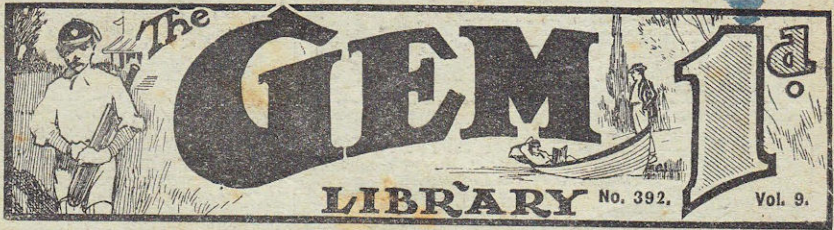


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FOR THE OLD SCHOOL'S SAKE! UNDER THE DRAGON!

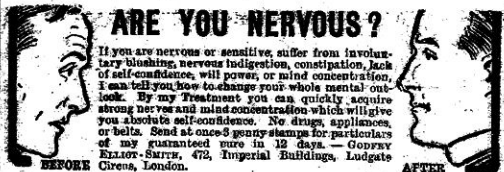
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"You're St. Jim's fellows, I see by your caps. Help me, for the old school's sake!" (See Chapter 1.)

CHAPTER 1.

The Fugitive.

"YOU'RE St. Jim's fellows, I see by your caps. Help me, for the old school's sake!"

The speaker was a young man with a haggard, desperate face. His clothes, of good material and cut, were dusty and rumpled, looking very much as if he had slept in them for the last few nights. He was hatless, and his dark hair was peppered liberally with the dust of the summer roads along which he had been tramping. His chin and upper lip, clean-shaven as a rule, it was evident, were horribly bristly.

The fellows to whom he spoke were Tom Merry and Talbot of the Shell.

These two had strolled away from their comrades after a picnic in the woods by the river. It was a broiling hot day, and to lie lazily under the trees and talk had seemed to them the best way of spending the next hour or two of it.

But they had not been on their backs five minutes, and had scarcely exchanged twenty words, when the fugitive appeared.

At his appeal they sat up.

To one who asked in the name of St. Jim's these two were scarcely likely to turn a deaf ear.

One of them counted St. Jim's as home. That was Talbot, who had no other home.

And the old school was no less dear to Tom Merry than to Talbot.

Next Wednesday:

OUR WONDERFUL SUMMER DOUBLE NUMBER.

No. 392. (New Series.) Vol. 9.

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"Who are you?" asked Tom Merry.
 "And what help do you want from us?" inquired Talbot.

"I'm an old boy—never mind my name now. And the police are after me, that's why I want help!"

Tom Merry and Talbot looked at one another.

To refuse point-blank, without hearing more, was impossible to them. But, to do as this fellow wished, might lead them into very serious trouble.

"Are they close on you?" Tom Merry asked.

"Yes—no—I really don't know! I think I may have dodged them in the last few miles, since I've got into country that I know well. But they nearly had me at Westwood."

"We'd better step in among the trees, in case anybody comes along," said Talbot. "Mind you, we don't promise that we'll help. But we don't say that we shall refuse."

"You mean you may do it if I can convince you that the police are barking up the wrong tree," answered the stranger, with the touch of a sneer. "Well, I'm not certain I can do that; but it's a fact, whether you believe it or not."

Was he telling the truth?

Neither felt sure.

There was something about him that they did not quite like. But they realised that no man was likely to show at his best under such conditions as these—unwashed, unshaven, dusty, dishevelled, and hunted.

Together, the three went deeper into the wood, and no word was spoken until Tom Merry called a halt.

"This ought to do, I think," he said. "We're far enough from any path now."

Then he waited, and Talbot kept silence too. For it seemed to them that the next move was clearly with the stranger.

He seemed loth to speak. Twice he cleared his throat as if to begin, and twice failed to make a start.

At last he said desperately:

"Look here, you fellows, I'm faint for want of food; I've had nothing since last night. But the thirst is worse even than that. It's a positive torture! If you could get me something to eat and drink—"

He stopped short. They wondered whether what he wanted most was to put off telling his story.

But it was quite easy to believe that he was really hungry and thirsty, and even if they had known for certain that he was a criminal, they would not have cared to refuse him food and drink.

"I guess I can do something for you," said Tom Merry. "The stuff wasn't all wolfed, was it, Talbot?"

"Shouldn't think so. But it's half an hour since we left, and somebody may have made another assault on it since then."

At that the stranger grinned, and they thought him more likeable.

"I know," he said. "Been there myself. But, even if you can't guarantee supplies, I'd be obliged if you would have a shot at getting them."

"Right-ho!" answered Tom Merry. "You'll stay here, Talbot?"

His chum nodded.

Tom hurried off to the spot between the woods and the river where he and the rest had lately dealt, in their usual capable manner, with an excellent spread.

As he neared it he heard the voices of Figgins, Herries, and Manners from the river bank, while nearer at hand sounded trumpet notes that could only come from the nasal organ of Fatty Wynn.

"Good egg!" he said to himself. "They've left Fatty to keep guard over the grub, and Fatty's taking forty hundred winks, as per usual. So nobody needn't know nuffink, as the nigger said."

He was right. Patty alone was there, and Fatty lay on his back, with a handkerchief spread over his face, and his hands crossed peacefully on his well-filled waistcoat. So still and hot was the day that there was no breeze to stir the handkerchief, though Tom Merry could see it gently rising and falling through the slight local air disturbance produced by the Welsh junior's trumpeting.

"Anybody might walk off with the blessed lot, and

that old porpoise would never know anything about it," Tom Merry murmured. "But I'll forgive him this time, because it all happens to suit my book."

He investigated the contents of the hamper which stood at Fatty's head.

There was actually a steak-and-kidney pie, still uncut. The provisioning had been on the most liberal scale, or such a thing could not have happened.

Tom commandeered the pie, also a large hunk of cake, and three bottles of ginger-ale.

"Probably won't care about tarts, or anything of that sort," he said to himself. "And if I collar more it will be missed. Come to that, though, what I've taken is safe to be missed. Old Fatty won't forget that pie."

But it could not be helped.

"I say, Figgy, wheeah are Tom Mewwy and Talbot?" inquired the voice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of the Fourth. "I wathah think I will look the boundahs up. It is scarcely the thing for them to waltz off by themselves in this mannah, I considah."

"Oh, hang that ass Gussy!" said Tom, and made off at once.

He found Talbot and the stranger sitting on the ground. That they were fairly well concealed was proved by the fact that, trying to reach the place by what he fancied to be a somewhat more direct route than that by which he had gone, he had some difficulty in finding it at all.

They had been talking. He could see that by Talbot's face.

But he did not begin to ask questions at once.

Instead, he handed over a bottle of the ginger-ale, which the fugitive clutched with eager hands, and then proceeded to set down the rest of what he had brought.

"This is no end good of you," said the stranger, and put the bottle, quickly opened, to his lips.

Gluck, gluck, gluck! He did not take it away until it was drained to the very last drop.

"It's not my usual tippie, but I don't know that I ever drank anything which went down better," he said.

Then he cast wolfish eyes upon the pie and cake.

"Do you mind if we go away and talk a bit, while you attend to these things?" asked Talbot.

"Not at all. I feel as if I don't mind anything now that I have some decent food to put inside me."

The two chums walked out of earshot.

"You're a bit doubtful, old man," Tom Merry said.

"I am," confessed Talbot.

"How much has he told you?"

"Oh, enough to go on with. The question is how much of it can we believe?"

"You don't think he's straight, then?"

"I don't know, Tom. Really, I don't know. I hate judging another fellow. You can't help judging partly by appearances. And, of course, a fellow doesn't look his best in such a state as this. But on his own showing he's been pretty much of a waster. I'd be the last to say that that shows there's no good in him. On the other hand, it makes one a bit doubtful how to believe him."

"Well, tell me the yarn, old chap. And I don't mind saying this before I hear it—if your judgment's against helping him any further, I'm with you. For I know by this time how keen you are to give a lift to the lame dogs. And I reckon I've learned, too, that you don't make any very big mistakes about them."

"If a chap's to make a mistake, it had better be on the right side, and that seems to be the side of mercy," Talbot answered gravely.

"You're right. Well, who is this merchant?"

"Chap named Featherstone. Was here in Railton's early days as a master—remembers Railton's coming fresh from the 'Varsity when he was a fag. Remembers Kildare's brother—Big Kildare, they called him—in the Army now, like pretty nearly everybody else. He's St. Jim's right enough."

"What's he done?"

"Nothing, by his own account, except run into debt and gone the pace like a good many fools!"

"But what's he supposed to have done? Why do the police want him?"

"Embezzlement of sorts."

Tom Merry's face grew long and solemn.

"That's hot," he said. "I don't like that. Of course, he says he's innocent? And he may be. Very likely is. But if so, somebody else must be guilty. Who? Has he any notion?"

"Says he has. Won't name the fellow."

"Doesn't make much odds to us, old man, because we shouldn't know the other chap from Adam. But makes a heap of difference to the police."

"I said so. Asked him why he didn't face the music and show the other fellow up."

"And what did he say?" asked Tom.

"Couldn't. Caught in a net. Been playing the giddy goat to such an extent that he's made circumstantial evidence against himself, I gather."

"That's all very well, Talbot. But why bolt? It will be ten times worse for him if he's caught, because bolting looks like guilt."

"Mother's ill, he says. Shock of hearing that he was in prison might be fatal."

"Rats!" said Tom Merry. "If she's anything at all, she'd stand that better than knowing he'd cut and run."

"Rats!" was just what I thought, Tom. It's a thin excuse at the best. I'm not sure that it's a true one. On the whole, I think it made me more doubtful than anything else he told me."

"You think he may be innocent, then?"

"I think it's very likely he is. But if so, he's a funk."

And a funk was the kind of person for whom neither of these fellows had any use.

"If we refuse to help him, it doesn't mean giving him up, of course?" said Tom Merry thoughtfully.

"Oh, no! We're not going to do that in any case. But I reckon he'll be nabbed as sure as eggs unless he gets help."

"Is that our bizney?"

"What you mean, old chap, is that if I'm in it you're in it? Isn't that so?"

"Oh, that—that was understood all along. What I really mean now is that I want to keep you out of it."

"But you said you'd leave the decision to me."

Tom Merry groaned.

"So I did! There's no denying it, and I won't go back on it! But I see what this means. You're game to help him?"

"Yes, I am! I can't refuse. He said 'for the old school's sake,' you know. What can a fellow do after that?"

