish turned the colour of pea-soup. He was the weakest of the four, and he knew it. He might contest the point, but he felt pretty sure that in the long run he would be forced into doing what they wanted done. And he trembled as he thought of what would happen should the Terrible Three catch him out.

"Leave the thing alone!" growled Gore. "I don't believe they'll trouble. Let's chance it!"

But that way out did not appeal to either Crooke or Levison. Mellish wasn't sure even that it appealed to him. It seemed taking rather big chances.

"They'll call it forgery," he whined.

"Call what forgery?" snapped Crooke.

"Writing other chaps' names."

"Don't talk such rot! It isn't as if they were on cheques or anything. Besides, when a fellow forges he copies a signature."

"Levison took no end of trouble to make Tom Merry's just as he always writes it. And so he did with some of the others—all that he thought the Grams would know," bleated Mellish.

Gore got up, and pushed away his chair.

"I'm out of this," he said. "I didn't write any of the names."

"But you wrote part of the other stuff," retorted Crooke, with a sneer. "And you're not out of it, even if you slink away now. For if that gang ever get to know the truth I'll take jolly good care that they shall hear you were in it!"

Gore sat down again. That threat was too much for him. He repented now of his share in the plot. It was not the highest type of repentance, because it consisted mainly of a dread that he would be found out. But it at least made him feel very uncomfortable, and just a little bit ashamed, which was all to the good.

"Well, Mellish, when will you do it?" asked Crooke.

"I didn't agree to do it at all," protested Mellish.

"No. But we agreed you should. Comes to the same thing, don't it, Levison?"

Levison assented. So did Gore, though with less emphasis. The one thing Gore was quite resolute about was that he would take no further risk himself.

The wretched Mellish tried to temporise.

"I won't promise to do it," he said, "but I'll look out and see if I get a chance."

"You needn't promise, because we know you too well to put a fat lot of value on any promise you make," replied Crooke; "but you'll do it, because if you don't—well, how does this suit your complaint?"

He seized Mellish by the collar, dug his knuckles into the back of Mellish's neck, and then twisted hard.

"Oh, don't, Crooke! Stop it, Crooke! You're choking me!"

"I'll jolly well choke you a bit further than that if you don't bring it off!" growled Crooke viciously.

"I'll do my best!" snivelled Mellish. "No chap can do more."

"Got a cig, Gore?" asked Crooke.

"No. I've chucked that."

"Since when?"

"Since yesterday, if you must know."

"Talbot's influence working, I see!" sneered Crooke. "But mind this, Gore, if you give our plot away to Talbot——"

"Oh, ring off, do! Is it likely I should go telling him? He'd think me a worse cad than he does now!"

"So he thinks you a cad, and yet you give up smoking to please him!"

"He doesn't say he thinks so. Talbot's always decent to me, but I know he don't like me as he likes some fellows. I don't mean Tom Merry or Gussy, but not even as he likes Kangaroo or Lumley-Lumley."

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"And I suppose you'd give all you've got to make him?"

"Ring off, Crooke, I tell you! The more you talk about Talbot, the more I feel that this rotten scheme of yours is dead offside!"

"He'll turn King's evidence, Levison," said Crooke.

"No, he won't!" answered Levison quickly. He could see how utterly at fault Crooke's methods with Gore were, and knew how to manage the Shell fellow better.

"You don't want Talbot's pity, do you, old man?" he asked cunningly.

"Pity be hanged! Of course I don't!"

"That's about all you'll get. He treated me the same way til I got fed up. I'm not going to put a fellow on a pedestal, or to be patted on the head by him when I look at things his way."

"My stars, do you think I am, then?"

"No. But old Crooke seems to. I understand better."

Gore relented. Within five minutes he had broken his promise to Talbot, and was smoking again.

Crooke did not leave Mellish alone. Before they parted he had managed to impress upon that unhappy youth the likelihood that his failure to secure the incriminating negative would lead to consequences far worse than any attempt to steal it could.

"For if they catch you in their den you can pretend to be up to some of your usual sneaking little tricks, and you won't get anything more than a bumping," he said, with brutal candour. "Now, what I shall give you if you don't nick it will be real gip—don't you make any mistake about that! And afterwards the Merry crowd will take it out of you as well as us, so you'll be no better off that way."

So next day Mellish waited his chance. He hung about the Shell corridor in a deadly funk. He watched through the keyhole of No. 1, Manners taking the film out of the camera. He knew later that the negative was exposed in the window. But still he did not get a chance to slip inside and try his luck.

Crooke collared him after dinner.

"Got that thing yet?" he hissed in his ear.

"No. How can I? I've never had a chance!" whined Mellish.

"Rats! The thing's in the window; I could see it from the quad. Look here, it won't make much odds if you're a minute or two late in Form. Lucky you're in the Fourth, so the Terrible Three won't spot it. Hang behind the rest, and slip in then!"

Mellish could see objections to that dodge, but on the whole it seemed safer than any other he could think of.

He carried it out. With fast-beating heart and shaking knees, he stole into No. 6, and then made a breathless rush for the Fourth class-room.

So quickly was all done that he came in at the tail of the Form without being actually late.

He did not feel quite safe while the negative was in his possession. He told Levison so in a whisper. But Levison did not rise to the occasion, and offer to take charge of it.

"Shove it in your desk," he said.

"No, I won't. Somebody might look in and spot it. And it's got Manners's name on the woodwork," Mellish answered.

"Levison—Mellish!" said the stern voice of Mr. Lathom. "I will not have this talking in class! If I see you at it again I will cane you both!"

Mellish made up his mind to talk no more. He did not want to be caned. Nobody ever did want to be caned, but Mellish dreaded the ordeal more than most.

But his luck was out this afternoon.

It was Levison's fault. Algebra could not hold Levison's thoughts. There were no charms for him in quadratic equations at any time. But now his mind was full of the negative in Mellish's pocket.

"I say, let's have a look at that thing!" he whispered a little later.

"Shut up!" Mellish whispered back. "You'll have Lathom dropping on to us."

"Don't be an ass! You can put it under this book, and——"

"I won't, I tell you! I'm not going to risk it."

Levison put his hand into Mellish's pocket, and tried to tug the thing out. Mellish resisted stubbornly, with a corner of one eye on the Form-master all the time.

It was the attempt to look two ways at once that settled his fate. Levison suddenly ceased to tug, and Mellish, forgetting that he was quite at the end of the desk, tried to slide further away, and came down with a thwack on the floor.

"Come here, Mellish!" said Mr. Lathom.

Mellish, with hanging head, stepped forward.

"Hold out your hand!"

Mellish obeyed. The first stroke made him wince. At the second he groaned. The third caused his fount of tears to overflow.

"Really, Mellish, you are no better than a child! You weep at a very slight punishment, and, as I perceive, you bring things into class to play with—a practice to which I have many times expressed my rooted objection. Hand me that article from your pocket!"

Mellish looked down. Levison had tugged the negative frame half out, so that it was partially exposed to view.

"If you please, sir——"

"Do you imagine that I am going to permit you to argue with me, Mellish? Hand it over at once!"

"Oh, but if you please, sir——"

The cane was lifted threateningly. There was nothing for it but to hand over, and it might as well be done before the stroke as after.

Mellish obeyed.

"You've done it now!" whispered Levison.

"It was your silly fault!" whispered Mellish.

"Come here, Levison! I warned you a little while ago."

Mr. Lathom had laid the negative on his desk unexamined. When Levison had gone up for his dose and returned with stinging palms, he shifted a paper in laying the cane down, covered the confiscated article, and promptly forgot all about it.

When the Form was dismissed Levison caught Mellish by the arm.

"You needn't try to slink off!" he said. "You've got to get that thing back."

"How can I? Lathom will spot it when he moves his papers, for a dead cert!"

"He doesn't always move his papers before he goes. Depends upon whether he's in a hurry or not. Just you hang about here until he clears. I'd better stay with you, I think, or you'll be doing a bunk."

Jack Blake and Herries passed them, and gave them a curious glance. Levison tried to look indifferent, but it was evident to both observers that he was keeping Mellish in hand for some reason or other. They connected it with the confiscation, naturally; but neither had been able to see what the article confiscated was, and they passed on, thinking it none of their business.

"Let's go and see if old Manners has got that thing done yet," said Herries.

They reached Study No. 1 just in time to witness the fury of Manners when he discovered his loss.

"The rotters!" he yelled. "Now we jolly well know it's somebody close at hand, and I'll bet we'll find them before they're many hours older! Yes, I'll bet we do!"

"What's the matter, old man?" asked Tom Merry.

"That blessed negative's gone!"

"My hat, though, that's funny!"

"Funny, do you call it? Funny! Hark at him, you fellows! I don't call it funny. I call it—— Hanged if I know what I do call it!"

"If two negatives make an affirmative, as Linton says they do," said Lowther, "what does one negative make?"

"A thief, in this case," answered Tom Merry, grinning.

"You fellows will drive me fairly off my rocker!" roared Manners. "It's all very well for you—you didn't get the snapshot—you—— What on earth do you want, Blake, you idiot? Oh, I say, you fellows, somebody's been and gone and boned that negative!"

"This is where we come in, Herries," said Blake, jumping to the right conclusion. "Find Gussy and Dig this minute! Keep Levison and Mellish out of the class-room! I don't believe Lathom's gone yet, but don't let them slip in when he goes. I'm going to get in through a window. Do you twig?"

"I twig!" answered Herries, and was off at once.

CHAPTER 8.
A Lesson in Algebra.

BLAKE made for the quadrangle. Herries met D'Arcy and Digby in the corridor, and they bolted off.

Levison and Mellish were still hanging about the class-room door in a way that was meant to be unobtrusive, but which looked all the more suspicious for the attempt to anyone who had an inkling of the truth.

"Has Lathom come out, Mellish?" asked Herries. "I rather wanted to speak to him."

"Nunno, not yet. You'll find him inside," answered Mellish uneasily.

"Oh, I won't go in! I'll wait till he comes," said Herries.

D'Arcy and Digby meant to wait, too, it seemed.

"It's not a scrap of use," whispered Mellish to Levison. "Those fellows have spotted it, I'm sure. They know all about it, of course, for they were there when Manners told the yarn."

"I don't believe they do. We'll wait and see," returned Levison.

"It's vewy wude indeed to be whispewin' in company," said Arthur Augustus severely.

"I suppose I may have things to say to Mellish that I don't want every long-eared ass in the school to listen to, can't I?" snarled Levison.

"Oh, yaas! Most fellows wouldn't be at all intewested in the sort of secwets you and Mellish are likely to have," returned Gussy. "But if you wefer to me as a long-eared quadwuped——"

"I said ass!"

"Well, an ass is not a biped, I believe. My knowledge of natchuwal history is enough for that, anyway. I was about to say, Levison——"

"I don't care what you were going to say, so you can dry up!"

"I was about to say, Levison, that I should be wegwetfully—no, that's w'ong, because I shouldn't weally wegwet it—obliged to bump you!"

Mr. Lathom emerged at that moment, and caught the last words.

He frowned.

"That sort of thing won't do here, D'Arcy," he said. "Clear off, all of you!"

"Herries says he wants to speak to you, sir," said Levison maliciously.

But if he thought to take Herries at a disadvantage, he miscalculated.

"What is it, Herries?"

"It was about that last equation, sir," answered Herries at once. "I didn't quite follow when you showed us on the blackboard."

"This zeal for mathematics is a new trait, Herries," said Mr. Lathom. "But it is not one to be discouraged. Come back with me, and——"

But that did not suit Herries' book at all. It might well result in Blake being caught out.

"Oh, I wouldn't trouble you, sir," he said. "To-morrow will do all right."

"It is no trouble, my boy. By the way, what have you been doing to your face?"

"Nothing, sir," replied Herries, quite truthfully. It was Carboy who had done the ornamental work upon his countenance.

"Humph! Has Mr. Carrington seen you?"

"Oh, yes, sir!"

"I mean since you 'did nothing' to your face?"

"Oh, yes, sir!"

"And did you give him the same explanation?"

"Nunno—well, not exactly, sir! Because, you see, he didn't ask what I had done to my face. I suppose he

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tumb—I mean, I suppose he understood that I couldn't very well have done it myself!"

Mr. Lathom's stern face relaxed into a smile.

"Well, if Mr. Carrington has got to the bottom of the matter, as I suppose he has, since he knows of it, I shall not inquire further," he said. "You can come back with me now, and we will run through that equation together. As, no doubt, D'Arcy and Digby share your thirst for enlightenment, they may as well come too. Ah, yes, and Levison and Mellish!"

"If you please, sir, I don't need it explaining; I understand it quite well," said Levison hastily.

"So do I, sir," whined Mellish.

"Good—very good! But you shall come back nevertheless, and as you understand it so well you shall explain it to the rest."

Levison groaned. It was quite beyond him to do anything of the sort.

"Oh, if Levison knows, sir, it's all right. He can tell me," suggested Herries, desperately anxious to keep Mr. Lathom out of the class-room until Blake should have had time to come and go.

"But I should like to hear Levison's explanation," said the master, and turned back to the door.

There was no help for it. Any further attempt at delay would only make matters worse if Mr. Lathom was given reason to suspect anything.

They followed. As Mr. Lathom pushed the door open someone darted across the room.

"Blake, come back at once! What are you doing here?"

Jack Blake thrust something into his pocket, and came back, trying to look innocent.

"What was that you put in your pocket?"

Blake would not lie. Nothing short of lying would have served his turn then, even if that would have done. He produced the thing at once.

Mr. Lathom laid it on his desk, with only the most cursory glance at it.