"He said so. Fat lot he cares about the old school, I bet! It's for himself he cares, the selfish bounder!"

"Very likely, old chap! But you and I care for the old school."

"I give in," said Tom Merry. "Lead on, Macduffer!"

CHAPTER 2.

A Hiding-place Found.

MR. FEATHERSTONE had disposed of all the food and had drunk another bottle of ginger-ale by the time they came back.

"I feel better now," he said.

And most certainly he seemed more cheerful.

"I'm glad of that," answered Talbot.

The fugitive looked at him curiously.

"Do you mean that it's all you intend to do for me?" he asked. "Mind, I'm thankful, even so. But I won't pretend to deny that I had hoped for more. When I got near enough to see the old school, I felt somehow that I was certain to find help round here."

"We're willing to do more," said Tom Merry.

Featherstone's face lit up.

"Thanks, no end!" he replied.

"What do you suggest?" Talbot inquired.

"Well, I really don't know. For the matter of that, I should be very well content to leave it to you two. You seem to have your heads screwed on the right way."

"That's all very well," Tom Merry answered; "but I don't quite see it that way myself. It's putting a little more on our backs than seems reasonable. Haven't you any plan of your own?"

"Ah! If you fellows only knew what it was to be hunted down as a criminal!"

One of them did know. That had been among Talbot's experiences. But he did not say so.

"It's horribly wearing! What I feel I want most now is a good long rest. I don't care much where, as long as there's a roof over my head. I never was one of those fellows who like sleeping out under the stars—it's too big for me—gives me the creeps! A roof—a couple of blankets—a razor—a cake of decent soap—some grub—something to drink—that's all I ask for."

Not so very much to ask for, if it had not been for the secrecy necessary in providing all these things. But that made it a good deal.

"Hadh't you thought of the old castle?" asked Tom Merry.

"By Jove, though, that's a notion! No, I hadn't. I couldn't think very clearly about anything, and I can't say that I even remembered the place's existence."

"But, of course, you know the way to it?" Talbot said.

"Oh, of course! It lies nearly due east from where we now are. But the best way would be to go to the east corner of the wood, cutting across from there, and so avoiding showing myself on an open footpath."

"That's it," answered Tom Merry. "We'll come with you to the edge of the wood and arrange about supplying you with provisions and so on."

"I say, you fellows are really no end decent!"

"Duck!" hissed Talbot; and Featherstone promptly dodged behind a bush.

"I say, Tom Mewwy! Are you theah, Tom Mewwy?"

"It's that ass Gussy!" groaned Tom. "And the worst of it is that he's so beastly difficult to choke off. We can't let him into it; those Fourth-Form bounders get into rows enough of their own without us dragging them into anything."

"Tom Mewwy! Oh, I see you! Theah you are!"

"You're wrong, Gussy. I'm not! It's quite a mistake! You may think you see me, but it's only what Skimmy calls my astral body—is that O.K., Talbot? As a matter of fact, I'm—er—elsewhere—exceedingly elsewhere!"

"Don't talk such wot, Tom Mewwy!" cried Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of the Fourth, breaking his way through the undergrowth towards the two chums and their concealed companion.

"Go away and play, Gussy! We haven't the time to talk to kids just now!"

"Oh, wats, Tom Mewwy! Evewybody's askin' where you and Talbot have got to. It isn't at all the cheese to wandah off by youahselves like this. Almost an unfriendly action I call it!"

"If you don't buzz off, Gustavus, I shall be guilty of a quite unfriendly action! I shall punch your silly head!"

D'Arcy opened his eyes widely. This was not at all in Tom Merry's usual form. He could not understand it a bit.

Arthur Augustus flattered himself that he was capable of understanding anything, given a fair chance, and he meant to get at the bottom of this.

"Wats, Tom Mewwy?" he replied, drawing nearer. "You would not be so wude, I am suah!"

"If it was anybody else!" groaned Tom. "Figgy or Blake or Kerr or Mayne—anybody but Gussy—it wouldn't matter so much. But he is such an ass! He'd never mean to let anything out, and yet as sure as eggs he'd do it!"

"Get him away, old man," suggested Talbot.

Tom shook his head.

"I'll try," he answered. "But it's no go. He'll insist on walking off with the two of us. Wants us to go and play oranges and lemons or ring-a-ring-a-roses, I suppose!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, I cannot undahstand how you find it poss to lowah youahself to be talking of such puewile wubbish! We are going to bathe."

"Well, we're not. Is that good enough for you, Gustavus?"

"Bai Jove, no! Come along, deah boys, and don't be so dweadfully gwumpy. At least, you talk in a gwumpy manner. And Talbot—"

"Keeps silence in a ditto ditto—eh? Well, we don't

want a bathe just now, old man; that's the long and short of it."

"I cannot considah that a satisfactowy answah. Theah is some mystewy heah, and I mean to pwobe it. Oh, cwumbs! Who is that?"

He had just caught sight of Featherstone. "Keep still!" hissed Tom to the fugitive. To D'Arcy he said: "Nobody. It's only a scarecrow!"

"Wats! They don't put up scarecrows in a wood, deah boy! Weally, I considah it a most fortunate chance that I happened along—"

"Butted in 'is, I believe, the correct term," Tom Merry amended.

"That is wude, Tom Mewwy! But I am not to be choked off by youah wudeness. I am suah theah is some secwet heah, and I shall take it as a dweadful misalt if you try to keep me out of it any longah! Cannot I be trusted? Did I evah go back on a friend?"

Featherstone stepped out of hiding. "You'll have to tell him," he said. "There's no getting out of it, I can see. And I don't mind him a bit, as he's St. Jim's and a friend of you two. He won't betray me."

At first sight Arthur Augustus took the fugitive for a tramp, but directly he spoke this error was at an end.

"Most assuahedly I am to be trusted, my deah sir," he said. "Tom Mewwy and Talbot will satisfy you as to that, I appwehend."

"Oh, Gussy's to be trusted, as far as his goodwill goes!" said Tom Merry. "He's the soul of honour, but he does talk a bit too much."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, if theah is one quality I pwide myself upon more than anotheah—"

"But there isn't, because you reckon you've got 'em all!" growled Tom.

"It is discretion. Am I not wight, Talbot?"

Talbot did not commit himself by an affirmative answer. He said:

"D'Arcy is a chum of ours, Mr. Featherstone. Gussy, this is Mr. Featherstone, an old St. Jim's boy, now under a cloud. He has asked us for our help, and we have agreed to give it to him."

"Delighted to make youah acquaintance, Mistah Feathahstone! You could have, I am suah, no bettah helphs than Tom Mewwy and Talbot, with myself as, I trust, a not unworthy third!"

Featherstone was evidently rather pleased by the warmth of this new arrival's greeting, which was in strong contrast with the reasonable reserve of the other two.

"Well, now, deah boys, what's to be done? And wheah do I come in?" asked Arthur Augustus, putting up his monocle and beaming on all three.

"Mr. Featherstone finds it necessary to go into temporary retirement," answered Tom Merry, in his driest tones. "The old castle has been thought of as a suitable place, and he falls in with the idea."

"Whipping! It isn't poss to find a bettah place anyweah around heah."

"No. That's one reason why it might be dangerous if the pol—if the folks knew that Mr. Featherstone was in this neighbourhood. But they don't, as far as we can gather. So it may serve. He intends to make for it at once, and we have promised to take him the necessary supplies."

"Gwub, an' so on, of course? Oh, yaas, Tom Mewwy, that's easy enough! Look heah, suppose one of you takes him to the castle, and the othah waits about heah, and I go back and collah what gwub I can in a small hampah and bwing it along?"

"He knows the way to the castle all right himself. As for bagging the grub—well, if you're on for that, I don't mind. You paid for it, but I doubt whether the other fellows will remember that if you're caught red-handed."

"I'll risk that," answered Arthur Augustus firmly. "Oh, yes! I didn't doubt you would. But not a word to anybody if you're caught, remember—not if they put you to the giddy torture! We mustn't have any more mixed up in this affair. Three's too many."

"I do not agree. I considah thwee the absolute minimum. And, besides, you must admit that my bwains

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will be of use to you—and to Mistah Feathahstone, I trust—in this stwait."

"I hope so. I dare say they will, Gustavus—if you find them! Cut off now!"

"Shall I find one of you heah when I return?"

"You'll find us both here, I guess."

"But I ofahed the suggestion—"

"I know you did. We're not taking it, See? Buzz off, Gussy!"

Arthur Augustus went, not quite satisfied. It was evident that Tom Merry did not mean to let him assume the leadership, and the swell of the Fourth always pined for that honour.

"He's a good little ass, but a leaky vessel," remarked Tom.

"I like him," answered Featherstone. "Seems to have plenty of sympathy for a fellow down on his luck."

That meant they had not shown enough, of course. But they felt no inclination to show more, for they did not feel nearly as much as they might have done had they been sure that the whole of Mr. Vincent Featherstone's story was true.

"Of course, one of us will come with you if you'd prefer it," said Talbot.

"Well, if you wouldn't mind. Anybody sighting me from a distance would be less likely to feel suspicious if I was not alone; and if he spotted the St. Jim's colours that would make it all right at once, probably."

Yes, thought Tom Merry; but was it quite the thing that those honoured colours should be used in such a manner?

He did not say so. Talbot volunteered to go, and Tom stayed, to await the arrival of Gussy.

He was very thoughtful as he lay in the shade, wondering what would be the outcome of all this.

"For the old school's sake," Featherstone had said.

Tom doubted that—at any rate, as far as the fugitive was concerned.

CHAPTER 3. Gussy's Raid.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS was in his element.

He had a definite task to achieve—a task that needed, as he saw it, brains, strategy, a combination of prudence and boldness such as only a fit leader of men could be expected to have.

It was quite true that he had stood this picnic to the rest. There were thirteen of them in all—the Terrible Three, Tom Merry, Lowther, and Manners; the four from Study No. 6, in the Fourth-Form corridor, D'Arcy himself, Jack Blake, Herries, and Digby; Talbot, Mayne, and Skimpole, of the Shell; and the New House trio, Figgins, Kerr, and Fatty Wynn.

But it would have been simply impossible for a fellow with Gussy's fine feelings to use the fact that he had paid for the provender as an argument to excuse his walking off with a considerable proportion of the remainder of it.

And Gussy did not desire to argue the matter at all. St. Jim's methods of argument tended to the forcible. More especially was this the case where grub was concerned.

No; the only thing to be done was to get the stuff away by strategy.

A perfect whale for strategy, Arthur Augustus, in his own estimation!

The importance of the enterprise was so evident to him that long before he came within sight or earshot of the place where the hampers had been left under the somewhat casual guardianship of Fatty Wynn, he had begun to move stealthily and secretly—"like a Wed Indian on the trail," as he told himself.

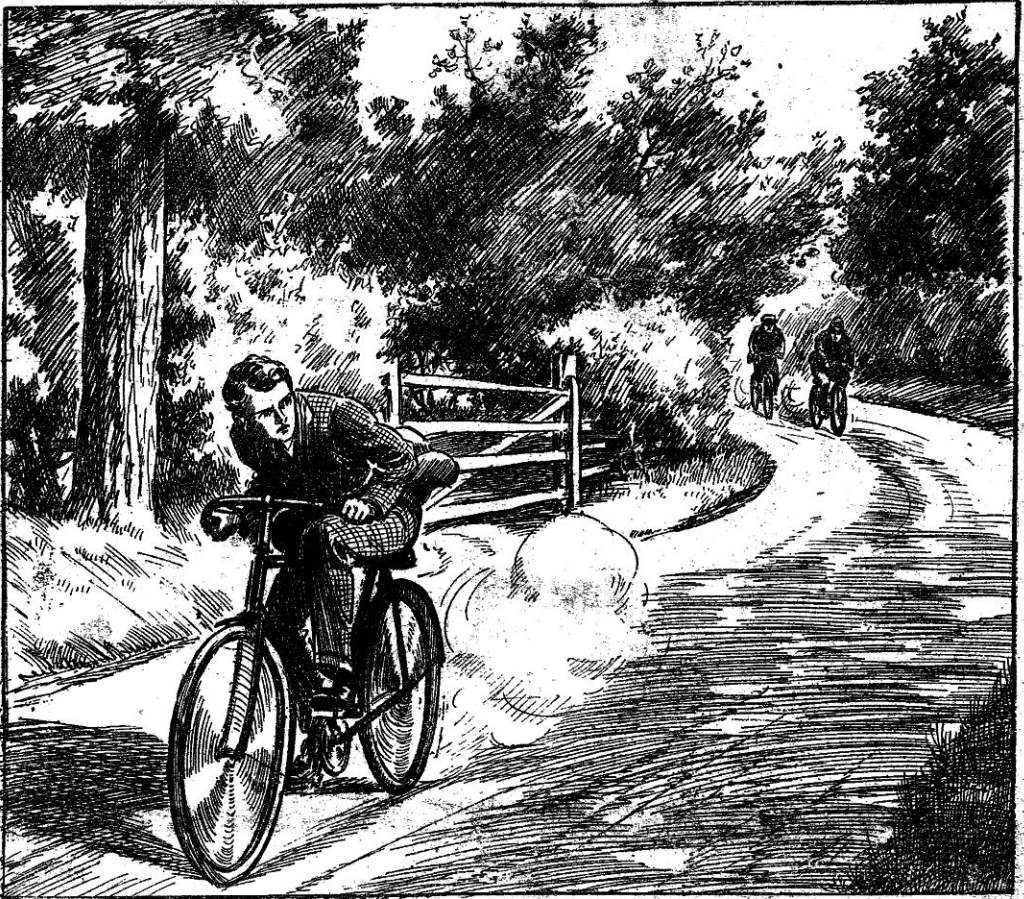
Now he approached the camping-ground.

Fatty Wynn still slumbered peacefully. His trumpeting continued, and the handkerchief over his face fluttered gently with the snores.

"Good!" said Arthur Augustus to himself. "Vewy good indeed!"

He thought it easy to circumvent the sleeping Fatty. The rest were still down by the river, he supposed—in the river by this time, likely enough. They would

"SCHOOLBOYS NEVER SHALL BE SLAVES!" SEE "THE MAGNET" OUT TO-DAY!



"Stop! Stop, in the name of the law!" yelled one of the constables. Tom Merry bent over his handles, and pedalled faster. (See Chapter 12.)

not wait long for him and the other two missing members. But, as he drew nearer, stepping carefully, he perceived that Fatty was not alone.

Above the top of the biggest hamper appeared the massive dome of thought which pertained to that eminent scientist, Skimpole.

"What a frightful nuisance!" muttered Gussy. "But I might have guessed it all sewene. Skimmy would much wathah sit and mug up Professah Balmycumpet's wotten books than bathe, of course!"

Was Skimpole so absorbed in the abstruse work of the learned professor as to be oblivious to what was going on around him?

Gussy went on tiptoe, like Agag, walking delicately.

"Pity old Skimmy should have planted himself wight up against the hampah!" he muttered. "But pewwaps he won't heah me."

Then did Arthur Augustus trip over a tussock, and fall, bringing crashing down with him a small hamper containing dirty plates.

The resultant noise disturbed Skimpole's studies.

"Did I hear anything?" D'Arcy heard him say. "Yes, I really think I heard something! And it was not Wynn's snoring, because I have grown so accustomed to that as merely part of the scene, so to speak—in harmony with the buzz of the insects, the songs of the birds, and the soft lowing of distant cattle."

"What a tewwible old donkay Skimmy is!" said Arthur Augustus to himself. "The birds don't sing at

all at this season of the yeah, and there aren't any distant cattle to low—at least, I can't heah any, and I guess I could if Skimmy weally did."

The swell of the Fourth lay low, hoping that Skimmy would once more immerse himself fathoms deep in Professor Balmycrumpet.

But Skimmy didn't.

He got up, stretched himself, yawned hugely, and spotted Arthur Augustus.

"Hallo, D'Arcy!" he said, in quite a natural, school-boyish way—he must have got really tired of Balmycrumpet. "Hallo! I didn't know you were anywhere near. Did you fall?"

"No, deah boy—at least, what made you suppose that I fell?"

"Well, you're on the ground. Of course, you might have lain down. But I think it's a mistake myself to lie with one's trousers in all that mess. Not that I mind very much about my trousers, of course. But I know you do."

Arthur Augustus now perceived with dismay that his nether garments were freely plastered with what looked like miscellaneous oddments from the dirty plates.

"G'way, fly!" muttered Fatty Wynn, between sleep and waking.

Skimpole approached him.

"Strange, that!" he said. "There is no fly. I must see what Professor Balmycrumpet has to say on dreams. For it is evident that Wynn dreamt the fly, so to speak."

"Didn't!" murmured Fatty. "Fly tickled nose!"

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Then he relaxed into slumber.

"Ah, do look it up!" said Gussy. "Bai Jove, that's a bwainy idea, Skimmy! Have a look at old Balmycrumpet now. I should like to heah what he has to say about dreams."

"No," said Skimmy. "This volume of the professor's works deals with quite another subject. It is anthropological rather than psychological. You apprehend the distinction, D'Arcy."

"Oh, yaas, of course!" replied the swell of the Fourth, not quite truly. "I say, Skimmy, aren't you going to have a bathe?"

"I think not. I had one before we ate. I can enjoy a bathe, but I prefer it in quieter company than that of our friends down yonder. They are too fond of—"

"Playing the giddy goat, eh, Skimmy? You're quite wight, deah boy. Pway don't let me intahfeah with youah pwofound meditations."

That was another fairly direct hint to get back to Balmycrumpet. But Skimmy had had some, and did not appear—wonderful to relate—to be hungry for more just then.

"What do you propose to do, D'Arcy, since you are not going to bathe again?" he asked.

"Well, deah boy, as a mattah of fact I came back to get some gwub for—for a friend," he said lamely.

"And why not? Any friend of yours, I am sure, is welcome to it."

Since the provender had been paid for by D'Arcy, and not by Skimpole, there was nothing especially generous about this. But Arthur Augustus was so pleased that he felt he could have hugged Skimmy.

"Good, deah boy! Pewwaps you will aid me to select and pack it," he said.

"Oh, with pleasure, D'Arcy, I'm sure."

Things were going swimmingly, after all!

"I think I will take the smallest hampah," said Arthur Augustus, turning out the contents of that referred to without ceremony. Ah! A tin of tongue, with one of those patent scewey openahs. That will do, for one thing. Is theah a pie of any kind? Oh, yaas! And that cake, Skimmy. And some biscuits. And half a dozen bottles or so of the pop. We're weally getting along quite nicely, aren't we?"

"Ahem! Has your friend—er—a large appetite?" inquired Skimmy.

"Yaas—no—weally, I don't know! Pewwaps I needn't take so vewy much moah. Do you think the othah fellows will miss what I have bagged, Skimmy?"

"Since you ask my candid opinion, D'Arcy, I must say that I think there is no doubt whatever on that point. They simply cannot help missing it!"

"That's watah wotten, because I didn't waant them to know anything about it. By the way, Skimmy, I twust you will not tell them."

"If you desire to pledge me to secrecy, D'Arcy, I can only say that not the yawning grave can be more secret than I will be!"

"Thanks, awf'ly, deah boy! You're a weal friend, Skimmy."

"Can I come along with you and help to carry the hampah?"

"Oh, no, thanks, deah boy, that wouldn't do at all! I mean, I can quite easily cawwy it myself."

"It is rather a load to carry in one's arms, D'Arcy, and to carry it by one hand gets tiring. There is, of course, a scientific explanation of the fact that it is less wearisome to carry two pails of water than one. It is that—"

"That I don't mean to cawwy pails of watah at all, Skimmy! It's only a small hampah."

"Not such a very small one, D'Arcy. And the principle is the same. It is this—"

"I suppose you mean that I had bettah pack two hampahs, and take one in each hand?"

But, though Skimpole was not greedy, he at once made it clear that he did not mean anything of the sort. He considered that D'Arcy's nameless friend was already amply provided for.

"I am afraid there will be trouble with the other fellows, if you do," he said. "In fact, I think it likely that there may be trouble in any case."

That warning brought Arthur Augustus sharply to his bearings. He had better get away at once. Any moment now the fellows might be coming from the river.

"I'll mizzle off," he said, and seized the hamper.

"You're quite sure that you would not like my help?"

"Quite suah, thanks, Skimmy, deah boy!"

"Very well. But, D'Arcy—"

"Yaas, deah boy?"

"You have not—er—removed the foreign matter from your trousers."

Gussy had forgotten all about it. But now that he was reminded of it he realised the impossibility of going off in such a deplorable state.

He seized a table-knife, and performed a hasty scraping.

"I'm afraid they're not quite clean now," he said. "Weally, they look as if they nevah would be clean again. But I can't waste any moah time. Ta-ta, Skimmy!"