"I cannot understand your action, Blake," he said; "but at best it is a piece of impertinence to me, and I shall cane you for it!"

Blake, Herries, Digby, and Arthur Augustus all felt relieved. Jack Blake was not the fellow to make a fuss about a stroke or two of the cane. It was heaps better than having awkward questions asked. But none of them could quite understand why Mr. Lathom refrained from the demand for an explanation.

As a matter of fact, the master's glance, slight as it was, had shown him the name of Manners on the woodwork. He knew that Jack Blake & Co. were chums of the Terrible Three, and he knew that Mellish was not a friend of theirs. It was easy to deduce a motive for Blake's action, and Mr. Lathom did not care to probe too deeply into the matter of Mellish's possession of the thing.

Blake took four strokes nonchalantly.

"Now, Levison," said Mr. Lathom, "you will explain to Herries and the rest the matter that puzzles them."

At that Blake opened his eyes. But Herries shook his head ever so slightly, and he understood that this was another affair. His interest in it sank to zero when he realised that it concerned algebra.

Levison made the most awful hungle of his attempt to explain. He could not have rendered the subject clear to anyone who didn't know all about it already, even if he had really understood. But he had not understood at all.

"That will do, Levison—or, rather, that will not do, but is enough. Now, Mellish, you may try."

"If you please, sir, I—I—I'm not good at explaining things, sir. I'm afraid I can't."

"Try, my boy—try. No one knows what he can do until he has tried."

The confusion of Mellish was worse even than the confusion of Levison.

Mr. Lathom took out a cane.

"I object very strongly to false pretences," he said. "Hold out your hand, Levison!"

Levison took his medicine, and moved towards the door.

"Stop! I haven't done with you yet! Your hand, Mellish!"

Mellish writhed, and blubbered like a baby as he went through it.

"Now, Blake, do you think you can explain this problem?"

"Not sure, sir. I understood it all right, but I'm no great hand at explaining things."

"A defect you share with others," replied Mr. Lathom, with an expressive glance at the face of Herries. "Oblige me by trying."

On the whole, Blake did not do so badly. He was fairly good at mathematics, for one thing, and, for another, the thirst of the other five for enlightenment was not so great that it required much satisfaction.

Mr. Lathom saw that at least one of the half-dozen could work the problem, and he thought he had spent enough of his leisure upon them.

"That will do," he said. "Don't trespass again, Blake! Don't claim knowledge that you lack, Levison and Mellish! As for you other three—— But, there, go!"

He thrust everything upon the desk inside it, and turned the key as they went out of the door.

CHAPTER 9.

Preparations for the Raid.

"WELL, I must say you chaps muddled the bizney just about as well as it could be muddled!" was the thanks they got from Manners.

"We did our best," said Blake, with unwonted humility, "and, after all, we've found out something."

"What do you reckon you've found out?" snapped Manners.

"That Levison and Mellish were in it. They may have been the only ones in it, or they may not. But it's a dead cert they were in it."

"My hat, that's easy guessing! If there's anything crawly and sneaky and low going on here, isn't it safe to count those two in?"

"All very well," said Tom Merry, "but that's only guessing. And guessing and proof are two different things. Now we've really got something to go on. Mellish didn't sneak that negative for nothing, and Levison didn't back him up without a motive. So we've two criminals discovered. Somehow I don't think that's all. There's somebody else's hand in this. Mellish would never have thought of such a dodge, or have come into it without pressure, and it's not quite Levison's usual style."

"Who else do you reckon?" asked Lowther.

"Sha'n't say, old man. But we'll spot 'em all in time. I say, Manners, why don't you go and ask Lathom for that thing?"

"Good egg!" said Blake. "I should never have thought of that. But it's easier for any of your fellows, because he's not your special and particular beak."

Manners snorted.

"What with Carrington and Linton I get all the cane I've any use for," he said emphatically.

"But Lathom couldn't cane you for——"

"Do you know the yarn about the man in the stocks?" rapped out Manners.

"Can't say I do."

"Well, he was there. And some smart merchant—a bit after your style, Tom Merry—comes along and asks him what he was there for. And he said for so-and-so. Then the merchant says: 'But they can't put you in the stocks

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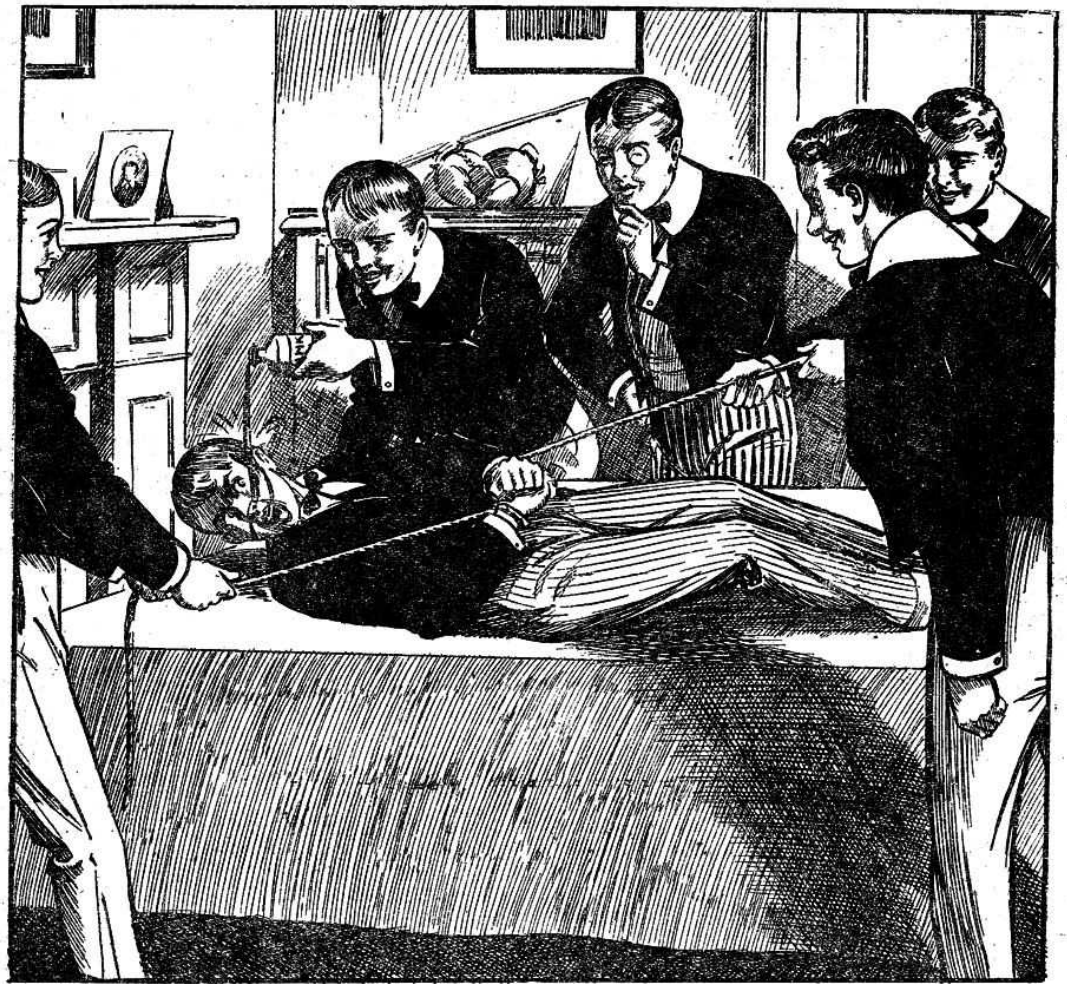

Manners lifted an inkpot and tilted it until a drop or two ran on to Digby's forehead. "Ring off!" roared Digby. "Ouch!—yaroooh!" (See Chapter 9.)

for that.' 'They have, anyhow,' says the other chap. 'But they can't do it,' persisted the smart merchant. Then the other chap got riled."

Manners looked round for the expected smiles, but there was never a smile to be seen.

"Let's have that over again," said Tom Merry. "I didn't quite catch on to it that time."

"Ass!"

"What I want to know," Lowther remarked, "is why the man in the stocks got riled?"

"Idiot!"

"But, aftah all, you know, Mannahs, there was pwoof that he could be put in the stocks, because he was there, don'tcherknow. And if he couldn't be put there he wouldn't have been there, would he?"

"Nobody expects a tailor's dummy to have any brains!"

"What I want to know," said Blake, "is what he was put in the stocks for? It's a pity to leave out things like that, that really belong to the story."

"Chump!"

"Did he get out after that?" inquired Herries.

"Fathead!"

"What's the point of it?" asked Digby.

Manners uprose in wrath.

"You're the worst set of frabjous imbeciles I ever saw in all my natural!" he roared.

Then Talbot came in.

"Here's another imbecile!" said Tom Merry cheerfully.

"Not likely! Talbot's got more sense than all the rest of you lumped together!"

"Right-ho! Tell him the yarn and see."

Manners told the story. Talbot, with a perfectly grave face, asked:

"Where did it happen, old man?"

The wrath of Manners was diverted by the fact of his noticing that Talbot carried a parcel.

"What have you got there?" he asked. "Grub?"

Talbot put the parcel on the table and cut the strings. There was revealed nothing more interesting than a couple of big hanks of thin rope.

"There you are, Tom," said Talbot. "I think it ought to be enough."

"I should say so, old man. Here are the patterns. We'll get to work at once."

"My hat!" said Manners, taking up a piece of rope tied strongly in the form of two loops, with about a couple of inches between them. "What on earth's that thing for?"

"Wimwams for a goose's neck!" answered Tom Merry, winking at Talbot.

"Rot! Let's try it on yours, if it is. It wouldn't go over your head. Tell you what, though. I say, Gussy, lie on the table, will you, there's a good chap?"

"Weally, Mannahs, don't be so widic!" answered D'Arcy. "The table is not a pwopah place to lie upon. Besides, I don't lie. It's low."

"Gustavus has made a joke!" roared Blake.

"Cribbed it, you mean," said Lowther.

"I assuah you, Lowthah, that it was entirely the pwoduct of my own bwain."

"Will you, Dig?" asked Manners.

"I don't mind," answered Digby. "I got off a caning that I expected a few minutes ago, so I'm one up, anyway."

He placed himself on his back upon the table.

"Catch hold of his legs, Blake!" cried Manners. "Hold the beggar's arms, Lowther!"

They obeyed. Digby began to struggle, regretting his too easily given consent; but in a trice Manners had slipped one of the double loops over fect and around his legs, a loop to each leg. Then he put the other, with smaller loops, over his hands.

Dig was triced up, as helpless, for the moment anyway, as anyone in fetters. His struggles failed to do more than shift the loops an inch or two.

"You've got it, old man!" cried Tom Merry.

Manners lifted an inkpot and tilted it until a drop or two ran on to Digby's forehead.

"Oh, ring off! Shurrup! Drop it, I say! I didn't agree to—— Ouch! Yar-oogh!"

Digby had sat up suddenly, jerking the arm of Manners, and had received the full contents of the inkpot, all but a little that went up Manners's sleeve.

"Idiot!" snapped Manners. "It was your own silly fault! And you've made a beastly mess of my shirt!"

"Wait till I get at you, that's all!" howled Digby, with ink running down his neck, trickling into his mouth, and making his eyes smart. "Wait till I get at you! A dirty trick, I call it! You're a rotter, Manners!"

"Never mind, old man!" said Talbot. "Think how lovely it will be for the Grams!"

Digby forgot the wrongs he had suffered—forgot even the ink trickling down his back.

"Great Scott!" he cried. "What a wheeze! It's—it's a fair knock-out! Here, take these things off, somebody. I must go and get rid of this beastly stuff. But I shouldn't care now if it had been a pailful—not now I know!"

"This has proved to me two things that I've often wondered about," said Blake.

"What things?" asked Lowther.

"Whether Manners had any brains. He must have a bit, or he wouldn't have guessed. Whether Digby has any. He can't have, or he wouldn't have lain down like a lamb to be operated upon."

"I don't care a scrap," said Digby, as Arthur Augustus relieved him of the manacles. "What's a little thing like that?"

"As you're so well satisfied about it, I dare say you won't mind paying me for the ink you consumed," said Tom Merry mildly. "That happened to be my inkpot."

"Rats! I'll be back in a minute, to help make those things."

And off went Digby. The rest fell to work. Tom Merry cut the rope into sections, and Talbot instructed the others in the precise methods of tying the knots so that they should withstand any pressure put upon them.

"Who knows about this besides us?" asked Manners.

"Nobody."

"Well, see here—let's have Figgy & Co. across, and get one of them to lie on the table like Dig!"

"Thanks! I think not, however," said Tom Merry. "We'll save the dodge for the Grams. And we'd better leave some ink for to-night's prep."

"You might spare me two sets—enough for two fellows, I mean—though," said Blake.

"Whaffor, old son?"

"Why, before we go I think it would be rather a hefty move to truss up Levison and Mellish. I don't think anyone left in our dorm will unfasten them before we come back, and it will be a little taste of what they've got to come."

"Good egg! That won't settle their account, but it will be something to be going on with. You're improving, Blake!"

"I should say so! He's going to take the next algebra class," said Herries slyly.

"Ring off, Herries!"

"What's that? I say, Blake, you're positively blushing!"

"Drop it, Merry! Herries is off his rocker, that's all."

"No, I'm not. It's O.K., you chaps. Lathom was no end pleased with him. Said he demonstrated equal to old Euclid himself. Dunno whether Euclid did algebra, though—should think his own piffle was enough for him."

"Levison and Mellish aren't much in the demonstwation line, are they, Hewwies?" said Arthur Augustus.

"Rather not! It was a rare jape to hear them trying it. But old Blake soon showed them how to do the job."

"Ring off, Herries, do!"

Digby returned, with some of the ink removed, and Figgins & Co. dropped in and lent a hand with the work. Everybody agreed that it was a great scheme.

"It will take three of us to each one of them, though, Merry," said Blake.

"Not if we catch them asleep, old chap. We'd have their hands fastened before they were fairly awake, and, if they did kick, a few——"

"Tom Mewwy, I'm surprised at you! How can you dweam of cowwecting Blake when it's a mattah of mathematics?" put in Arthur Augustus.

"I'll wring your silly neck if you don't dry up, Gustavus!"

"If x equals a Grammarian, and y a set of loops for his wrists and legs, what's the value of z—being the pleasant surprise he'll feel when he finds himself fast?" asked Talbot.

"Now then, Professor Blake!" gibed Lowther.

"If x equals all the silly rot talked in this den, who's got a-y z?" asked Blake.

"My hat, he's coming on fast, isn't he, you fellows?" said Tom Merry, with pretended admiration. "See here, Blake! When you've applied for a staff post here, and got it—of course, you'll get it—do what you can to suppress corporal punishment, will you?"

"Suppress it!" snorted Blake. "If anything like that happened, I'd make a point of caning everybody in the Fourth every day, and you Shell duffers twice a day!"

"That's a bad knot, Blake," said Talbot quietly. "See here!"

He pulled the loop apart with very little effort.

"Sorry!" answered Blake. "It's the rot these chaps talk that put me off it."

The task was nearly finished now, and Talbot made a careful examination of the result. Half a dozen of the double loops were thrown out as defective, and had to be done over again. But at the finish there was not one of them that failed to pass the examiner.

CHAPTER 10.

The Raid.

BLAKE looked at his watch for about the twentieth time. He had left the blind of the window near his bed up, and the moonlight was so bright that there was no need to strike a match.

"Time, you fellows!" he said.

Forthwith up rose D'Arcy, Digby, Herries, Reilly, Hammond, and several others.

They slipped on their clothes with all speed, and each produced a pair of light, rubber-soled shoes.

"You can deal with Mellish, old man," whispered Blake to Herries. "I'll take that cad Levison."

He slipped into the hand of Herries two of the double-loops.

"Now then, Mellish! Put your legs out of bed!"

Mellish pretended to be asleep; but Herries knew a real snore from an imitation one.

"None of that!" he said sharply. "If you don't do as I tell you, I'll——"

"What do you want me to do, Herries?" whined Mellish.

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"I've told you, and I know you heard. Do as you're told, or it will be the worse for you!"

"I—I—I don't see why I should, Herries! You've no right—— Yarooh!"

Herries had seized him by the ear. Arthur Augustus pulled down the bedclothes, and in five seconds Mellish was fastened hand and foot.

Meanwhile, Blake and Digby had moved over to Levison's bed.

"Now, Levison!" said Blake.

"I don't want to talk to you, and I won't talk to you! Go and eat coke, Blake!"

"Oh, don't make the mistake of supposing that the charms of your conversation brought me out of bed, Levison! I didn't come to tell you it was a nice day to-night, or that with the wind north-south-west and the moon shining we'd better get up and hunt rats. Down with the clothes, Dig!"

"Stop it, Blake! I won't—stop it, I tell you! I won't——"

"No, but we will!" answered Blake. "There you are! We're going out for a little walk, to contemplate the nature of beauties—I mean the beauties of nature—and we think you had better be made safe till we come back. I'm not threatening any of you other fellows"—Blake raised his voice a little—"but we'd very much prefer that no one should meddle with Levison and Mellish—do you twig?"

"Right-ho, Blake!" said one voice.

"Wouldn't get out of my bed to help if they'd both got their heads in the water-jugs and were suffocating," said another, evidently belonging to a fellow who didn't love the precious pair.

Some of the rest were asleep, and some pretended to be; but Blake knew that there was little danger of the two being released.

In the Shell dormitory, and over in two dormitories of the New House, the clans were gathering too. By-and-by they all met in the shadow of the quadrangle wall.

No one was absent. The risk of so big an expedition was not a light one, of course. But they reckoned that they were prepared to accept risk.

The Grams had to be shown that they were not cocks of the walk!

Figgins led the way over the wall by the old oak, and Tom Merry brought up the rear.

Twelve chimed from the school clock just as he dropped. The hour had been fixed late so as to render as small as possible the chance of being seen.

By this time all St. Jim's, with a few exceptions, in four dormitories, ought to be wrapped in balmy slumber. The public-houses in the neighbourhood were all closed, and the last reveller had homeward wended his weary way. P.-c. Crump might be out and about, but it was quite as likely that he was snoring placidly, and in any case Tom Merry and his followers did not greatly fear that active and intelligent officer.

The full moon made the night almost as light as day. In Rylcombe Wood it cast chequered shadows on the path as it poured down its rays through the foliage of the trees. Everything was very still, and there was little talk among the raiders. But from time to time the sound of a chuckle might be heard, or a half-suppressed snigger would break out, as someone revolved in mind the sorry fate in store for the Grammarian enemy.

They reached the Grammar School. A place had to be found for getting inside the walls. But that presented no special difficulty.

One by one the juniors clambered over. In the shelter of a hedge hard by stood a watcher, and the eagle eyes of P.-c. Crump took in the proceedings.

"A fair cop!" murmured the constable. "Yes, it's a fair cop this time, an' no herror! Boys from the big school a-gettin' into the Grammar School, an' what they're after goodness knows—I don't. But it's a fair cop, any road!"

He recognised some of them—Tom Merry, Talbot, the long-legged Figgins, D'Arcy, Wynn—and could guess at the identity of many of the rest. But he was careful to note down in the book he carried only those he was sure of. Crump was no genius, but he had his own notions as to playing the game.

"Can't be burglary!" he muttered. "They wouldn't be for comin' out in a little army to burgle the Grammar School. No, 'tain't that. I expeck it's one of their little games. There's always somethink up betwixt St. Jimes's an' this 'ere institootion."

The last boy had disappeared now, and Crump was still not quite sure what he ought to do in the matter.

Under the wall, in the shadow, they passed along, moving in single file, silent now as Red Indians on the warpath.

Three class-room windows were tried by three fellows, and the catch of that at which Talbot operated yielded to the steady pressure of his knife-blade. As it did so, he wished that he had not volunteered to try it. For he was reminded unpleasantly of the old days, when he had learned to be skilful in such things with an evil end in view.

But that was all over now, and in a minute or two he had forgotten all about it again.

P.-c. Crump had pulled himself up laboriously till he could look over the top of the wall. There he hung, watching, his head as round and looking bigger than the bright moon that hung in the sky above him.

"My stars!" muttered the constable. "If they ain't a lot of bowldacious young rips—well, ask me another, that's all!"

But nobody asked him another. Nobody heard him. Nobody saw him.

"There they go—'most like the animiles goin' into the ark, 'cept as these goes one by one. Well, well, well! I wonder what Dr. Monk'll say to this 'ere barney? If 'e don't lay about 'im with that there cane of 'is—well, well, well!"

The last boy had passed in. In the class-room they lined up in single file again. Tom Merry took the lead now, and Figgins brought up the rear.

They knew their way about the Grammar School, of course, some of them better than others, but none better than Tom Merry.

"Tread quietly!" he whispered to Talbot, next in line, and "Tread quietly!" Talbot whispered to Manners, and so it passed on until it reached Figgy. But there really wasn't much need for the warning.

Up the stairs now, and into the corridor outside the dormitories.

Tom Merry halted.

"This is the one," he whispered. "Now be more careful than ever, you fellows! If we wake anyone before we're fairly spread out, it will rot up the whole bizney, more or less."

He opened the door very softly. A trumpet-like snore greeted him.

"Somebody's asleep, anyway!" whispered Lowther to Jack Blake.

Very softly, very carefully, the St. Jim's leader drew up one blind, while Talbot attended to another, and Herries to a third.

The bright moonlight, shining into the room, showed two long lines of beds.

It fell on the faces of some of the sleepers, and one or two stirred uneasily, and Carboy was heard to mutter:

"That's one for you, Herries!"

Herries and Digby stole to the side of Carboy's bed. The others were choosing their victims. Tom Merry and Lowther took Gordon Gay; Talbot and Manners went to Frank Monk's bed; Blake and D'Arcy devoted themselves to Wootton major; Kerr and Hammond to Wootton minor; Figgins and Glyn to Mont Blong, and so on.

Three or four beds were left over, but care was taken that none of the hostile band should be omitted.

Tom Merry gave a low whistle.

On the instant clothes were pulled from beds, and operations begun.

"Here, I say——"

"Groo-ooh!"

"Leave me alone, can't you? It's not——"

"Ow!"

"Stop it, you bounder!"

"Yarooh!"

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"It's the enemy! Go for them, you fellows! I see Merry!" cried Gordon Gay.

It was all very well for Gay to order an attack upon the invaders. But there was not the least chance of his orders being obeyed.

He himself was quite helpless. The rest were for the most part in like case. The few who had not been dealt with dared not attempt anything.

No one had bungled badly. Here and there leg-hoops might have been thrust upon arms, and vice versa, but that made little difference for the moment.

"This is where we come in, Gay!" said Tom Merry.

"Not exactly!" replied Gay. "You seem to have come in already—rather like a set of burglars, if you ask me!"

"But I don't ask you, Gay—see? I don't care a snap about your opinion. We're here, and we've got you nicely tied up. That's what maters, Gay. Think about that for a bit, old chap! Do a little of the reflecting act about your sins too!"

"Oh, I'll own it's a bit of a score for you," answered Gay. "Oh, you've scored, decidedly! But, now that it's all done——"

"All done?" broke in Tom Merry. "My dear chap, we've only just begun! The interesting part is to come yet."

"Rather!"

"Don't think you're going to get off as easy as this, do you, you bounders?"

"It's our turn now!"

"I am not of a wevengeful natchah, but I should considah myself a cwass ass if I consented to let this be the finish!"

"Ring off, Gussy! Your consent's not asked——"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy! I have allowed you to assume the leadahship of this waid, but——"

"You allowed me because you jolly well couldn't help it! Ring off, I say!"

"Of course, you fellows know that we've only got to sing out for help and you'd be outnumbered at once," said Monk.

"Oh, yes! We know that. But we don't reckon that, on the whole, you are at all likely to sing out for help," answered Figgins.

"We think you'd rather keep this little surprise-party to yourselves," chuckled Kerr.

"Do you happen to remember the night when you jumped on us, and were going to tar us all?" asked Lowther. "We owe you one for that."

"Oh, that's a back number, Monty," said Tom Merry. "It's for their exhibition of German frightfulness just lately that we're going to teach them a lesson.

"Nobody can say we didn't fight fair," spoke up Carboy.

"Nobody does say so—as far as fighting fair is concerned," answered Tom Merry. "Herries, let's have Carboy out. He shall be the first victim!"

Herries and Digby yanked Carboy out.

"Bath-room's next door, I think, isn't it, Gay?" asked the St. Jim's leader.

"Go and see for yourself!" growled Gay.

"Thanks no end for your politeness, but I don't think I will," replied Tom Merry. "Talbot and Kerr, will you take control of the bathing department? I dare say these bounders will be none the worse for a wash!"

Herries and Dig carried the writhing Carboy into the bath-room, and Talbot and Kerr followed.

"Nothing but soap allowed," said Talbot, with a shrewd suspicion that a bottle or two of ink might be secreted in some pocket.

They dumped Carboy into the bath. They turned the taps full upon him. And they soaped him!

Carboy didn't need washing, but there was nothing to hurt him in the operation. Nevertheless, it was galling to be soaped by two fellows, either of whom you know you can lick—one of whom you have quite lately licked, indeed—and to feel yourself entirely helpless.

And Herries and Digby soaped with a will. If Carboy wasn't well washed behind the ears it wasn't their fault, and if Carboy's eyes smarted—well, that might be put down to them; but it wasn't dangerous, at worst!"

The victim did not yell. He was sorely tempted to; but he knew that if other dormitories came to the rescue it would be a long, long time before he heard the last of the joke against him. While as for his comrades in misfortune, as there seemed no doubt whatever that they were also to be put through it, they mattered little. They would have nothing to crow over him about.

"If you're going to—grooh!—take as long as—ow!—this with everybody—stop ramming that soap into my eyes, you rotter, Herries!—it will be—yarooh!—morning before——"

"We're not. You're an extra-special case," answered Herries. "But you've done now. Help me to lift him out, Dig, and we'll stand him to dry."

"Here, just take these things off me, and let me get back to bed!" demanded Carboy."

"Right-ho—I don't think!"

"I shall catch my death of cold standing——"

"No, you won't. The water's as warm as new milk. We'll dry you, if you like, though."

"Rats! I won't let you fellows——"

"You couldn't stop us, old man! Tell you what, though—we'll loose your hands and let you use a towel. But if you try to get the loops off your legs, back you go into the bath!"

"How long are you fellows going to be?" asked Tom Merry at the door.

"Ready for the next now. No need to limit it to one, though," answered Herries. "Four baths here."

"Oh, good egg!"

Tom Merry went back. Carboy, with arms loosened, towelled himself vigorously, and waited his chance.

Wootton major, Wootton minor, Mont Blong, and Carker were brought in, and Blake, Reilly, D'Arcy, Hammond, Figgins, and Glyn came along to help in the washing department.

"Oh, my word! I'll give it to you rotters next time I catch you!" said Wootton major, breathing hard as they seized him and dumped him into a bath.