He had already wasted too much time. A minute earlier, and he might have got off unperceived.

But while he had been scraping, a figure had appeared on the slope between the wood and the river.

The figure was of Mayne of the Shell. He did not sing out, but he stood and watched Arthur Augustus disappear into the wood, hamper in arms. He saw Skimmy subside to earth, and take up an attitude of deep thought, his massive brow lodged upon his palm, his elbow on his knee.

Mayne turned back.

It was not worth while to disturb either the scientist or the sleeping Fatty. D'Arcy had gone into the wood, and Talbot and Tom Merry were not in sight.

As it chanced, Mayne said nothing to the rest about the hamper. D'Arcy was the provider of the feast. They had all done themselves well. If D'Arcy chose to walk off with what remained—or part of it—Mayne saw no reason at all why D'Arcy should not.

CHAPTER 4.

Skimpole the Martyr.

HALF an hour or so later the fellows who had been bathing turned up, headed by Figgins and Jack Blake.

"Hallo, Skimmy!" said Herries. "How's old Balmycrumpet getting on, eh?"

"I am at a loss to know what you mean, Herries," returned Skimpole with dignity.

"Rats! What's-his-name—the professor—Offhisonion—that's it!"

"It occurs to me that you may mean Professor Balmycrumpet. What a sad pity it is, Herries, that you—and so many others—are altogether devoid of any taste for the engrossing pursuit of science! That is where the Germans are so superior—"

"What?" yelled Digby. "Germans superior to us? You just say that again, you fathead, and I'll—"

"Really, Digby, you are very absurd to suppose that the threat of violence can change anyone's convictions, least of all mine. Perfect wisdom is not the property of any one nation. In some respects Germany is decidedly sup—"

Digby hurled himself at Skimpole with a howl of rage. But the punishment he designed was prevented—or, at least, postponed. For a shocking discovery had been made by Manners, who now announced it.

"Some boulder's been raiding the grub!" he shouted. Instantly followed "confusion wild and disarray."

Not lightly might the St. Jim's juniors brook so deadly an injury as that.

"There was a tin of tongue, I know there was," mourned Herries. "A big tin—a Faysandu tin. Is it there, Manners?"

"No; nothing's there—at least, hardly anything!"

"Two pies there ought to be," said Digby.

"There simply isn't the shadow of the ghost of a pie, Digby!"

"I shouldn't be keen on it if there was," Digby admitted frankly. "That ain't my sort of pie. I like something that gives your teeth a bit of work."

"Looks as if your teeth would be out of employment for a time, Dig," said Mayne, grinning.

"There was a cake, too," Kerr remarked. "Has anybody met a stray cake walking about without a collar?"

"I'm not peckish, but I'm beastly thirsty," said Lowther.

"Right-ho, old man! Here you are!"

Manners slung across a bottle, which his chum caught neatly.

"Ass! It's an empty one!"

"Idiot! So are all that are left! Come and see for yourself if you feel doubtful."

"Is there anything at all?" asked Herries mournfully.

"Oh, yes! Tin of sardines."

"It's too hot for sardines."

"Scraps of cake—"

"Thanks, but I'm not feeling scrappy!"

"Dirty plates, and a toothpick!"

Manners was drawing the long bow. There was no toothpick, and there were several other things, including a big tin of biscuits. But biscuits are rather dry without anything to drink.

Fatty still snored on.

"That's what comes of leaving the wolf to guard the fold," said Monty Lowther, throwing the empty bottle accurately to hit Fatty's third waistcoat button, counting from the lowest one.

"G'way, fly!" murmured Fatty.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Jack Blake. "Pitch one on his nose, Lowther! He'll think that's a hornet!"

Fatty sat up, blinked, and smiled around him.

"What-ho!" he said. "You've come back, you fellows. I just dozed off for a minute—"

"I should think so!" broke in Figgins. "Look at the sun, porpoise! It's got three parts round the sky while you were dozing off for a minute, bladder of lard! You've been asleep hours and hours, you prize porker!"

"I don't wonder he had to sleep, after all the grub he must have put away," said Digby, with a dark look at the Welsh junior.

Fatty appeared rather hurt.

"I did myself very well," he said. "I always do if there's a chance. But nobody had to go short because of me. And I fancy that, after all, I must really have been asleep a goodish while, because I really feel quite empty again now!"

"My hat! Empty, after wolfing pretty much all we left—enough to feed a small family!" cried Manners.

"Eating what you left! I don't understand a bit. I lay down here directly we finished, and I haven't stirred since," protested Wynn. "I say, though, you're not serious really, are you? The grub can't have gone! That—that would be too horrible!"

"He got up in his sleep and wolfed the lot," said Digby. "That's what comes of letting New House rotters into—"

"Oh, ring off, Digby!" yelled Figgins. "Fatty didn't touch it if he says he didn't. You can take that from me. You seem to forget that there was another fellow here—not a New House chap, either."

And he looked meaningly at Skimpole.

Skimmy was feeling very uneasy indeed. He hoped D'Arcy's friend was not too far away.

He had given a pledge of secrecy to Arthur Augustus, and he meant to keep it. But he saw that there might be trouble if Gussy did not turn up very soon.

"Did you collar the grub, Skimmy?" demanded Manners.

"Most certainly I did not, Manners."

"Have you been just dozing off, too?" roared Digby.

"Oh, you—you—you mouldy pro-German!"

"That is mere undignified abuse, Digby, and as such, unworthy of—"

"If you say a scientific mind I'll—I'll slay you! Mine ain't a scientific mind. I don't care who knows that. I want a bottle of pop and some grub, that's what I want, and scientific minds be jolly well hanged!"

"You are talking at random, Digby. It is impossible to hang a mind!"

"You can jolly well punch a head!" Digby yelled. "And I'm going to punch Skimmy's!"

"Here, hold on, old man!" said Mayne, who always stood up for Skimpole, his first friend at St. Jim's. "I

don't believe Skimmy had anything to do with it. In fact, I feel sure he hadn't—had you, old ass?"

"He was here, anyway. There's no getting away from that. And if he let someone else waltz in and bone it, I'm for reckoning him guilty," said Manners.

"You may be, but that hardly settles matters, I think," replied Mayne.

Digby and Manners glared at him.

Mayne, though generally popular, was still more or less a new boy, and when he set himself up in opposition to Manners and Digby they felt, if no one else did, that he was really going a bit too far.

"Are you very particularly concerned in this business, Mayne?" asked Manners.

"Yes, if you're going to jump on Skimmy for what I know he never did," came the instant answer.

"If we choose to jolly well jump on Skimmy, it's no giddy bizney of yours," growled Digby.

"But I shall make it so!"

At this moment Mayne observed that Skimpole was trying, by weird contortions of his countenance, to make him understand something that for some reason the eminent scientist could not put into more definite language.

But Mayne quite failed to understand. The stuff was really D'Arcy's. He had paid for it. If he chose to walk off with what was left, who had the right to grumble?

Nevertheless, it was for Skimmy, not for him, to say that D'Arcy had walked off with it, Mayne considered.

And then he began to understand what Skimmy was driving at. Nothing was to be said about D'Arcy—that was it.

Well, nothing should be said, then. But Skimmy wasn't going to be jumped on for what another fellow had done—not if Mayne knew it!

"Look at that frabjous Chinese image of a Skimmy!" cried Figgins. "Did you ever see such a dial?"

Having attracted more attention than he had any use for, and apparently having failed in making his chum understand, Skimpole ceased contorting his face.

"I know what's the matter," growled Digby. "The bounder's gorged so much that it's given him horrible pains inside. And serve him jolly well right!"

"That's all very well," objected Manners, "but Skimmy's internal pains won't fill me up."

"We can see through Skimmy's pains," added that inveterate punster, Lowther.

"Well," said Kerr, "compared with our old porpoise, Skimmy is pretty nearly transparent; but I'm none so sure that we can see through him to that extent. There's more in this than meets the eye, that's my opinion."

"My hat, there would be!" answered Lowther. "Skimmy or Fatty—not for me to apportion guilt—has stowed away the stuff where only X-rays could penetrate to it."

"I tell you it wasn't Fatty!" said Figgins hotly. "He says he didn't, and that's good enough for me and Kerr, so it will have to be good enough for the rest of you!"

"Look here, Fatty, honour bright, didn't you touch the stuff after we'd gone?" asked Herries.

"Honour bright, I didn't," replied Fatty solemnly.

"That's good enough for us," said Blake. "Now, Skimmy!"

Skimmy flushed, and paused.

He could not say truthfully what Wynn had said, and he scorned a lie.

If he had answered at once, the actual form of his answer would have mattered less. But that pause made everyone notice it.

"Honour bright, I haven't eaten a mouthful of it," he said.

"There you are!" cried Manners. "If he hasn't bagged it, the rotter knows who has! And he'll jolly well have to tell!"

"My dear Manners, do look at this thing in a scientific and philosophical light, I beg you! In the first place, you cannot any of you be hungry—"

"Oh, can't we?" roared Digby. "What giddy right have you to talk like that about another chap's appetite? We don't go filling ourselves up with wind out of old Balmyscrumpet—"

"Desist, Digby, I earnestly request you! Your high tone and evident ill-temper are quite incompatible with the consideration of this matter in the true spirit of science. Consider again. The food has gone. Your heated language cannot restore it—"

"But we can jolly well take it out of you, though!" howled Digby. "You pro-German—you—you beastly renegade!"

"You cannot take it out of me, for the simple reason that it is not in me. Even if it were, it would scarcely be—but I will not elaborate that argument—for even to a mind like yours—"

"Oh, ring off, you measly walking-dictionary! A mind like mine—you pumphandle! What's the matter with my mind, I'd like to know?"

"Nothing, as far as known at present," said Kerr. "Since your possession of any such thing is a matter of doubt," added Lowther.

"If Skimmy didn't do it, he knows who did," said Manners, "and it's up to him to tell us. Who was it, you chuckle-headed gasbag?"

"I refuse either to say or to answer further questions touched in so offensive a form," replied Skimpole firmly.

"Oh, rush the rotter, and force it out of him!" yelled Digby.

"Half a mo'!" said Kerr. "We're all here, except D'Arcy, Talbot, and Tom Merry. All of us were down bathing, except those three and the fat and lean of it here—Fatty and Skimmy. So eight of the thirteen of us are beyond suspicion, and Fatty's given his word, so he makes nine."

"Not nine—eight," put in Mayne quietly. "I left you for a few minutes, you know."

"You didn't come up here and wolf all that grub in a few minutes, though," answered Piggins.

"I certainly didn't. I didn't touch it. But if Skimmy's to be suspected, so am I!"

"Skimmy admits he knows something," said Herries.

"And I haven't said that I don't know anything," replied Mayne.

"Oh, that's all rot! You're only sticking up for that old goat, Skimmy!" fumed Digby.

"Yes, and I mean to. You may as well understand that!"

"Seize the pro-German!" yelled Digby.

And he made a start by clapping an empty hamper over Mayne's head.

Somebody seized Mayne's leg, and dragged him down. Mayne could not see who that was.

Somebody else sat upon him. He knew who that was. At least, if it wasn't Fatty, it was two fellows, and it did not feel like two, except as to weight.

It was of no use to struggle. He was outnumbered.

"Pax!" he said, in muffled tones, from inside the hamper. "I'm not going to quarrel with the lot of you, and I'm sure you don't really mean anything but fair play to Skimmy."

"Depends on what you call fair play," retorted Digby. "We're jolly well going to put the boulder through it, if he doesn't tell us what we want to know! We sha'n't quite slay him, but I guess he won't enjoy it much!"

"You are mere savages," said Skimpole. "Do not mind them, Mayne, my dear fellow! I would much prefer that you should not interfere to your own detriment."

"Hear that, Mayne?" asked Fatty. "I'll get up if you say it's all serene."

"I've said 'Pax' already, haven't I? That ought to be enough."

Slowly and ponderously Fatty arose. Mayne shook his head free from the hamper, and got up.

He could not help grinning when he saw Skimpole's face, for the inventor looked for all the world like a martyr about to be led to the stake.

"I dunno what we can do," growled Digby.

"We can duck the beggar," suggested Piggins.

"Right-ho! That's an idea. Kim on!"

They were dragging Skimmy towards the river, when something chanced that put an end to his martyrdom.

CHAPTER 5.

Heard in the Wood.

"THERE'S Levison!" yelled Herries. "He's the thief, you bet!"

"Where?" shouted Blake.

"Behind that bush! See! There he goes! Oh, after him, you fellows!"

"Stop!" cried Mayne. "It wasn't Levison who boned the stuff!"

"No, it wasn't!" shrilled Skimmy.

But they paid no heed to Mayne or to Skimpole. They were off after Levison.

The cad of the Fourth bolted. He did not know why they were coming for him. But he judged it best to bolt. And he made way for the wood, knowing that they would be sure to run him down if he kept to the open. In the undergrowth of the wood he might find a hiding-place.

Only Mayne, Skimpole, and Fatty Wynn were left behind.

"It wasn't Levison. But I don't see a lot of use in fagging myself in all this heat to run after him when I don't want him. He can argue the case with those chaps," said Mayne.

"I am much of your opinion, Mayne," replied Skimmy.

"I'm not going to run, anyway," remarked Fatty. "It doesn't agree with me. And there isn't anything worth guarding now. So I really think I might as well have another snooze!"

He lay down, and in less than two minutes was snoring hard again.

"Why didn't you let on, old man?" asked Mayne.

"I promised that I would not," Skimpole answered.

"Promised D'Arcy, you mean? I saw him off with the hamper. Nuff said! I don't want to know any more!"

"Shall we stroll after the rest?" Skimmy asked.

"I should think we may as well. Dig seems blood-thirsty, and as we know it wasn't Levison, it's up to us to see that he doesn't get it too thick."

They followed. But already the rest had disappeared into the wood.

Levison was lost to sight directly he got in among the trees. But they could hear him crashing a way through the undergrowth, and were able to follow the clues given them by the broken bushes.

Naturally, Levison gained. He had not to look for any such traces, but could push on without halting.

It was some time, however, before he felt himself at all safe from pursuit.

When he did, he threw himself on the ground, fairly pumped.

High trees were all around him, and in among their stems grew bushes, while tall bracken helped to hide him.

"Wonder what they chased me for?" he muttered.

"I was an ass to run away, for they hadn't really anything against me. Now I may have let myself in for it, because there seemed to be some sort of a row on, and I suppose somebody's managed to make me out the guilty party."

Curiosity had drawn him nearer the scene of the picnic than he had meant to go. He had wanted to find out why the others were squabbling.

"I'd better have given them a wider berth, anyway," he went on. "It didn't matter to me which of them punched the other's head. I hate the whole gang of them!"

Above his head the leaves rustled gently. A light breeze had sprung up, cooling the overheated air.

He listened for any sound of continued pursuit.

He could hear none. But he heard something else—voices speaking not far away from him.

And he recognised one of those voices as that of D'Arcy.

"I say, Tom Mewwy, Talbot's wathah a long time, isn't he?" asked Arthur Augustus.

"He had farther to go than you had, Gustavus. Don't worry me! It would be good enough for me to lie here and do nothing at all now that it's cooler, only that chap Featherstone keeps me thinking."

Levison had stolen nearer, on hands and knees. He



Fatty Wynn was wriggling under Herries, and Kerr and Digby were lying side by side, each trying to turn the other over on his back. "Br-r-r! Hold up, Herries! It's too hot for this silly bizney!" protested Fatty. (See Chapter 6.)

only caught part of what Tom Merry had said just then, but he heard all that followed.

"Why, Tom Mewwy? I don't see why you should wowwy. It seems to me that we are all doin' our dutay."

"Oh, you think it's our duty, do you?"

"Yes, of course; Featherstone bein' St. Jim's an' all that. We couldn't wefuse to help him. It would have been clean off the wails to wefuse."

"Not so sure, old man. I don't go chucking my sympathy about in lumps like you and Talbot. To tell you the truth, too, I'm not greatly gone on Featherstone."

"Deah me! Now, I thought him a vewy nice fellah indeed!"

Tom Merry grinned.

"You always do, Gustavus," he said.

"Bai Jove, you're quite w'ong, Tom Mewwy! I bar wottahs as much as anybody. Look at Levison, now. I cannot do with the fellah at all."

"All right, Gussy!" muttered Levison to himself, and he showed his teeth vengefully.

"Oh, Levison! He's not worth discussing! I've given him up for a bad job. I wish I knew something about

this chap Featherstone's career at St. Jim's. For all we know, we may be helping another Levison. And that's not worth while."

"Bai Jove, no! But it's scarcely poss, is it? I thought you and Talbot had made up youah minds Featherstone was all wight."

"But that's just what we haven't done. And that was why we didn't want to drag anybody else in. But you butted in, Gussy; you always do butt in, you know."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy! Anybody might imagine to heah you talk that I was a dweadfully intwusive sort of fellah!"

"No, not that, old ass; only a chronic butter-in! Well, there it is. We've given our word to help Featherstone now. But the sooner he shifts his quarters the better I shall like it. Fact of the matter is, I'm not taken with the notion of the old-castle as a very safe place. If they get half a hint he's round this way, they'll search it as sure as eggs."

"The police, do you mean, Tom Mewwy?"

"Yes. And we don't want them nosing round."

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Levison was intensely interested now. He parted the bushes ever so carefully and looked out at the two.

Tom Merry lay with the back of his head pillowed on his locked hands. Arthur Augustus sat with his arms around his knees.

Near him stood a small hamper.

Levison was sharp enough to deduce several things from the sight of that hamper.

It explained the row on the scene of the picnic, he fancied.

It was meant for this fellow Featherstone, he was sure.

An old St. Jim's boy, wanted by the police, hiding in the ruined castle! Tom Merry, Talbot, and D'Arcy in the secret!

There ought to be big trouble for them in this, properly worked.

Levison crouched motionless, scarcely breathing, till the silence should grow less marked.

He started in alarm when another figure suddenly appeared.

But it was only Talbot.

Tom Merry sat up.

"Hallo, old man!" he said. "Is the giddy bolter safely hidden?"

"I think he should be safe enough," Talbot answered. "Anyway, I don't fancy we were seen."

"Gussy's taken rather a fancy to him," remarked Tom Merry. "I can't say I'm struck. How do you feel about it?"

"I'm not exactly keen on him," Talbot answered quietly. "He is rather exacting in his demands, I consider. What do you think he wants, besides food, blankets, a razor, and the rest?"

"Can't say, I'm sure. Sort of bounder that might want a feather-bed and peaches for dessert, shouldn't wonder."

"He didn't mention those things. But he really feels that he must have some bottled beer; and if we could also bring him a bottle of good whisky—"

"My hat! The earth and all that in it is, would be about his mark, I guess. He won't get those things in prison!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, anybody might think you fancied he would have to go to prison!"

"Really, Gustavus, it isn't such a very unlikely thing for a fellow who has the police after him. They don't go in chase for the fun of the thing, you know. What did you tell him, Talbot?"

"No, point-blank. He understands now that we're not mugs enough for that game."

"But dwinkin' beeah; or even whisky, isn't a cwime for a grown-up man, Talbot?"

"No, Gussy; but buying beer or whisky is a St. Jim's crime for any of us, and Tom and I bar that sort of thing. We'll see that you don't do it either, old chap."

"I wasn't exactly thinkin' of it, Talbot. But I do think pewwaps you two are a bit too wough on the fellah. I suppose you have no doubt whatevah that he is innocent?"

"We're not so sure as all that, Gussy," Tom Merry said. "He says he is, and we think he may be. But he doesn't exactly inspire us with perfect conviction."

"What is the cwime they allege against him?"

"Embezzlement, old man."

"Weally, that's too howwid! If he is caught and proved guilty, we shall be in a vewy uncomfortable posish. And if he gets away—well, that won't be much better if he is a wong 'un."

"Remember, Gustavus, we wanted to keep you out of it."

"But I'm not talking about that, Tom Mewwy. Do you think I am wowwying about myself? Any wisk you and Talbot take I am willing to take, too, and in youah company I know I shall never have any wost cause to feel ashamed."

"Gussy," answered Tom Merry, trying to speak lightly, "you overpower me with your compliments!"

"You're a white man, D'Arcy," said Talbot.

And that was very much what Tom Merry meant, too, though he had put it in a different way.

"What about the hampah?" Arthur Augustus asked. "Shall we take it to the castle now?"

"No. He's had enough to keep him going for a few hours," Tom Merry answered. "It's too risky to take it by daylight—for him, and for us, too. It will have to be done under cover of darkness. For the present we'll hide the thing, and then get back to the other fellows. They'll ask a lot of questions, of course, and it will be rather rotten not to be able to answer them; but that can't be helped."

"Twust to me, deah boys! I will put them off the twail."

Levison crawled slowly backwards. He was too near them to feel safe when they moved.