"You mean when you and a dozen others happen on one of us, don't you?" asked Blake cheerfully.

Herries and Digby were bending over Wootton minor now. Carboy saw his chance, and took it, at any risk!

He caught Herries by the right leg and Digby by the left, and gave a mighty heave. They splashed into the bath—half-full of water now—on top of Wootton major!

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Carboy, forgetting all caution in his triumph.

"Zat's ze style, Carboy!" cried Mont Blong.

At that moment a bell somewhere down below clanged loudly.

"You've done it now!" said Wootton major. "You'll be nabbed, every man jack of you, sure as eggs are eggs!"

"That's the hall-door bell," spoke up his brother. "Somebody must have seen you bounders come in, and means to wake up the house!"

It was even so. P.-c. Crump had waited for some little time, rather at a loss what to do. Crump's brain did not move too fast. But it had moved to some purpose now. He had made up his mind that the only thing for him was to arouse the Grammar School, see Dr. Monk, and tell him what was going on—or at least as much of what was going on as was within Crump's knowledge.

"I guess this is where we scoot!" said Kerr.

"Unless our retreat is cut off," answered Talbot coolly.

There was that possibility, of course. Nor was it a small one.

Now was the time for Tom Merry to show his generalship!

"Come along here, all of you!" he said, appearing at the bath-room door again.

They went—Herries and Digby dripping, Carboy not yet dry, but much better tempered, for he felt that he had to some extent got his own back. Leglets and wristlets were hastily removed from the persons of Carker, Blanc, and the two Woottons, and they made a rush, wet as they were, for their beds.

Those who came in from the bath-room found that the Grammar School fellows had all been released.

"Gay says they're willing to help us get away, if it's poss," said Tom Merry. "Under the circs, I think it's pretty decent of them. They've a rope-ladder here, it

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seems. Now, we ought to have time to get clear before anyone comes, because the bell has to be answered, and somebody's got to dress more or less before they can go to——"

"For a chap in a hurry, you're about as long-winded as they make 'em, Merry," said Figgins. "Where's the rope-ladder?"

"Tell you what," volunteered Gordon Gay. "We'll shove a bed up against the door! Then no one can get in till we take it away, and we won't move it until the last of you fellows has cleared and the rope-ladder safely back."

"I say, that means no end of a row for you fellows!" said Tom Merry.

"This thing means a row, anyway. I don't know whether it will be poss to keep you bounders out of it. Looks as if somebody outside had seen you, and had called to tip our Head the wink. But we'll keep you out of it if we can."

Those who had been at the sheep-washing, as Herries called it, were surprised at Gay's friendly tone. But the fellows who had remained behind in the dormitory were not. They knew that explanations had passed between the rival leaders, and that a peace treaty had been in process of negotiation.

CHAPTER 11.
A Narrow Squeak.

"DON'T think much of this as a rope-ladder," said Figgins. "But I suppose we must risk it."

He slung the lower end out of a window, and fastened the hooks at the upper end securely to the sill.

"Go on first, Figgy," said Tom Merry.

"What, me go first? Not likely!"

"Afraid the ladder will break?"

That was enough for Figgins. He was out of the window at once, and clambering quickly down.

"Kerruish!" said the leader.

The boy from the Isle of Man swung himself out, and slid down the ladder without bothering about the rungs.

"D'Arcy!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, I cannot agwee to——"

"If you don't go I'll chuck you out! You're keeping everybody waiting."

Arthur Augustus obeyed. He slid down as Kerruish had done, and those above saw him stop and bend to examine the damage done to his trousers. They also saw Figgins catch him by the collar and propel him forcibly into the shadow by the wall.

"Wynn!"

"I'd better go last, Merry. I might break——"

"If everybody's going to argue, I resign!" snapped Tom Merry.

"Oh, I'll go!" answered Fatty, and went.

"Hammond!"

The little Cockney obeyed without a word. Lowther, Redfern, Dane, Digby, and others followed, till only Talbot, Kerr, Blake, and Tom Merry were left.

Before this the bed had been moved up against the door. Now the sound of the handle turning could be heard.

"Go on, Blake!" said Tom Merry.

"I say, though, we can't sling out like this, and leave these fellows to face the music!" protested Blake.

"Don't be an idiot!" said Gay sharply. "It will be ten times worse for us if you're caught here."

"Go on, Blake!" urged Frank Monk. Blake slid down.

"Open this door at once!" came the stern command from outside.

"It's the Head himself!" groaned Gordon Gay.

"Look here, old chap, we can't go—we can't, really," said Tom Merry desperately.

"If you don't we'll cut you dead for ever after!" answered Gay. "Besides, the other fellows will say you didn't play the game."

"Do you hear me? Open at once!" said Dr. Monk again.

Kerr was sliding down now. Talbot nodded to the Grammarians, and followed without a word. Tom Merry put out his hand impulsively. Gay and Monk took it, each in turn.

"You've got the paper safe?" said Gordon Gay.

"Yes, and you bet we'll find out the rotters who wrote it. You're quite satisfied now that we didn't?"

"Of course we are!" said Monk quickly. "I say, apologise to old Talbot for us, will you? Gordon and I weren't over civil to him yesterday."

"Open this door at once!" shouted the Grammar School Head.

Tom Merry was sliding down the rope. Almost before he had left hold of it a dozen hands were clutching to pull it up. There was going to be a big row in that dormitory, and every minute the Head was kept waiting outside the door was calculated to make it bigger.

Figgins had shown good generalship. He had forced the fellows to climb the wall again. Some had seen the sense of it; some—D'Arcy among them, of course—had argued that it was like desertion, but all had gone, except Figgins himself and Talbot.

"Good, Figgy!" said Tom Merry. "Come along! We haven't a second to spare. Once the Head gets to the window he's bound to spot us going over, for it's as light as day."

The three were soon over. But they were not over quite soon enough.

That was not the fault of Gordon Gay & Co. They kept the bed against the door until all were out of the grounds. But there was a window in the corridor close to the door, and Dr. Monk chanced to look out of that.

He saw them plainly, though he did not recognise them.

Now, as they dropped, heavy footsteps sounded on the road.

"Stop! I arrest you all, in the name of the lor—leastways, by Dr. Monk's orders! Stop, I tell you!" Crump bawled.

They bolted.

Down the moonlit road they sped, Tom Merry and Fatty Wynn bringing up the rear.

"Don't mind about me, Merry!" puffed Fatty. "I can't keep it up much longer. But you needn't get caught, too."

"You aren't a flier, old man," answered Tom, grinning. "But you're a good quarter in the mile—better than that blue lamp behind us. He's chucking it now!"

It was even so. With a final bellowed command that they should stop, P.-c. Crump himself halted, fairly puffed. His eyes fell upon a piece of paper lying in the road, and he picked it up.

A sheet of foolscap, folded into a size to allow of its going inside a pocket-book—such it was.

"What's this?" Crump asked himself. "Looks like as if one of them young rips from the big school dropped it, so it does."

Working on, Crump's massive brain conceived the notion that it might be advisable to open the paper and examine it.

"Ah!" he said, as he looked at it. "Might 'ave been wrote better, an' I dunno as I azactly see through it, but it's my opinion as Dr. Monk would like to 'ave a glance at this 'ere."

And Crump was right in his opinion.

Meanwhile, those ahead, noting that pursuit had ceased, slackened their pace, and Tom Merry and Fatty caught up Figgins, Talbot, and Manners.

"What about that paper, Merry?" asked Figgins. "I should like to have a look at it, and it's quite light enough to read by the moon."

Tom thrust his hand into his pocket.

"Great Scott!" he said. "I've lost the thing!"

"Oh, you idiot! Why didn't you hand it over to me or to anybody with brains enough to come in when it rains?"

"If you ask me, Figgins, that's rather a poor simile," said Talbot. "Do you remember a football match when somebody would insist upon playing in a giddy deluge, and a beautiful crop of influenza resulted?"

"Oh, ring off, Talbot! That's all over and done with, anyway. But, really, you were rather an ass, Merry."

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"Granted, old chap. I feel like one, anyhow. I've a good mind to go back and look for the thing."

Talbot seized him by the arm.

"You won't do anything of the sort," he said. "Mind, I don't know that it's going to make a lot of difference. Crump's no Sexton Blake, but he's not blind, and if he didn't spot some of us it's a miracle. But it's no good taking unnecessary risks, is it?"

The rest were in full agreement with Talbot, and as they persisted that they would all go back, too, if Tom Merry did so, he gave up the idea.

"Seems as if we never shall get a good look at that paper," he said gloomily. "Manners was smart enough to snapshot it, and then Mellish waltzes in and bones the negative, and Lathom confiscates it, and that's all up the spout. Then Gay and Monk tell us all about it, because they see at last that the thing's a do, and Monk hands over the paper, and I go and lose it. It's fifty to one that anybody who picks it up will just grin at it and then chuck it into the ditch."

But P.-c. Crump had picked it up, and, scenting a clue, had not thrown it into the ditch, though it is doubtful whether it might not have been as well for them if he had.

"What will Crump do?" asked Manners. "The old ass must have spotted us getting in, for, of course, he was the merchant who played that lively tune on the hall bell. Tom, I don't see how this thing's going to be kept dark. Dr. Monk will know, for all the Grams may try to keep it from him, and that means our Head will know. Consequence—ructions!"

"Oh, don't rub it in, Manners! I'll admit that the scheme's turned out a giddy fiasco, and I'm willing to take the blame of it. But it was a piece of rough luck that that fat old bluebottle should have been hanging about. Why wasn't he in bed and snoring?"

"Ask a pooliceman," suggested Figgins.

The clock was chiming half-past one as they stood again by the slanting oak. A good deal had happened in the ninety minutes since they had left, but their spirits were by no means so high as they had been at the start of the expedition. Some of them would not agree that it was a complete failure, and it is worth notice that Herries, D'Arcy, and Wynn, who had suffered from the Grammar School "methods of frightfulness," were of the number of these, but no one could contend that it had been a complete success.

"But we got in again without being twigged," said Lowther in the Shell dormitory, "and at the worst the Head can't expel us; there were too many in it for that."

CHAPTER 12.

Mr. Lathom Gets Interested.

A SURPRISE awaited Manners next day. Mr. Lathom sent for him.

He could guess what it was for, of course; but he had not expected it, by any means, and he went feeling rather doubtful.

"This thing belongs to you, Manners, I believe," said the Fourth Form master.

"Yes, sir."

"I took it from a boy in my Form. Do you know how he came by it?"

"No, sir."

That was true. Manners had very strong suspicions, but no proof, so that he could not be said to know.

"Do you know who the boy was?"

"I heard something about it, sir. Mellish, wasn't it?"

"Yes. As you do not know how he came by it, I can only assume that he had no right to it. That is between myself and Mellish, and I shall discuss the matter further with him. Meanwhile, there is something about this thing which has aroused my curiosity. I wish to see a print from this negative, Manners."

"Y-y-yes, sir."

"Is there any particular reason why I should not see it?"

"Nun-no, sir! At least—well, I'd much rather you didn't, sir, if you don't mind."

"But I do mind. I insist upon seeing it, indeed. How soon can you prepare a print?"

"By to-morrow morning, sir, I should think—that is if—if the thing isn't spoiled."

"If you have any regard for your own comfort, Manners, I think you will discover that it is not spoiled, and that a print from it is perfectly possible! I shall expect you after classes to-morrow morning."

"Yes, sir."

Off went Manners. He appeared in Study No. 1 with a very long face.

"What's the row, Manners?" asked Tom Merry, who knew nothing as yet of the interview.

Manners recounted what had passed.

"Well, there's one thing—we shall see now just what was in that beastly 'scrap of paper'!" said Lowther.

"We shall. And so will Lathom and Carrington, and Ratty, and the Head. And when they've all seen it we shall enjoy ourselves—I don't think!"

"Doesn't make much odds, old man," said Tom Merry soothingly. "There's bound to be a heavy discharge of artillery from the Grammar School direction before the day is over, and this is a small thing compared with that. After all, we didn't write the giddy manifesto."

"We didn't—that's true. But we may have some difficulty in proving we didn't. And we can't explain very well, can we?" Mellish and Levison are rotten cads, but a fellow can't split even on their sort."

"I say, old chap, couldn't you spoil the negative?" asked Lowther, seized with a bright idea.

"Well, I dunno. Yes, I might, for Lathom didn't put me on honour. He just threatened me with a caning if I didn't bring him the print. So if I choose to take my caning——"

"No, you don't, Manners!" said Tom Merry quickly. "Because it isn't a just caning. Lathom's bound to ask whether it was destroyed by accident. It wouldn't be the cheese to lie to him, and if you tell the truth you're in for something ten times worse than any caning—see?"

"Suppose I choose to lie?" growled Manners. "That would be my own bizney, I reckon."

"But you won't choose to, old man," answered Tom Merry. "We can't do that sort of thing, you know."

"You can't, you mean. I'm not so sure I can't. If I thought we could hush it up by——"

"Ring off! You know you can't, Manners, so it's all no good."

And, when he had thought it over, Manners decided that his chum was right, while Lowther felt a trifle ashamed of his bright idea.

Throughout the day they awaited the expected summons to the Head. Cricket had no interest for them. Even Fatty Wynn was a bit off his feed, and refused a second helping of pudding at dinner. They gathered in groups and discussed the affair till they all felt sick of it.

Still the summons did not come.

The afternoon dragged out its slow length. Classes were over for the day, and they were still kept in suspense.

Could it be that the Head knew nothing as yet?

Even if it were so they could build no hopes upon his ignorance. Sooner or later he was bound to know.

The mystery was why Dr. Monk should have held his hand so long. But among them all was none found hopeful enough to suggest that he meant to let it drop altogether. The matter was, from the magisterial point of view, much too grave for that.

Apart from all that had preceded it—and it was likely enough that Dr. Monk would take a serious view of that—the unlawful entrance of the Grammar School at dead of night by a horde of St. Jim's boys was an escapade that was bound to be met by heavy punishment.

Tom Merry, Talbot, Lowther, Kerr, and Figgins went to Rylcombe between classes and tea.

Not a Grammar School boy was to be seen about the village. They took counsel, and resolved to go on to the school.

No one to be seen there! The cricket-field and the playground were alike deserted.

"It will be pretty rough on those fellows if they have to stand the whole racket," said Tom Merry. "They're all kept in, of course."

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"Well, I should be sorry, but I could bear it," admitted Lowther frankly. "I'm worrying so much about us that I don't feel quite so much sympathy with them as you do, old man."

"There's no fear," said Talbot. "Their turn may come first, but ours is bound to come later."

"Let's get it over!" cried Tom Merry. "Let's go up and ask for Dr. Monk and settle the whole thing straight away."

"Good egg!" answered Figgins. "If——"

He stopped dead.

"If what, old ass?" asked Tom Merry impatiently.

"If there was any chance of that settling it! But there isn't, you know—not the ghost of a chance! I'm not funking it. I'd be willing to take poor old Fatty's whacking, and half a dozen other fellows' as well, but it's no go, Merry!"

"Monk wouldn't cane us," said Lowther. "How could he?"

"You bet he could!" returned Tom Merry. "And I only wish he would—if it could be settled that way."

Talbot was willing to share in the attempt, and a dispute developed. Figgins leaned rather to the views of Tom Merry and Talbot, though he saw little prospect of doing any good. He seemed attracted by the self-sacrifice involved. Kerr and Lowther were dead against the plan, and said so pretty plainly.

The discovery that it was so near teatime that they would be obliged to run all the way back cut short the argument.

The evening passed, and still they were kept in suspense. Some of them found it almost unbearable. A few began to cherish unreasonable hopes of getting off scot-free.

No one spent a sleepless night, but most of them scarcely slept so well as usual, and several had bad dreams.

Manners went off with a long face to keep his appointment with Mr. Lathom.

He was back sooner than his chums had expected, and found Tom Merry and Lowther examining carefully with the aid of a magnifying-glass the second print he had made of the snapshot.

It was not too clear in places, but where a word was illegible it could easily be guessed at from the context.

"Hallo, old man! You're soon back," said Tom Merry.

"Yes. And I must say you fellows haven't wasted any time in having a peep at that thing," answered Manners.

"What did he say?" inquired Lowther.

"He said, 'Thank you, Manners! This is an interesting exhibit. I will not detain you now, but we may have to discuss the matter further at some later time.'"

"Oh, never mind Lathom! If it was only him! It's discussing it with the Head that disagrees with this child," said Tom Merry. "What do you think of this, Manners? There was some pretty rocky spelling about when it was done, I guess."

Lowther had copied down what they could decipher of the faked manifesto exactly as it was written, except that the doubtful words were enclosed in brackets. It read thus:

"We the undersined [fellows] of St. Jim's are completely fed-up with the [stupid,putrid(?)] arogance of the Grammar School bounders, and we hearby give them [notice] that we intend to take them down a peg or two. Any one of us is [willing] to fight the best among them [without] excepcion, and some of us could do it with one hand [tied] behind our backs. We are ready whenever and wherever they like, leeving it to them to choose time and place, because we know we can lick them all ends up."

There followed a number of signatures.

"My hat!" said Manners. "I don't wonder the Grams were mad. What a pack of rubbish!"

"They ought to have known we shouldn't come down to such stuff as this," answered Lowther.

"Don't see how they could know," Tom Merry said. "There's my signature, and if I hadn't known that I never wrote it, I could have sworn that I did. Gay knows it, and he wouldn't have any doubt, of course. Talbot's is like; so's yours, Monty. So is Manners's. So is Figgy's. Some of the others are just scrawled anyhow, because the rotters who did this were pretty sure the Grams wouldn't know them, and so couldn't smell a rat."

"But what on earth——"

"Oh, that's quite plain! The spiteful bounders who did this don't like either us or the Grams. It was a dead easy thing to take a feud that's been going on no end of a time and see if they couldn't put a little vitrol into it—see? Whatever happened was all to the good from their point of view. When Carboy whacked Fatty and Herries they could chortle. When Wootton major put our Gustavus through the mill, it was all jam to them. If Talbot and Gay fought, it wouldn't have mattered much which won—they'd have crowed!"

"Mellish and Levison, for a cert," said Manners thoughtfully. "We've got that far. But they weren't all. Who were the others?"

"Might make Mellish split," suggested Lowther. "He's a funk."

"No," said Tom Merry decidedly; "we won't have that sort of thing. We'll find out for ourselves."

But someone else was also interested, and it was that other person who found out.

Mr. Lathom made a diligent examination of the print Manners had taken him. Once or twice he smiled, but in general his forehead was creased in a frown, and when he had finished anyone who knew him would have seen storm-signals in his face.

He went off to interview Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell.

That afternoon both the Shell and the Fourth had a surprise. Instead of the Greek translation—which was the Shell's regular work for the first hour—and the arithmetic class in the Fourth, both Forms were taken in English—a subject which possibly received less attention at St. Jim's, as at many another public school, than it deserves.

The Shell had half an hour to write an essay of two hundred words on the subject of British sea-power. The Fourth were told to express on paper their views upon the subject of capital punishment.

Two curious coincidences marked the second half hour in the two Forms. In each room a piece of dictation was set, and this was rather unusual. But it was more curious that in each Form the same piece should be given. And perhaps it was more curious that in each Form the sentences included were these:

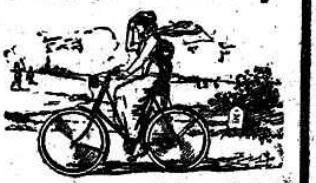
"The intolerable arrogance of this assumption passed all bounds."

"To this rule no exception whatever was made."

"Hereby may be seen the result of such domineering pride as marked the conduct of this haughty prelate."

"Undersigned were the names of twelve peers."

Health and Economy



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"The bishop had been seen to leave his palace that morning."

After classes Mr. Lathom and Mr. Linton met again.

"I have drawn blank," said the Fourth Form-master. "I already knew Mellish and Levison to be among the conspirators, and the others who have misspelt the test words are undoubtedly among the conspired against."

Mr. Linton's stern face relaxed a little.

"I have some results to show," he said. "Crooke spells 'arrogance' with only one 'r,' and 'hereby' as it is spelled in that wretched screed. Manners also slips on 'arrogance,' and there are two or three who misspell 'exception'; but only Gore has both that word and 'leave' wrong. Let me look at that print again, Lathom. Yes, you are right! Four hands contributed to the upper part of the writing, and it is not difficult to trace their respective shares."

"The condition of D'Arcy's face and of Wynn's—ah, and of Herries's also, for your Form has not escaped!—is now explained," said Mr. Lanthom.

"It is an abominable trick," answered his colleague. "There is in it an element of rancorous spite that one might fairly term Teutonic. What shall we do, Lathom?"

"Send at once for Crooke, Gore, Mellish, and Levison," answered the Fourth Form-master.

CHAPTER 13.

Dr. Monk's Invitation.

"THERE'S Gay from the Grammar School in the quad, Merry, and he wants to see you, he says," announced Curly Gibson of the Third at the door of Study No. 1.

"Ask him to come up here, will you, kid?"

The Terrible Three, Talbot—the four from Study No. 6—and Figgins & Co. were all in No. 1. In these hours of suspense they found moral support in keeping together. In the quadrangle they could see Noble, Redfern, Kerruish, Lumley-Lumley, Dane, and the rest, also supporting one another by the same means.

Not one of all the crowd had blamed Tom Merry for the fiasco. They were staunch, one and all, and too generous to seek a scapegoat. But they didn't feel happy.

Looking out of the window, Tom Merry saw that they followed Gay. The tread of many feet presently sounded in the corridor. Next moment Gordon Gay stood at the open door, and behind him showed anxious faces.

"Pleased to see you, Gay," said Tom Merry politely.

"And happy to know that the slight differences between yourselves and us are likely to be satisfactorily adjusted in the neah futchah," added D'Arcy, bowing gracefully.

Gordon Gay grinned.

"Well, I think the affair isn't going to turn out quite as badly as it looked like doing at one time," he said. "But I won't talk about that till I've handed you this, Merry. I'm a sort of a kind of giddy herald, you know."

Tom Merry opened the envelope, which bore no address, and was not sealed.

The enclosure was in Dr. Monk's handwriting. It was quite brief, and read thus:

"If Tom Merry and the other St. James's boys who visited Rylcombe Grammar School at an ill-chosen hour recently will be obliging enough to accompany the bearer of this, Dr. Monk, who regrets having missed them on that occasion, will be prepared to receive them."

"I say, Gay, what did he mean?" asked Tom Merry.

"What does he say? That's more to the purpose!" cried Blake, who had not been among those able to read over Tom's shoulders. "Do you chaps think that we aren't in this, that you keep it all to yourselves?"

"Oh, all serene! I'll read it aloud," said Tom Merry.

He did so. A hum of surprise and inquiry came from the assembled crowd.

"Well, what does he mean, Gay?"

"Can't you guess, old man?"

"No. I should have thought he'd have let our Head know."

"But our Head doesn't always do things just as you St. Jim's bounders would expect him to. Are you coming?"

"I am," answered Tom Merry promptly. "What do the rest of you say?"

There was a shout of assent.

"Well, round up anybody who isn't here."

"We're all here—every galoot of us!" cried Clifton Dane.

"Come along, then!"

Out they trooped, Tom Merry and Gordon Gay leading, arm in arm. Curious eyes saw the procession, and curious minds wondered. But none knew what it portended, and none could guess, save only four.

Crooke, Gore, Levison, and Mellish had just been sent for. They were going off together, all with hangdog looks, and Mellish already near unto weeping-point.

Figgins nudged Talbot.

"See?" he said. "Twiggez-vous, old man? They're our four noble conspirators, and somebody wants 'em. Putting two and two together, I should say Lathom's going to talk to them, and from what you fellows tell me I guess he's roped Linton into it. Well, I only hope they'll keep Ratty out, that's all. I shouldn't mind Carrington so much."

"Yes, it looks as though they were going to execution," replied Talbot. "So are we, I guess. But I hope we don't present quite so mean and poor-spirited an appearance as that crew."

"Not likely, old man. Why, you and Tom Merry look as if you quite enjoyed it, and everybody seems a bit relieved."

Everybody was, if only because they realised that now they would soon know the worst.

"Tell us all about your end of it, old man," said Tom Merry to Gay.

"Well, there's a long story to tell. To cut it short, the Head was in a regular boiling-over rage when we let him into the dormitory at last; and because he was so mad, and knew it, he wouldn't do anything then. Our Head's as just as they make 'em, you know."

"Yes, he's a good sort."

"Hope you'll think so an hour hence. Well, next day there was the biggest kind of a row. We wouldn't let on anything, but we knew that he must know a good deal, because it had leaked out that that fat old Crump had given the show away. Still, we didn't know how much the old ass of a bluebottle had been able to tell him, and we weren't going to let you fellows in for it if you could be kept out."

"Thanks, Gay!"

"Oh, hang thanks! You'd have done the same for us. The first row was a general one, and we'd all agreed not to tell anything, so the upshot was postponed. Then the Head sent for me and Monk. A bit thick for Frank, you know, because the Head's his pater, and—oh, well, you'll understand it wasn't jam for him! He stuck to his guns like a Briton, though, and we had a pretty rotten half-hour. Then the Head produced that wretched paper—what an idiot you were to drop it, old man!—and we knew it was all up."

"But how——"

"Crump picked the thing up and passed it on. I say, have you fellows found out yet who did it? Because we want to interview those merchants, you know."

"We know—or we think we do. But I don't see that it would be quite the cheese to tell you fellows. If they were some of your chaps now——"

"We'd pound them to a jelly for a low trick like that!"

"So shall we our malefactors. But you wouldn't give them away to us, would you, if the case was reversed?"

"Something in that! No, on the whole, I don't think we should. But we shall expect you fellows to warm those rotters up."

"If we don't err in our calculations," remarked Figgins, "they're getting the first payment on account off their little bill now."

They had clustered round so that all could hear, and there was chuckling in the crowd as Figgins spoke, for all had seen the miserable four.

Perhaps Gay had, too; but he said nothing about that.

"How did the thing reach you?" asked Talbot.

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"Fastened to the wall inside the gate. We took it down directly, of course, and no one but ourselves saw it," Gay answered.

"Then you started in at once to practise with the gloves?" said Kerr.

"Oh, you guessed that, did you? Yes, we did. We weren't going to leave any room for doubts. Of course, we didn't dream that the thing wasn't genuine, though we were a bit surprised at the nasty tone of it. By the way, Talbot——"

"Oh, don't mention it," broke in Talbot, well able to guess what was coming.

His eyes met Gay's, and all bitter feeling—if there had been any on either side—passed with that look.

"Well, what did you fellows get?" asked Jack Blake.

"That's rather a personal question, Blake," returned Gordon Gay. "Will it be enough to say that, besides gating and a whack of lines, I wriggle when I recall it?"

It was quite enough.

They formed up into line now, with Tom Merry and Talbot at the head, Figgins and Kerr next, and the rest by pairs, and so they passed into the Grammar School grounds.