"Let's put the hamper right inside this big bush," said Talbot. "Think we can find the place in the dark, Tom?"

"Oh, yes; I guess so! We must make for this corner of the wood."

They went. Levison watched them go, then stole from his hiding-place, removed the hamper, and found another depository for it in a hollow tree some twenty yards away.

CHAPTER 6. Friends Fall Out.

ONCE clear of the place where he had been eaves-dropping, Levison had no more fear of his pursuers.

He did not care in the least if he was caught. Indeed, he rather welcomed the prospect, for it would give him a chance to set these fellows by the ears.

So he marched boldly along the footpath through the wood.

"There he is!" yelled Digby.

Levison glanced round. Herries and Manners were with Digby. The rest seemed to have given up the chase.

The cad of the Fourth stood still and let them come up to him.

His coolness rather took them aback. But, to prevent accidents, Digby caught him by the collar and Herries by the arm.

"What's this for?" asked Levison.

"Oh, don't pretend you don't know, you rotter!" cried Manners. "Who boned the grub?"

"Well, I never care about saying more than I can prove."

"Oh, no!" growled Digby. "You're George Washington without his little axe, you rotter, ain't you?"

"But, to the best of my knowledge and belief, D'Arcy did," continued Levison coolly.

That staggered them. Digby and Herries let go of the cad. He did not attempt to bolt.

It fitted in. It might be true, even though Levison said it. For Gussy had certainly been absent.

"I don't believe it!" cried Herries, yet he showed by his face that he did.

"Oh, all right! Never mind about calling me a liar—I'm used to all sorts of insults from you fellows! But ask D'Arcy—that's all! He isn't a liar, of course, so he's bound to own up!"

"See here, you rotter! What did you run away from us for?" demanded Manners.

"That may have been a mistake. I suppose it was. But, if you'll think, you may remember that you were all rushing at me before I bolted. And I didn't know what it was for. You fellows aren't so fond of fair play to a chap you don't like that it seemed worth my while to wait."

"What do you think, Dig?"

"I think we'd better bump the bounder, Manners! He deserves it for something else if he don't for this!"

"Oh, I don't know," said Herries. "Let the cad go. But if Gussy says he's lying, Gussy's word is good."

ANSWERS

enough for me, even if this rotter swore himself black in the face."

"Bunk, Levison!" ordered Manners.

But Levison was in no hurry.

"I suppose I've the same right in the wood as you have," he replied. "I didn't ask for your company, and I don't want it. But I'm not going to be ordered about by you!"

"Don't argue with the rotter, Manners," said Herries. "Come on, and let's talk to our Gussy!"

They joined the rest at a moment when things were not looking quite pleasant.

"This blessed picnic is a giddy fiasco!" Figgins was saying. "You fellows go off all by yourselves."

"Well, I suppose you could manage to get along for an hour or so without us," chipped in Tom Merry.

"For that matter, we could get along without you altogether—get along jolly well!" retorted Figgins ill-temperedly.

"Then I don't see what you're grumbling about."

"Do you think it's the cheese to bunk off—"

"Sounds more like the dessert, Figgy!" broke in Lowther, giggling.

"Oh, rats to you! You Shell bounders are too beastly thick for anything!"

"What on earth is all the trouble about?" asked Talbot, looking puzzled.

"Somebody came along and collared nearly all that was left of the grub," explained Kerr. "That's chiefly what is the matter; the rest is mere trimmings. Fatty was here, asleep as usual. Skimmy was here, dipping his proboscis into Balmyscrumpet. Fatty don't know a thing. Skimmy does, but won't tell. Mayne also knows something, but also declines to impart his knowledge."

"And we know something!" shouted Manners. "It wasn't a Shell bounder who boned the grub. It was a Fourth-Form sweep—one for you, Figgins!"

"I'll bet he wasn't a New House chap, though," answered Figgins quickly.

"That's easy!" retorted Manners. "When there are only three of you here."

"And all quite above suspicion," added Kerr. "Thanks awfully, Manners!"

"I wasn't going to say anything of the sort. I don't see why you shouldn't be suspected as well as anybody else. More! But it didn't happen to be you, that's all. It was that chuckleheaded jossler with the pane of glass in his eye!"

He pointed an accusing finger at Arthur Augustus.

"Weally, Mannahs, youah wudeness is positively atrocious! I—I—I—"

"But you can't deny it, Gussy!" roared Digby.

"You know you did it, Gustavus!" cried Herries, catching him by the collar. "Look at Skimmy! His face gives you away. And Mayne—the beggar's grinning like one o'clock!"

"Pway, leave my collah alone, Hewwies! I wefuse to be handled in this disgvacefully wough mannah! I—"

"You're trying to get round it. I'm not talking about your collar—I'm talking about—the grub—you—boned. Can you understand that?"

"I wesoolutely decline to discuss anything whatever with you, Hewwies, until you wemove youah wough gwasp fwom my collah!"

"Oh, let go, Herries!" said Jack Blake. "We'll see to it that the bounder doesn't exit without leave."

Arthur Augustus glared at him.

"I have no intention of winning away, Blake," he said severely.

"No! We'll take giddy good care you don't! Now, Skimmy, was D'Arcy the criminal?"

"I decline to say, Blake."

"Bump him, the bounder! No, never mind, though; he's as good as admitted it. If he can't say 'No,' it's all the same as saying 'Yes.' That's plain enough for any ass to see!"

"Ah! So glad you see it, Blake," remarked Lowther blandly.

"Oh, shurrup! Mayne, was it D'Arcy?"

"If I say 'Yes,' you'll believe me? If I say 'No'—"

"We sha'n't! You've got it, old chap! So what do you say?"

"Nothing at all," answered Mayne.

"Why don't you ask Gussy himself?" suggested Kerr.

"We have, and he won't answer."

"I declined to answah until Hewwies had released my collah, Blake. I have no objection to telling you now. I did bag the grub."

"I did it, with my little axe!" murmured Lowther. "No, they did the axing. Wasted a frightful lot of time over it, too! But what can you expect of Fourth-Form kids?"

"Ring off!" yelled Figgins. "We're fed up with you Shell specimens, that's a fact! See here—did you two know Gussy was bagging the things?"

He looked straight at Tom Merry and Talbot.

"Since you want to know," answered Tom, "we did."

"There! Of all the scandalous, rotten, degrading, piffing, mean—"

"Here, hold on, Figgins!" cried Talbot. "You're going it just a trifle too strongly!"

"I'm not going to hold on! I shall say what I think! And Kerr thinks the same—"

"Dunno, Figgy. They're awful creatures, of course. Makes me quite ill to look at their low, wicked diabs. But I can't back up everything what you have said, are saying, or mean to say. You might just possibly say a little more than I meant, you know."

"I uttably decline to associate myself with the bwutal language Figgy has used about my fwriends of the Shell," said Arthur Augustus, with decision.

"I should think the best thing we can do under the circs is to buz off back," said Tom Merry.

"Do as you like. But you needn't reckon it's for you to say what we shall do," returned Figgins hotly.

"My dear, good ass, we haven't the least wish to! If I might be allowed to make a suggestion, though—it isn't for my own benefit—it's for the good of St. Jim's generally."

"Well?" snapped Figgins.

"I think it would be an excellent idea if you and Blake and Herries and Digby went down to the river, stuck your silly heads in, and kept them there till you're cooler!"

"Oh, go and eat coke, Merry!" yelled Digby.

"Certainly, Dig! Anything to oblige!" And there really doesn't seem to be much else to eat, does there?"

A perfect howl of indignation arose at that. It seemed to the injured contingent like rubbing it in.

"We seem to have got into the Zoo by mistake," remarked Lowther. "I guess we'd better clear."

"I should say so," replied Tom Merry. "Gussy, are you coming with us, or will you stay here to be eaten alive?"

"I wathah think I will go with you, Tom Mewwy."

"Gustavus don't want to encourage cannibalism!" chuckled Lowther.

"Manners, are you for or against?"

"Oh, I'm coming, Tommy! I can't say I'm satisfied on the grub question."

"But he isn't peckish enough to stay and try Gussy or Fatty," murmured Lowther.

"Ass! I say I'm not satisfied about that, but I'm hanged if I can stand having these empty-headed Fourth-Form kids slinging their insults at the Shell! They don't know any better, of course. But I reckon it's about time they were taught."

"You'd better try to teach us!" snorted Herries.

"Oh, the giddy job's too big for me!"

"So I should say!" retorted Blake.

"What do you mean? Do you think I'm afraid of the best man among you?" roared Manners, pulling off his blazer.

Off came Blake's at once. But off came Figgins's, too, and Digby's, and Herries's.

"Which of you is it to be? I'm not going to take on all four, you know."

"This is my job, Blake!" said Figgins.

"Rats! Do you think you are a better man than I am?"

"Or me?" yelled Digby.

"Or me?" growled Herries.

"I'll soon show you!" shouted Figgins.

"Come along, Manners!" said Tom Merry. "By the time they've done with one another there won't be one of them fit to stand up to you. Besides, it's such rot!"

"Right-ho!" answered Manners, pulling on his blazer again. "See any of you later on, when you've settled which, you kids."

Tom Merry, Talbot, Lowther, Manners, Mayne, Skimpole, and Arthur Augustus walked away.

"Funk!" sang out Digby.

Manners turned, his fists clenched.

"Don't take any notice," said Talbot. "They know all serene that you don't funk them."

"Renegade!" shouted Herries.

"That's to my address," said D'Arcy. "Don't you think it's up to me to give Hewwies a fearful thwacking, deah boys?"

"No, I don't!" replied Talbot decidedly.

"Grub-sneakers!" roared Figgins.

"That's you, Talbot, and me, and Gussy," remarked Tom Merry. "But I can bear it if you can."

"Traitors!" screamed Blake.

"That means me and Skimmy," said Mayne. "Because we saw Gussy toddle off with the hamper, and wouldn't tell."

"Did you weally see me, Mayne?" asked Arthur Augustus.

"Yes."

"And you didn't think it was a low twick?"

"No! Not likely! Hang it all, you stood us the feast, old man!"

"Bai Jove, I nevah thought of that! Nevah mind, though, it doesn't make a heap of difference. If somebody else had stood it, and somebody else—not the same somebody else, of course, but another fellow—theah, I'm getting dweadfully mixed! But it doesn't mattah, anyway. Only I think old Skimmy's a bwick for not letting on!"

"I promised not to, you know, D'Arcy."

"Oh, yaas! Natchuwally I knew you wouldn't aftah that, but, all the same, I wegard you as a bwick!"