Gordon Gay led them to Dr. Monk's study and tapped at the door.

"Come in!" sounded from behind it.

Gay opened the door. The Grammar School headmaster sat at his writing-table, looking distinctly downcast.

"Ah, Merry! This is a pleasure!" said the doctor grimly.

Tom Merry felt that the pleasure wasn't quite mutual, but could not well say.

As the rest continued to pour in, Dr. Monk lifted his grizzled eyebrows in surprise.

"A second raid in force!" he said. "Stay, I am afraid we shall be uncomfortably crowded here. Gay, go and clear a class-room, and we will adjourn thither. I had not gathered that so many were concerned."

Then the raiders were marched off to the class-room and lined up there to receive "the wigging of their lives," as Lowther called it later.

Dr. Monk pointed out to them the very serious nature of the offence of which they had been guilty. He spoke of the trick played upon both them and his own boys, and the consequences of that trick, and while he dwelt upon that subject his face was very stern and unforgiving. It would have been unhealthy for Crooke & Co. had they fallen into Dr. Monk's hands.

"Now, I have a proposal to make to you all," said the Grammar School's Head. "I cannot undertake to keep this a secret from Dr. Holmes. But I should prefer to tell him to-night, when he will be dining with me, as one tells the story of a thing over and done with. There is only one possible way to that. It is that I should take upon myself the responsibility of punishing you all. To do so without your consent would be to perpetrate a series of assaults, and that course is not to my mind. Understand me—I make no promise that your own Head will abstain from punishing you. I cannot speak for him. But I will speak to him; I will tell him that it seemed to me, seeing how grievously you had offended against me by your raid, that I had a moral right to chastise you, and I will ask him to look over the matter on his side. Do you accept the terms offered?"

Accept them? Rather! They welcomed them with enthusiasm.

"Let me be quite sure. Any boy who would prefer not to accept, stand out!"

No one moved.

It was a flogging—no mistake! Never had they caught it hotter at St. Jim's than they did at the hands of Dr. Monk.

But they all took it without groaning or wincing, and when the last had suffered his fate Tom Merry, who had been the first, said:

"If you please, sir, would you let your fellows off the rest—I mean, the lines and the gating?"

"I will consider it, Merry. No, I will do it. I am glad you asked that."

He held out his hand to Tom Merry. He shook hands with one and all. Now that the flogging was over they were his visitors.

They filed out. In the playground Tom Merry cried, "Three cheers for Dr. Monk!"

And they cheered—not three times only, but thrice three times—cheered as though they had had a welcome present at the doctor's hands.

"Monk," said Jack Blake, "your pater's a Briton."

"And a pretty lusty one, too, eh?" replied Frank Monk, with a grin and an expressive writhe.

THE END.

(Next Wednesday's grand story of St. Jim's is entitled "An Affair of State!" By Martin Clifford. Go early to your Newsagent!)

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The City of Flame

By ALEC G. PEARSON.

A Great New Story of Thrilling Adventure.

THE OPENING CHAPTERS.

Hal Mackenzie, Jim Holdsworth, and Bob Sigsbee, while cruising in a yacht, the Isis, in the Red Sea, discover information relating to a mysterious City of Flame, and form themselves into an expedition for discovering it.

After many exciting adventures, they at last reach the land of Shoa, and after crossing a great desert, reach the Temple of the Sun. There they meet Patrick O'Hara, a tall, red-headed Irishman, who is being kept prisoner by the natives, and regarded as a saint. The comrades then come into collision with Argolis, the chief priest, who wishes their deaths.

A few days later the temple is visited by Queen Clytemna of Shoa, with an enormous retinue. She takes the three adventurers and the Irishman under her protection, and in due course they return with the queen's retinue to the City of Flame, and are lodged in her palace.

The priests, under Argolis, as well as other powerful enemies, are still working against the comrades, and one night they find that their rifles have mysteriously vanished.

Queen Clytemna informs the comrades of vast treasure-trove, and asserts that the treasure is rightfully hers, but the priests have conspired to keep it from her.

In spite of the fact that to recover the treasure will be an extremely hazardous task, the three comrades and O'Hara set forth to do so.

After many thrilling adventures in underground passages they meet an old native who calls himself guardian of the treasure.

The guardian guides the comrades forward, and points to a grim-looking statue of Death, on which is engraved in Arabic characters: "If you go forward you die! If you go backward you die!"

Undaunted by this, the comrades decide to go forward.

(Now go on with the Story.)

A Sight of the Treasure.

"We must make a thorough search of the place," said Hal, "for it doesn't follow there's no treasure in the cave because we don't see piles of gold and silver and jewels in front of us."

"Wal, it sure ain't no Tom Tiddler's ground," replied Sigsbee, "so far as we can see. At the same time, this old galoot must know where the stuff is, as he's guardian of it, so why not make him lead us to it? That'd save us a lot of time and trouble."

"He's a rotten stick to trust to," said Jim Holdsworth, "and as likely to lead us into a trap as anything. He wasn't too willing to come into the cave with us, and he's been in a blue funk ever since we entered. He's afraid something's going to happen."

"'Twas the underground rumbling, an' the bit av a shake-up we had, what put the fear into him," said O'Hara. "An', be the same token, ut made me feel unaisy. 'Twas some big lot av natural gas exploding way down in the stummik av the earth. An', if the next explosion blew this cave to blazes, where'd we be? Gowld an' jools 'ud be moighty small banes thin. Let's get howld av the stuff, an' thin climb out av this to where we can feel we're aloive. This cave's too much loike a big tomb."

"I guess none of us want to stop down here longer'n we can help," put in Sigsbee. "Tell this old witch-doctor, cap'n, he's got to hustle, and put us on to the loot."

Hal explained matters to the guardian of the treasure, whose name he now learnt was Sardones—Jim immediately christened him Sardines—and told him that if he played any tricks he was as good as a dead man.

"But the treasure is not in this cave," protested the old sinner; "it is in the one beyond."

"Well, how do we get there?" Hal demanded. "I see no opening."

"You must pass that other guardian to reach it," croaked Sardones; and he pointed to the huge figure of Death.

"We'll search this cave first," declared Hal.

They did so, and drew blank. Apparently their unwilling guide had told them the truth.

"Now we're ready to go on," said Hal. "Show the way."

Sardones muttered to himself the sentence inscribed on the bronze tablet at the base of the skeleton:

"'If you go forward you die! If you go backward you die! Truly, white men, you were fools to come down here.'"

"Lead on!" ordered Hal.

Then some sort of mad impulse seized him, and, shaking his spear aloft, he cried out in a ringing voice:

"If we go forward we die! If we go backward we die! Let us go forward and die!"

His comrades took up the refrain, and repeated it, brandishing their weapons over their heads. The words rang through the cavern like some wild, barbaric chant. Sardones crouched down, and regarded them with a fearful surprise.

"What can stay these white men," he muttered, "who sing their war-song in the face of death?"

"Now, what made us do that?" exclaimed Jim.

Hal Mackenzie laughed.

"I fancy there's a bit of the original savage left in most of us that come of a fighting stock," he replied—"hidden deep down as a rule, until something causes it to crop up. I felt suddenly as if I had to let myself go, somehow."

"Bedad, ut's made me feel betther!" declared Pat O'Hara. "Look, now, at that ould image! What is ut he's doing?"

The "old image" had crept to the feet of the great skeleton, peering around him all the time as though he was in dread of some ghostly hand being laid upon him to prevent him carrying out the orders of these intruders of a strange race.

Needless to say, no ghostly hand was stretched forth. He rose slowly to his feet, and, reaching upwards, gripped hold of one of the bony arms of the skeleton. Then he pulled down on it, and the gruesome figure moved backwards, the low stone pedestal on which it was standing sliding easily along a groove of polished marble.

In that manner the entrance to the second cave was opened.

"'Tis a quare sort av door," muttered O'Hara; "but I sha'n't be afther copyin' the style av it for the intrance gate av Castle O'Hara, which I'll build wid my share av the treasure."

"You've sure started building 'castles in the air' already!" growled Sigsbee.

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"If we go forward we die! If we go backward we die! Let us go forward and die!" said Hal in a ringing voice, shaking his spear aloft. His comrades took up the refrain and repeated it.
(See page 24.)

"Now, white men," croaked Sardones, "you can see that which you have come after."

He stepped aside, and he seemed to have recovered from his fear, for he was chuckling with a sort of ghoulish enjoyment. What it was that had struck the old sinner as humorous the explorers didn't trouble to inquire. They pressed forward to the opening, and stared silent and amazed into the inner cavern.

The light of torches or of lamps was not required there. They found themselves looking into a cave not more than half the size of the first one, and they could see every part of it, for it was filled with a radiance which was very similar to the light which would be given from a score of shaded electric bulbs.

It was purer, whiter, and less glaring than the light from the natural gas which illuminated Queen Clytemna's palace and the public buildings of the City of Flame, yet it hardly seemed feasible that its source was electricity.

However, as they were adventurers, and for the time being treasure-seekers, and not scientists, they didn't trouble to speculate on the origin of the mystic light. It was marvellous, because the radiant glow filled the cavern from no visible source.

But there was another marvel which claimed their attention, and it was this which held them spellbound.

For all the riches of the world in gold, silver, and precious stones seemed gathered in that cave. It was piled in such profusion that it was impossible for the mind to grasp any idea of the value of it. Gold and silver in ingots and in coins; gold and silver utensils of all shapes and sizes; gold in pure nuggets and gold ornaments.

Vases of strange shapes there were, studded with jewels, and rings, bracelets, and other ornaments, such as are beloved of women.

Then there were heaps of precious stones, all sorts mixed together in glittering profusion—diamonds, rubies, sapphires, pearls, opals, emeralds, and others of lesser value. It dazzled the eyes to look at them.

"Je-ru-sa-lem!" gasped Sigsbee. "Why, that Queen of Sheba must have been the richest woman in all the wide world—richer'n any millionaire ever was before or ever will be again. Rockefeller and Vanderbilt, and all that crowd have got to step back out of the way now. Because, don't you see, although we'll get a share each, the rest belongs to Queen Clytemna; and she'll be—or she is now—richer than any six millionaires you like to pick out."

"That's so," admitted Hal. "And she always has been, as Sheba's treasure is rightfully hers. But, so far, all this wealth hasn't been much use to her—in fact, no use at all, as she hasn't been able to handle it."

"Well, some of it'll be of use to her at last," said Jim, "when we cart it up to the palace. My idea is to let the gold and silver alone, and only take the jewels. A pocketful of diamonds is worth fifty times as much as a pocketful of gold. And it would be a long job carting all that gold away, even if the road was clear, and no risk of being intercepted, and having a fight for it."

"And that's a pretty sure proposition," replied Hal. "We sha'n't be able to get a quarter of this stuff away, and a quarter is more than we'll need."

"Faith, that'll make us all rich for loife!" put in O'Hara. "An' Clytemna——"

The croaking voice of Sardones interrupted him.

"Do you fear to touch the treasure now that you see it, white men?" he asked. "Has the gold no value now that it is within your reach?"

For they were still all standing in the doorway, their astonishment at the sight of the fabulous wealth having simply held them there.

NEXT WEDNESDAY: "AN AFFAIR OF STATE!" A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD

"Old Sardines is getting sarcastic at our expense," said Jim.

"Wal, it ain't much use standin' lookin' at it!" exclaimed Sigsbee. "We've got to load ourselves up with the stuff and get away back with it, and the sooner we set to work the better, I reckon."

They all made a rush now, but for some little time they occupied themselves in examining the rare and quaint gold vessels and ornaments, and picking up handfuls of the gems and letting them run in a glittering shower through their fingers. It was a temptation not to be resisted.

And while so occupied they gave no thought to Sardones. Therefore, they did not see the look of malevolent triumph with which he regarded them as he crept softly back and laid his hand upon a lever that was at one side of the opening between the two caves.

But presently they were startled by hearing his weird and mocking laugh.

"He, he, he! It is pleasant to handle the yellow gold and the glittering stones, is it not, white men?" he cried. "But have you already forgotten what is written—'If you go forward you die. If you go backward you die'? Look forward, and look backward, and see—what you will see."

They all sprang round, as if they had received a shock from a galvanic battery. And this is what they saw.

Right across the opening between the two caves—the skeleton's doorway, as Sigsbee aptly named it—and extending for a yard on each side of it, was a gap in the floor about three feet in width. Yet there had been no break in the floor when they entered. And out of this gap there streamed a broad sheet of flame—a wall of fire which no man could pass. The peculiarity of this flame-barrier was that it was quite silent; there was no roaring noise accompanying it, as might have been expected.

The flame must have leaped up from some pit of fire beneath them as Sardones spoke, for they only now began to feel the heat from it. A pressure on the lever had been sufficient. The explorers were beginning to realise that they had so far only reached the fringe of the mysterious forces connected with the City of Shoa.

Consternation was on every face as they gazed, first at the mass of flame, and then at each other.

"That old goat has tricked us, after all!" exclaimed Sigsbee bitterly. "I could kick myself for not having thought to haul him in here with us."

"We could all kick ourselves," replied Jim, "but it would be far more satisfactory to kick old Sardines. I wish he was within reach of my foot. There he is, croaking again."

They could not see him, because it was as impossible to see through that thick wall of flame as it would have been to see through a baize curtain. But they could hear the old miscreant's high-pitched voice.

"He, he, he!" he cackled. "I go now to tell Anubis, the councillor, and Argolis, the high priest, how you are gloating over the yellow gold, and the bright stones in the treasure cave. You will never leave them. And in time there will be more skeletons to guard the treasure. He, he, he!"

That was the last—for the time being—they heard of him.

The Black Lake.

"What'll the son av a sea cook mane by 'more skillitons to guard the treasure?'" demanded O'Hara wrathfully. "Is ut——"

"Seems to me his meaning's clear enough," interrupted Hal. "We're boxed up in this cave, and we can't get out while that sheet of flame cuts off our retreat."

"Be the mortial, 'tis well named, this City av Flame!" continued O'Hara. "To blazes wid it!"

"It has already gone to blazes," said Jim, with a faint effort of humour. But he was not feeling at all humorous. Nor were the others, for his efforts failed to win any appreciation.

"This is a sort of occasion," growled Sigsbee, "when you find out how useless gold is to help you out of a tight place. Yet, I allow, folks'll go hunting around for it till the world busts up. That old mummy must have turned some crank, or such like contrivance in the main cave, which opened the floor and let loose this fire. It comes from a reservoir of natural gas, and there must be a sea of fire underneath us."

"Feels like it," said Jim. "This place is like an oven already."

He mopped his face, which was streaming with perspiration.

"Mebbe the flame'll die down afther a bit," suggested O'Hara.

"It'll burn for a century," declared Sigsbee gloomily.

However, the quartette were not of the sort to take a beating lying down. Their predicament was as bad as it could well be, but it wouldn't mend matters to sit down and bewail their fate.

"Let us go forward—and die! Come! Those were the words we chanted only a short time ago!" exclaimed Hal. "But we won't think of dying yet. We haven't properly examined the other end of the cave. Let's see what obstruction there is there."

All that was visible from where they were standing was a wall of rock, with a projecting shoulder which slanted out from it.

What did this shoulder hide?

They crossed the floor and looked round the end of the projection. The mouth of a tunnel was facing them.

Jim heaved a sigh of relief.

"Thank goodness it's cooler here!" he exclaimed. "Do you notice," he added excitedly, "there's a steady current of air coming out of the mouth of the tunnel. That must come from outside, for there's no movement of air down in these infernal regions!"

"You're right, old chap!" cried Hal. "We'll explore this tunnel."

Their hopes rose high at once. Fortunately, they had brought the lamps to the inner cave with them, and they were quickly relighted.

Jim led the way. A dozen paces along the tunnel they came to a flight of stone steps leading downwards. They descended, and on reaching the bottom found they were on a platform of rock about six feet in width. Beyond the edge of this platform there was water. They were on the brink of a subterranean lake, but of what extent they could form no idea. The light from the lamps was only strong enough to penetrate the gloom for a few yards, so they were unable to see to the other side, or how far it extended to right and left.

It was a forbidding sheet of water, so black that it scarcely flung back any reflection of the rays of light, though here and there the surface was disturbed by frothy bubbles, which rose up, broke, and vanished. Also some thin patches of grey mist floated slowly across the water.

"Doesn't look very inviting," muttered Hal.

"Well, I don't feel any sort of yearning for a swim in it," said Jim.

"I allow it's the cussedest bit of an old ditch, from the looks of it," joined in Sigsbee, "that ever I clapped eyes on!"

"Faith, we've got to get across it some way!" said O'Hara. "An' as they ain't thought of purviding a motor-launch for our convaynience, we'll nade to swim."

"Are you game to try it?" asked Sigsbee, grinning.

"I'll thry so far's I can go," retorted the Irishman. "Half a moile's my distance. If so be the lake is wider than that I'll have to come back."

With that he started to pull off his shirt, but Sigsbee advised him not to be in a hurry.

"Dip your hand in first," he said drily.

O'Hara did so, but quickly drew it out again, with a yell of pain.

"Holies!" he spluttered. "The water's boilin'!"

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Hal.

Then he and Jim dipped the tips of their fingers in, for it was hard to believe that such a body of water was actually boiling. They withdrew their fingers hastily—quite convinced.

"I guessed she was on the boil," chuckled Sigsbee, "when I spotted them bubbles and the thin clouds of vapour, which same are steam. Way out in Southern Texas I once happened on a similar kind of lake, and I knew the signs."

Hal sat down on the lower step, his chin resting on his hand, and stared at the gloomy sheet of water.

"Then we're properly fixed!" he said. "There are two possible exits; but one is blocked by a wall of flame, and the other by a lake of boiling water. Those are the plain facts in the fewest words. Think them over."

Their spirits, so lately buoyed up on the discovery of the tunnel, now sank again to zero. For the time all the manhood seemed to have gone out of them. They had given proof often enough that they were not cowards, for they had bravely encountered perils such as falls to the lot of few men to face, but there are forms of death such as the bravest may not contemplate without a shudder.

To slowly perish of hunger and thirst in that place of horror! And the bitter mockery of it, that within reach of their hands was treasure enough to buy a kingdom, yet it could not purchase a single second to add on to their lives. No wonder that just then they hated the very thought of gold and diamonds, and Jim muttered that he hoped he might never see a beastly diamond again.

That is a sort of wish, however, which remains only so long as diamonds are of no practical value or use.

For a long time the silence remained unbroken, for, indeed, there seemed nothing now to say, until at length O'Hara made a remark which caused a sort of reaction. He didn't address the others; he was just talking to himself.

"Av we naded boilin' water to make tay wid, we'd be all

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roight; av we naded a foire to roast a leg av pork, we'd be all roight; av we naded an oven to bake a poi in, we'd be all roight," he murmured. "But sorra wan av these things do we want to do. For we've no tay, no pork, an' no poi."

Well, somehow O'Hara's ridiculous soliloquy started Jim off laughing, and the others followed his example, much to the Irishman's astonishment, for he was quite unaware that he had been speaking aloud. They laughed almost hysterically; and when the fit passed off O'Hara asked them:

"What the blazes they were laughing about?"

"Don't you know what you were saying, you cuckoo?" cried Jim.

"I know what I was thinkin'——"

"You were thinking aloud, man, and your remarks about tay, pork, and pie made us laugh. Well, the laugh has done me good."

"Me, too," said Hal.

"And me," echoed Sigsbee. "Kind of bucked us up. Bully for you, O'Hara. I vote we have a sup an' a bite, and then explore along this ledge a bit."

"Right-ho!" said Jim.

It was no more than a sup of wine and water and a mouthful of meat-cake they could have, for it was necessary to carefully husband their supply of food.

When they had finished this light repast, which only occupied them a few minutes, they turned their attention to an examination of the ledge of rock, which bordered the edge of the lake.

On the left it ended abruptly a few yards away from where they were standing, but on the right it extended apparently for a considerable distance.

They walked slowly along it in single file, Sigsbee leading with one of the lamps, and Jim immediately behind him with the other. Sometimes the ledge was no more than a couple of feet in width, and then they had to move with extra caution, for it was wet, smooth, and slippery. To have fallen into that boiling lake would have meant an agonising death. At other times the ledge broadened out to eight feet or more.

For fully a quarter of a mile they followed it, and as the end of the lake was now in view they had hopes they would be able to walk right round it. But that hope was not fulfilled, for the American suddenly uttered an exclamation.

They had come to the end of the rock path.

"All that walk for nothing!" said Jim.

"Arrah, now, don't be afther grumbling!" said O'Hara. "'Twas something to do, anyway, an' the walk back will——".

"Hold on!" cried Sigsbee. "You needn't talk of going back yet. I've butted into something—good!"

What he had "butted" into had to remain for a few minutes a matter of conjecture, for he didn't volunteer any further explanation, and as the ledge was narrow at that point no one could pass him. He was standing half-hidden by a projection from the wall of rock, with the lamp held out in front of him.

His companions were simply bursting with curiosity, and at length Jim called out impatiently:

"Give it a name, old scout! What is it you see? Don't keep us on tenterhooks!"

Sigsbee disappeared behind the rock projection.

"Come and look for yourselves!" he shouted in reply. "And don't rush!"

They didn't rush, but they pressed forward eagerly, and on turning the corner of rock found themselves in a deep, but rather narrow recess.

And fitting into this recess, as though it had been a dry dock made for her, was a boat of ancient build. Her length was between thirty and forty feet, and her breadth of beam seven feet. There were seats for four rowers, and a platform astern for the helmsman. Her stem was carved to represent a serpent, with the head raised and thrust forward as though about to strike.

The stern was richly carved, and there were traces of much gilding, but the giltwork, like the wood itself, was black with age. There were three paddles in this strange craft.

They stared at it in wonderment, for somehow it had never occurred to them they might find a boat on the margin of the Black Lake. It was not a sheet of water on which a sane person would go boating for pleasure.

"Bedad! There's someone used to come by way av the boilin' wather to help themselves to the treasure in the ould days!" exclaimed O'Hara. "An' what they did we can do, if so be this illigant craft'll float."

"I'm afraid she'll fall to pieces if we attempt to move her," said Hal. "The wood's sound enough, but if the fastenings are metal they're eaten through with rust ages ago."

They had all clambered into the boat, and were examining her from curved prow to rounded stern. It would have been interesting to know how many centuries she had been resting in her present position; unquestionably she had been there an immense time, for dust lay thickly upon her—black, volcanic dust—which, judging by their surroundings, must have taken hundreds of years to accumulate.

Pat O'Hara was groping about the stern, brushing the dust away with his hands. Suddenly he called out:

"Come here, Hal, an' see if you can read this. 'Tis writin' av the sort these haythins use."

Hal crawled over to where the Irishman was kneeling, and saw an oblong metal tablet which was let into the boat's stern. The inscription on it was not in the "writin'" used by these "haythins," as O'Hara put it—he meaning the Shoans—but in the ancient Greek character.

However, Hal had made a special study of ancient languages, and was able to decipher the words. They were almost as clear as on the day they were engraved, and were merely a statement of ownership of the craft.

"This is the boat of Orestes, the Greek," he read. Then he turned to Jim. "It's queer," he said, "how all those statements on the tablet we found at the Red Sea island are being verified. You remember that Anubis, the Egyptian—not the Anubis who is our special enemy, I need hardly say—and Orestes, the Greek, referred to the riches they gathered in the city."

"That was three thousand years ago," replied Jim.

"Well, they left plenty behind them," returned Hal, "and their boat too. So they must have used the route across the lake. Clearly, there's a way out when we get to the other side. Come along, chaps, let's see if this craft will float! If we put our backs into the job we'll soon get through with it."

The rock ledge sloped down gently from the recess to the water's edge, forming a sort of slipway, which would render the task of launching much easier. What sort of wood the boat was built of it was impossible to say, for it was black with extreme age. It was also as hard as iron, and very heavy.

There were two long planks on which her bilges rested, and when these were freed they were used as levers. Spurred by their energetic young leader—for Hal was always so recognised—they all worked with a will. Inch by inch the heavy craft was moved, until at last they were able to dispense with the levers.

"Shoulders to it!" cried Hal. "Now, all together!"

"Hurroo! There she goes!" yelled O'Hara.

Down the slope of rock she slid, and then plunged stern first into the steaming waters of the lake. They held on to her snake-head prow, so that she wouldn't drift away, and then swung her round until she was lying quietly alongside the platform.

"Phew! It's hot work in this Turkish-bath of a place!" exclaimed Jim, down whose face the perspiration was streaming. "I shall soon be trained down to bantam weight, and be able to get a job as a jockey when I'm back in England."

They all now climbed into the boat to see what effect their weight would have. Gaining confidence, they rocked her from side to side, and tested her in various ways. She scarcely leaked at all. In twenty minutes she had taken in less than an inch of water through the seams.

Her fastenings held good. Hal had made a mistake when he said that if they were metal they would have rusted through long ago. Had they been of iron, or steel, or copper, that would have been the case; but the metal those ancients used defied time and rust alike.

"Wal, I guess we're goin' to shift some of that treasure," exclaimed Sigsbee, "now we're able to get across the lake!"

"To be sure we are," replied Hal.

"An hour ago," said Jim, "I felt that I didn't ever again want to see another diamond or another ounce of gold. Now the grab-all lust has got hold of me again, and I want all I can get.

"Gowld, gowld, beautiful gowld,
Dimminds, an' rubies, an' imiralds!
All to be had for the takin', I'm towld,"

O'Hara sang in a voice like a fog-horn, until the others threatened to tip him overboard if he didn't stop.

"Stow it, Pat!" exclaimed Jim. "You'll wake the dead if you make that din. They'll think it's the end of the world come at last!"

"Faith, if they think that it ought to cheer them up!" replied the Irishman, grinning.

They paddled the boat to the landing-place at the mouth of the tunnel, and, having made her fast, went back into the treasure cave, which was as hot as an oven. The great sheet of flame still flared up, so there was no possibility of returning by way of the Skeleton's Cavern, even had they wished to do so.

(Another thrilling instalment of this fine serial story next Wednesday. To avoid disappointment, order your copy early.)

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 388.

For Next Wednesday—

"AN AFFAIR OF STATE!"

By Martin Clifford.

Amusing in the extreme is next Wednesday's grand, long, complete story of the chums of St. Jim's. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, acting from the highest patriotic motives, determines to "put in his oar" in connection with Government matters, and claims an audience with no less important a personage than the Prime Minister. To the surprise of many of his chums, Gussy receives a reply from Downing Street, bidding him meet a prominent Government official in the neighbourhood of the school. Who the great man is, and the weird adventures which befall D'Arcy after the interview, are graphically described in Martin Clifford's winning style.

No "Gemite" can afford to miss so delightfully absorbing a yarn as

"AN AFFAIR OF STATE!"

FROM FOUR FOLKESTONE FRIENDS.