Skimmy looked quite pleased.

"I'm sorry about the whole bizney," said Talbot.

"Oh, they'll soon get over it," answered Tom Merry.

But there were small signs among the half-dozen left behind of any speedy return to coolness.

"I always did say that there was something rotten about the School House!" fumed Figgins. "There they go, all School House eads, every man jack of 'em, and—"

"Ring off!" shouted Blake.

"Look here! I don't take orders from you, or from any other School House rotter that—"

"Shurrup!" yelled Digby.

"I sha'n't! I'm going to say what I jolly well like! It's about time you fellows understood that the New House is not only cock house at St. Jim's, but—"

"If you don't drop it, we'll bump you, Figgy!" cried Herries wrathfully.

"Right-ho! Try it on, that's all!"

The three went for him at once.

"Rescue, New House!" shouted Figgins.

Kerr and Wynn could not be deaf to that call. They piled in to the aid of their leader.

Fists were not used. But there was a good deal of wrestling, in every style and in no style at all, and in the upshot Figgins found himself sitting on Blake, Fatty was wriggling under Herries, and Kerr and Digby were lying side by side, each trying to turn the other over on his back.

"Br-r-r-r! Hold up, Herries! It's too hot for this silly bizney!" protested Fatty.

"I'll chuck it if you will, Dig," said Kerr.

"Do you give me best, Blake?" asked Figgins.

"I'll give you a thick ear the moment I get up, you idiot!"

"But what's the good of it all?" inquired Kerr, whom Digby had released. He sat up, and fastened his collar, while his opponent ruefully contemplated what had been a nice clean pair of flannels, now grass-stained and badly creased.

"That's what I want to know," said Fatty, rubbing

his waistcoat. "You stuck your knee into my stomach, Herries, and it hurt."

"Sorry, old man," answered Herries. "Didn't mean to."

"If you two have finished, everybody has," said Kerr to Figgins and Blake.

Figy got up, and Blake arose.

But relations were badly strained between those two, and they would not walk back together.

Thus the picnic that had begun with every prospect of being a complete success ended in disaster!

CHAPTER 7.

The Renegade.

"YOU can come to tea with us, if you like, Gussy," said Tom Merry. "I don't think you'll be very happy in No. 6 for the next few hours."

"Thanks, Tom Mewwy!"

"There isn't anything in particular to eat, and the tea-caddy's a bit low. But strong tea isn't good for anybody, you know."

"I've got a tin of mixed biscuits, and there's plenty of butter and jam in our den," said Mayne. "Plenty of tea, too."

"Right-ho! We'll all come along and patronise your establishment."

"Feel like putting your head into the lions' den, Gussy?" asked Monty Lowther, when tea was over, and the time for prep drew near.

"I certainly do not funk Blake and Hewwies and Dig, if that is what you mean, Lowthah. But I do not propose to stand any nonsense from them. I shall simply take my books, and go down and do my pwep in the Form-room."

"Coming out for a few minutes, Talbot?" asked Tom Merry.

They went out into the quadrangle together. Gussy also departed.

The more Tom Merry and Talbot thought of this affair the less they liked it.

Featherstone must be helped, because, won over by his plea—"For the old school's sake!"—they had promised to help him.

But they wished heartily now that they had not promised.

The fellow was not worth all the trouble he had caused, they felt sure.

"What about to-night, Talbot?" asked Tom.

"Oh, we must take along the things, and pretty early, too, or he'll think we are never coming; and you can't tell what that sort of merchant may get up to if he grows impatient."

"Soap. That's easy enough. A razor. We can't manage that until to-morrow. Blankets. I say, old man, they'll be missed if we take them!"

"Travelling rugs will do."

"Oh, yes! Good notion that. I've got some somewhere—unless they're at home—and so has Lowther. Grub we've provided for. What about Gussy? He'll want to come, sure as eggs."

"He can't, then! You know what D'Arcy is, Tom. He'll rot up the whole bizney if we let him come. And he couldn't get away without Blake and the rest twiggig it."

"Right-ho! I don't want him. It's a giddy pity he blew in when he did, but that can't be helped now."

Meanwhile, Arthur Augustus was undergoing some unpleasantness in Study No. 6.

Directly he showed his face there hostilities began.

Blake hurled a book at his head.

It was a heavy book—a Latin-English lexicon—and it hurt.

D'Arcy said nothing, nor did he retort by deeds. He simply marched up to the table, and laid hands on his books.

"Hallo, renegade!" said Digby pleasantly.

"You are a rotter, Gustavus!" spoke Herries.

He answered neither Digby nor Herries. He turned his back upon them, and moved towards the door, his books in his arms.

Blake's lexicon lay close to his feet. He might have kicked it, but he did not.

That would have been beneath his dignity, and he meant to maintain his dignity at any cost.

"Here, hold on, you old ass!" cried Blake.

But Arthur Augustus showed no signs of obedience. So Digby caught him by the arm and hung on, while Blake dodged round him and planted his back against the door.

"Now, renegade, we're going to make you confess the truth about the whole bizney!" said Blake.

"Kindly welease my arm, Digby. Blake, pway weleave youahself fwm the door," spoke the swell of the Fourth, in his stateliest manner.

"Rats! There's going to be no 'weleaving' and no 'wemoving' till we know all about it," Blake answered.

"Now, then, Gussy, don't be such an old idiot!" said Herries.

"I mean pweicely what I say, and I must beg you not to make use of such oppwobwious terms as 'ass,' 'idiot,' and 'wenegade.' I no longah wegard you as fwends! I am goin' to the Fom-woom. Vewy shortly I twest to get twansfewwed to some othah study. Fwom that time we can be stwangahs!"

"Crumbs! What does the old donkey mean?" gasped Digby.

"He don't know what he means," answered Blake. "Something's got into his head that he thinks is a thought, and it's gone wandering round and lost itself. The only remedy for that sort of thing is a bumping!"

"I uttably wefuse to be bumped, Blake!"

"Of course, you do, Gustavus! If you agreed, it would show that the case was quite hopeless. As it is—well, perhaps a good, hard bumping will do a bit of good. Stop him, you chaps!"

But Gussy had wrenched himself from Digby's grasp. He dropped his books, and put up his fists.

"Come on!" he cried. "I know the three of you togethah can lick me, but theah won't be much glowy in it for you. And I pfer to take a licking wathah than be bumped by fellows who have called me a wenegade, and whom I no longer wegard as fwends!"

His eyes blazed fiercely, and his face was red with rage.

One never quite knew how dire might be the offence given to Arthur Augustus by a chance word. "Renegade" had put up his back most completely.

"Rot!" said Blake. "You're off your blessed rocker, Gussy! It would be very like us to set on to you three to one, wouldn't it? Especially when one of us could give you a licking."

"If any of you lays a hand upon me, I shall punch his head!" cried Arthur Augustus. "I wesolutely wefuse to be bumped!"

Digby rushed in, and tried to throw his arms around him. Arthur Augustus hit out straight from the shoulder, and Digby staggered back, with a hand to his face.

There was a look in his eyes that went straight to Gussy's heart. But he hardened his heart—as much as he could.

"I'm sowwy, Dig!" he said. "But you asked for it."

Then Blake and Herries rushed him together. He used right and left—a pile-driver on Blake's jaw, a nasty jab for the nose of Herries. The lessons in boxing that Arthur Augustus had received that term had evidently not been wasted.

They were angry, but not so angry as to hit back. They seized Gussy, and in their grasp he was helpless.

"Come on, Dig!" cried Blake.

"No; I won't come on! I'll have no more to do with it. I never thought Gussy would have punched me like that, and if he wants to chuck it all, and not be friends any longer, he's welcome—that's straight! I won't help to bump him. I won't have anything more to do with him. And the sooner he gets fixed up in another den the better it will suit me!"

Blake and Herries released Arthur Augustus, and stared at Digby. They had been punched, too; but they had not taken it quite as he had.

D'Arcy looked sorrowfully at Digby. Digby turned his

head away. An apology trembled on Gussy's lips. But he had already said that he was sorry. And Dig had asked for it!

He picked up his books. Blake and Herries watched him, but said nothing.

"I am not a wenegade!" he blurted out, and then went.

Digby's face was working. Blake gripped his chum's shoulder hard. Herries turned and looked out of the window, but could not see much because of a curious mist that obscured his vision.

CHAPTER 8. Night Hawk.

"CROOKE," said Levison, "are you game for some-thing to-night?"

"Depends upon what it is," answered Crooke of the Shell. "I've had some of your rotten wheezes, you know, and if you ask me, there ain't much in them."

"This is a pretty good one, though. It will be a score for us over Merry and Talbot, and we shall collar a hamper of grub, too!"

The double prospect rather appealed to Crooke. He wanted to know more, of course, and Levison told him more—and told him the whole story, in fact.

"Right you are!" replied Crooke. "We'll attend to the hamper. I'm on as far as that's concerned. As for the rest of it, if you like to land those two rotters in a precious row, I don't mind. If they get sacked I don't mind—in fact, I'd be joyful. But I'm not going to risk anything for it."

Levison really did not need Crooke's help for that part of his plan which concerned the fugitive's fate. He did for that part of it which had to do with the fate of the hamper, because he rather funked going alone to the wood by night.

"Best plan will be to wait till they've gone off," he said. "You can keep awake and watch for their going. Then come and give me the tip, and we'll follow them. We can lie low till they've made up their minds that somebody's bagged the hamper. They'll go off to the castle then, to tell the gaolbird he can't have any supper, and we can pop in, collar the thing, and clear."

"Sounds all right—if it don't slip up somewhere," growled Crooke. "I'm on, anyway."

In two dormitories at St. Jim's that night there was watching and waiting.

Talk died down among the Shell brigade. Here and there a fellow began to snore, and deep, regular breathing told that the others were asleep.

Talbot got out of bed and touched Tom Merry's shoulder.

"I think it's about time now," he whispered.

Tom Merry arose, and they dressed quickly.

Crooke had heard, and when the door had closed softly behind them he got out of bed, and in another minute or two was hurrying along the corridor to the Fourth-Form dormitory.

"Awake, Levison!" he whispered, at the bedside of the cad of the Fourth.

"Yes. Don't whisper so loud; somebody will be hearing!"

"Oh, they're all asleep. Come along!"

"Are you dressed?"

"Enough for the job. It's beastly hot!"
The Fourth fellows were not quite all asleep. Arthur Augustus was not.

Gussy wondered what it meant, but failed to connect the expedition planned by Crooke and Levison with that which he knew Tom Merry and Talbot would be making.