From the charming seaside town of Folkestone, where hundreds of enthusiastic "Gemites" have their abode, comes the following letter. I make no apology for printing it on this page, since it touches upon several important topics in connection with the companion papers.

"Dear Editor,—There are four of us composing this letter. The first thing we look at when we open the good old 'Gem' is the Weekly Chat to all your readers. Some weeks ago, when we were looking at the replies in brief, we saw an answer to a girl reader of our town. Of course, that interested us more than the others. It was concerning 'Cousin Ethel's Schooldays.'

"Well, if this story is out of print, as you say it is, could you not get it reprinted? We are sure it would be well worth your while to do so. Do try and get it reprinted, dear Editor! You would be doing hundreds of boys and girls a good turn. Just put a little bit of this letter in your page, and by the next week's post you will have heaps of letters backing up our suggestion.

"And now the writers of this letter wish to ask you a few questions. Can you tell us what Switzerland is ruled by? Is Mr. Browning-Jones, who has a school by the old miller's hut, still there? And is Marmaduke Smythe still at St. Jim's?

"We all buy your companion papers, and at the end of the month we give ten to some children to get new readers with. The other twenty go to the Army Nursing Home, together with some tobacco, for the wounded.

"Now, dear Editor, we seem to have worried you enough, so wishing the 'Gem' and its companion papers every success in the world,

"We remain,

"Your never-miss-one-word readers.

"LILY BURTON,
"ETHEL WALKER,
"VIOLET HAMMOND,
"JOHN BARTON,
"Of Folkestone."

My loyal Kentish chums are to be commended for a most interesting letter.

With regard to their earnest request for "Cousin Ethel's Schooldays" to reappear, I will act as I usually do in these cases, and leave the matter in the hands of my readers. If I happen to be besieged with letters clamouring for the story to appear again, I will make arrangements for it to be done. If, on the other hand, my chums are not particularly keen about it, I will take no steps in the matter, since I always make it a rule to study the wishes of the majority.

In reply to the three questions I am asked, Switzerland is governed by a Republic; Mr. Browning Jones, whose school was destroyed by fire, has removed to another district; and Marmaduke Smythe is still a member of the New House at St. Jim's, though his doings, of course, are overshadowed by those of Figgins & Co.

My four friends are performing splendid service in obtaining new readers, and, what is more, in sending copies of the companion papers to homes for the wounded. I have it on good authority that the "Gem" and its fellow-journals have brought a ray of sunshine into many a ward; and those who are responsible for such thoughtful acts of kindness are patriots in every sense of the word.

REPLIES IN BRIEF.

"Gumpot" (Wavertree).—Yes, there have been halfpenny editions of the "Gem" Library, and they were jolly good value for the money, too!

W. Bedford (Manchester).—Harry Wharton & Co. are all in the same Form—the Remove. Wingate is seventeen years of age. With regard to your question asking which organisation you should join, the Boy Scouts or the Boys' Brigade, both are very excellent movements. You should select the one which will cause you the least inconvenience in the way of distance.—The trouble you complain of is stitch. You are evidently out of condition. Take your exercise in a less vigorous fashion, and keep off pastry.

G. R. T.—I incline to the belief that ventriloquists are born, not made. However, if you wish to acquire the art, write to Messrs. Glaisher & Co., Charing Cross Road, London, W.C., for their book on the subject.

"Y.M.C.A." (Bradford).—I should strongly advise you to stay where you are.

"Disappointed" (Barry).—I can fully sympathise with you, especially as you take your disappointment in such a sportsmanlike way. It not infrequently happens that several readers send up the same storyette, and this must have occurred in your case.

Dorothy B. (New Zealand),—Many thanks for your kind suggestion. It is a good one, and I will probably act upon it later on. Best wishes to you and your Colonial chums.

"A Lonely Girl Reader" (Rotherhithe).—If you will send me your full name, I will try and help you in the direction referred to. I am really very much obliged to you for the splendid way in which you have backed up the old paper and helped to keep its flag flying in spite of adverse criticism.

C. W. Johnson (Leeds).—George Darrel, George Crooke, Henry Kerruish, and Cecil Langton are the names you require. Thanks for your good wishes.

P. J. F. (Australia).—The name Reginald Talbot is quite correct. Glad you are so "gone" on the "Gem."

Harold Murray (Manchester).—The result of the competition you mention has already been announced.

W. W. Peters, Lincoln Street, Rosewater, South Australia, would like to hear from some enthusiastic English Gemites.

J. Land (Dalston).—Don't worry so much about your growth. You will probably put on several more inches yet. Remember that no one by taking thought can add one cubit to his stature; and Nature will look after your growth in her own mysterious way.

Leslie Smith (Sheffield).—Your idea is quite good, and if you watch the pages of our companion paper, "The Magnet" Library, you will see that it has been put into effect. I hope to hear from you again.

THE EDITOR.

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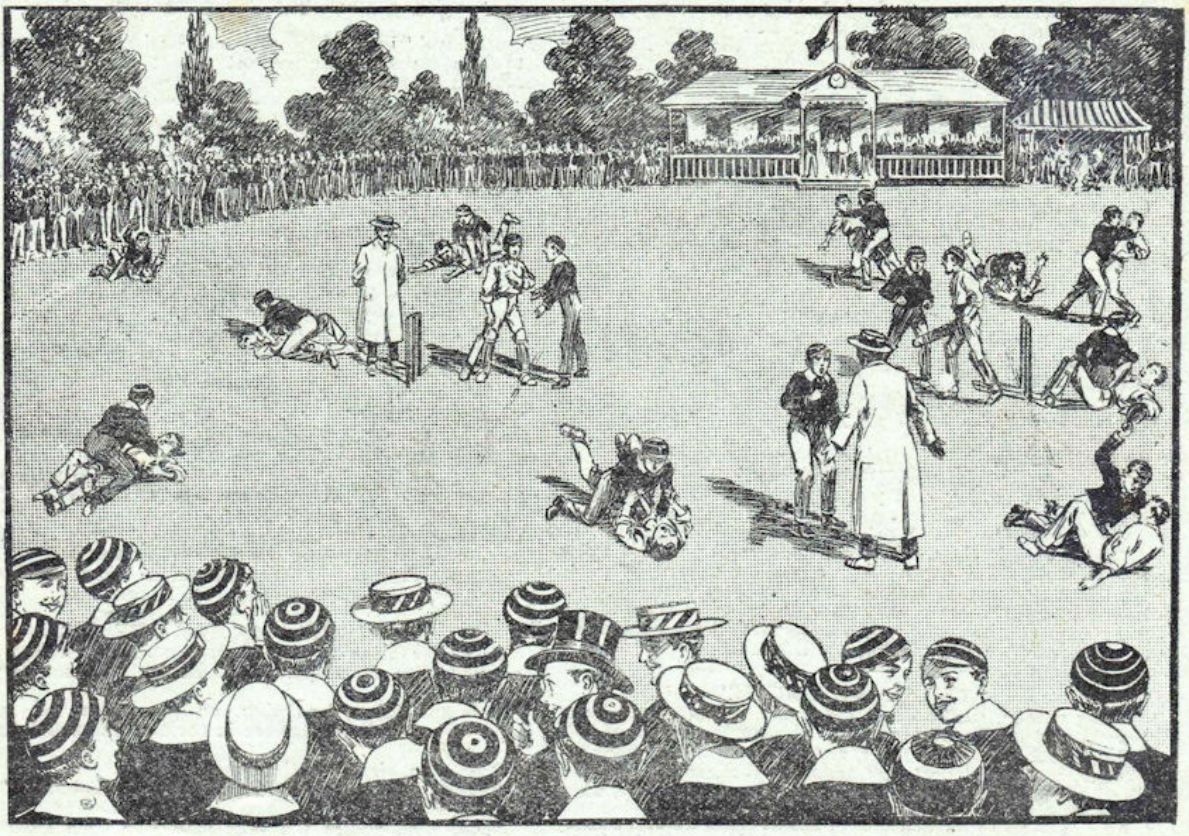
READ

THE BOGUS ELEVEN!



A Magnificent Long, Complete School Tale of Jimmy Silver & Co. and the Chums of Rookwood, in

TO-DAY'S ISSUE OF

A Cash Prize for Every Contributor to this Page.

Our Weekly Prize Page.

LOOK OUT FOR YOUR WINNING STORYETTE.

DID THE DOG KNOW?

An Irishman went on a visit to a friend's house. On his arrival he was met at the door by a fierce-looking dog, which began to bark viciously at him. Pat drew back in alarm, and asked his friend to call the animal off.

"You needn't be afraid," remarked the friend. "Remember the old proverb—'Barking dogs do not bite.'"

"That's all very well," answered Pat. "You know the proverb, I know the proverb; but does the dog know the proverb?"—Sent in by P. J. Toner, Bessbrook, co. Armagh.

HE KNEW THEM ALL.

Teacher: "Now, Tommy, please tell me how many seasons there are."

Tommy (smartly): "Six, sir!"

Teacher (sternly): "I always thought there were only four. Give me the names of the six you mention."

Tommy (proudly): "Spring, summer, autumn, winter, football, and cricket."—Sent in by H. Ogden, Bangor, North Wales.

THE REASON.

"I say, Tommy," called a man, who had just driven up, to a passing youngster, "come and hold my horse for a few minutes, will you?"

"Can't," came the unexpected reply.

"Why? Are you busy?"

"No."

"Shall you be late for school?"

"Ain't going to school. Going home."

"Will your mother beat you if you are a little later than usual?"

"Not much!"

"Then why, in the name of goodness, can't you earn a few coppers by holding my horse for just five minutes?"

"'Cos I ain't got no buttons on my trousers, and I have to keep my hands in my pockets to hold 'em up!" snapped the youngster; and he walked on his way whistling.—Sent in by J. D. Aynsley, South Shields, co. Durham.

"THEY ALSO SERVE!"

"Beg pardon, sir," said an old tramp, stopping an officer, "could you kindly help a poor old man who has served faithfully for twenty-one years, and is now nearly starving?"

"Yes, my man," promptly answered the generous-hearted officer. "Here's half-a-crown for you. Oh, by the way, what regiment did you serve in?"

"The convicts' battalion, sir. I served seven years for highway robbery, and fourteen years for manslaughter," said the tramp, as he shuffled off hastily.—Sent in by T. Sutcliffe, jun., Burnley, Lancs.

PAT'S SMART RETORT.

A British warship recently dropped anchor off the coast of Ireland, and a Tommy, noticing a full-bearded Irish sailor who had come ashore, thought he would raise a laugh at Pat's expense, and shouted sarcastically:

"Here, I say, Pat, when are you going to put those whiskers of yours on the reserve list?"

"Begorra, just as soon as ever you place your tongue on the civil list!" Pat retorted, with a grin.—Sent in by H. Cohen, Manor Park, E.

PRACTICAL JOHNNY.

Mother: "Johnny, run upstairs and fetch me baby's bonnet, please."

Johnny (who is tired, and in a disagreeable mood): "Don't want to."

Mother: "Oh, well, if you're going to be unkind to your little sister, she will put her wings on and fly back to heaven."

Johnny: "Well, then, why not let her put her wings on to fly upstairs for her bonnet?"—Sent in by Miss F. Blackmore, Plumstead.

THE EXPERIMENT.

In pre-war days a man went into a barber's shop in the Mile End Road, which was kept by a German, who was probably more clever at spying than barbering.

Anyway, when shaving his customer, he cut and gashed him nearly all over his face.

When the job was over, the victim said:

"Give me a drink of water, please."

"I 'opes dat you vos nod going to faint?" said the barber, handing the unfortunate customer a glass.

"Oh, no," said the man mildly. "No. I just wanted to see if my mouth still held water."—Sent in by W. G. Dipple, Camberwell, S.E.

CAN (NED).

Canvasser: "Can I see the lady of the house?"

Maid: "Yes, you can."

Canvasser (as lady appears): "Madam, I am selling a can-opener which cannot be beaten. It opens any can that can be opened by a can-opener, and any can can be opened by this can-opener that can be opened by any can-opener. If you can show me a can, I can——"

But the door had closed with a slam.—Sent in by George Wheatley, Houghton-le-Spring, co. Durham.

JUST THE MAN FOR THE JOB.

A soldier in a certain battalion recently asked to be excused from church-parade on the grounds that he was an agnostic.

Sergeant-Major (assuming an expression of innocent interest): "Don't you believe in the Ten Commandments, my man?"

"Not one, sir," was the expected reply.

"What, not the rule about keeping the Sabbath?"

"No, sir."

"Ah, well, you're the very man I've been looking for! Go and scrub out the canteen."—Sent in by G. Salmon, Shortlands, Kent.

SUSPICIOUS.

An elderly lady recently walked into a bank in Inverness, threw down her deposit book, and told the cashier she wanted to withdraw all her money.

On being given the few pounds that represented her total savings, she retired to the far end of the counter and carefully counted it. Then, returning to the cashier, she handed him back the money, and said:

"Ay, that'll do, ma mon. Just put it back again. I only wanted to see if it was all there a' richt."—Sent in by Gunner A. Brook, Bulford Camp, Wilts.

As the "GEM" Storyette Competition has proved so popular, it has been decided to run this novel feature in conjunction with our new Companion Paper,

THE BOYS' FRIEND, 1d.,

Published every Monday,

in order to give more of our readers a chance of winning one of our useful Money Prizes.

If you know a really funny joke, or a short, interesting paragraph, send it along (on a post-card) before you forget it, and address it to: The Editor, THE BOYS' FRIEND and GEM, Gough House, Gough Square, Fleet Street, E.C.

Look out for YOUR Prize Storyette in next week's GEM or BOYS' FRIEND.