He waited until the two had gone, though. Then he got out of bed and began to dress.

Suddenly he was aware of a figure standing by his side. It gave him quite a start.

"What are you after, Gussy?" demanded Blake's familiar voice.

Arthur Augustus felt relieved to find the figure was only Blake's, after all.

But all his wounded pride and hot resentment surged

up in him. He had been called a renegade! Blake need not fancy that things could be as they had been after such an insult as that.

"What I am afraid does not concern you in any way whatever, Blake," he answered.

"Oh, rats! You're not going out for a night-prowl alone, so don't you think it!"

"You can take it from me, Blake, that I am not going out with you."

"Right-ho! I've no particular wish to go, so get back into bed, and don't be a bigger old ass than you can help."

"You misundahstand me, Blake—wilfully, I think. When I say I am not going out with you, I mean——"

"That you're not going out at all, because, if you do, I'm jolly well coming. I don't know about Dig and Herries, but I rather fancy they'll be on, too."

"Weally, Blake, you are only asking for a snub. I do not want youah company, and I will not have youah company. Is that stwaight enough?"

"You can't snub me, Gussy—and you can't choke me off, either!"

"We shall see about that. Let go of me, Blake, or I will sing out, and wake everybody!"

"Right-ho, Gustavus, sing out! Ah, would you?"

For D'Arcy had released himself by a sudden twist, and was making for the door. Blake started in pursuit, but caught his feet in the pyjamas carelessly dropped on the floor by the swell of the Fourth, and came down. By the time he had picked himself up Arthur Augustus had made good his escape.

He went straight to the Shell dormitory. Tom Merry's bed was empty, so was Talbot's! They had gone!

It was too bad of them to go without him, he felt. He had choked Blake off. They wanted to choke him off.

Well, they shouldn't do it. He would follow them.

Arthur Augustus did not funk the solitary enterprise, but he did feel it an uncongenial, chilly sort of affair.

He went to the box-room, and let himself out by the usual way.

Within a minute of his departure, Blake, Herries, and Digby had followed him. The time occupied by D'Arcy in visiting the Shell dormitory had enabled them to get hot on his trail.

Blake, Herries, and Digby were in the dark as to everything except the fact that D'Arcy, after behaving in a very suspicious manner during the day, was now going off on his own after "lights out." He would be sure to get himself into a mess if they did not look after him; they were all agreed as to that. And therefore it was up to them to follow. Luckily,

they were able to keep him in sight. They were a good deal surprised at first when he took the way that led to the river and the woods beyond it instead of the Rylcombe Road.

"Oh, I twig, though!" said Blake. "Whatever he's up to, it's to do with this afternoon. The thing's a giddy mystery! But, for all Figgy may say, I don't believe that old Gustavus and Tom Merry and Talbot boned the grub to wolf it themselves. There's something behind it all!"

"I reckon so," answered Digby. "My word! Isn't it hot and close?"

"Going to get a thunderstorm, I guess," remarked Herries.

"That ass has started to run!" said Blake. "I don't feel much like running, but we're bound to keep him in sight."

To do that they had to be fairly close up, for the great black pall of cloud to the south-east was gradually over-spreading the whole sky.

Arthur Augustus had quickened pace because he saw two figures ahead, and took them for Tom Merry and Talbot.

But he stopped suddenly. Tom and Talbot were of the same height—or so nearly of the same height as made no difference. These two were not.

He guessed at once who they were—Croke and Levison! The three in the rearmost detachment had stopped for a moment when D'Arcy halted.

But they moved on, at a word from Blake, while he was still stationary, and before he had realised their nearness they were upon him.

Blake caught him by one arm and Herries by the other. "Now we've got you, Gussy; and you're not jolly well going on alone, so don't you make any giddy error about it!" said Blake.

D'Arcy seemed to have reconsidered his views.

"I'm vevy glad to see you fellahs," he confessed frankly, "because theah's something up that I can't quite make out, and pewwaps I could not vevy well handle it all alone."

"What's the blessed mystery?" asked Blake.

"That I must not tell you. But I don't mind saying that those wottahs Cwooke and Levison are just ahead, and I think they must be twacking Tom Mewwy and Talbot."

"Merry and Talbot?" exclaimed Herries. "What on earth are they up to? See here, Gussy, you'd better tell us all about it. You'll only make the biggest sort of a bloomer if you try to run the show on your own."

"I can't, Hewwies! It's a pwomise. But you chaps will help me

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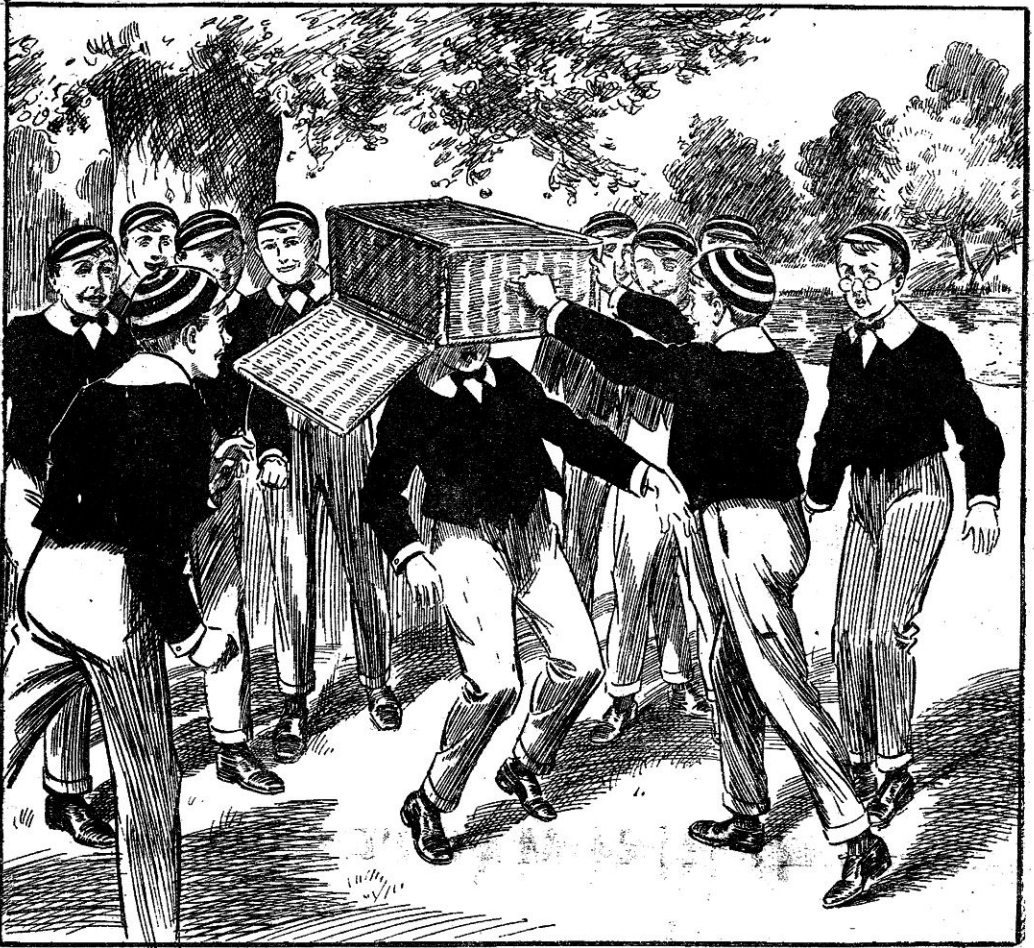
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"Seize the pro-German!" yelled Digby. And he made a start by clapping an empty hamper over Mayne's head. (See Chapter 4.)

to deal with Cwooke and Levison, I'm suah, even without knowing all about it."

"Rather!" answered Blake.

Digby had not spoken.

"Wheah's old Dig?" asked Arthur Augustus.

"Here I am," replied Digby, with just the least suspicion of sulkiness in his tone.

Herries dropped D'Arcy's left arm and moved round to the outside of Digby.

"I'm fwrightfully sowwy I punched you, Dig! You asked for it, you know, but I'm sowwy, all the same. I wouldn't caah a wap if I had to go to some othah beastly school if I weally had to cleah out of ouah den!"

"That's all right, Gussy," answered Dig, and slipped an arm through his chum's.

"Kim on!" said Blake. "We knew you wouldn't stick to it when you came to your senses, Gustavus. Herries and I never worried a scrap, but Dig was a bit put out."

"Don't huwwy too much," Arthur Augustus replied. "I want those wottahs to get into the wood befoah we come up to it."

"Dunno whether the wood's going to be just the safest place if the storm breaks—and I reckon the storm's

going to break before, very long," cried Blake. "But we're in for it now, and as Merry and Talbot are on ahead it's quite impos to turn back."

CHAPTER 9. A Stormy Night.

"IT'S gone!" said Talbot.

He was kneeling by the bush inside which the hamper had been hidden.

"I say, old man, it can't be the right bush!"

"But it is. I am certain of that!"

So was Tom really. They had marked the spot with too much care to be easily mistaken in it. And, as a matter of fact, there was no other bush of anything like the same size near.

"What a rotten bit of luck! It was a clear hundred to one against anybody's twiggig it, I should have said, but the hundredth chance seems to have come off."

"It's not much good waiting about," said Talbot. "We might go back and rake up something, but it wouldn't be very much."

"And that fellow will be no end impatient, and pretty

hungry, by this time," Tom answered. "I really think, old man, we'd better go on and explain."

"Anyway, it's no use searching for the hamper. That will be far enough away by this time, I guess," said Talbot. "Yes, Tom, I think we had better go on to the castle. I say, what a lightning flash!"

"And here's the thunder!" Tom Merry replied. But Talbot did not hear him, for his voice was lost in the rumbling boom that followed.

"Better run for it. We'll be safer in the ruins than in this wood," said Talbot.

Crooke and Levison, lurking not more than five yards away, heard that.

The next thing they heard was the soft patter of rubber-shod feet.

"Here, I say, Levison, I don't think much of this!" growled Crooke. "A blessed hamper won't pay me for being in this ghastly place through a storm like this is going to be. Just look at the lightning!"

The whole wood was lit up by a blue glare, and the next moment the thunder rumbled again, seeming right overhead.

"I say, Crooke, I saw four fellows not ten yards away when it lightened!" burred Levison.

"Two, you mean—those two who have just gone. And you were in such a beastly funk that you saw double!"

"No, it wasn't. You may have seen them, but I was looking the other way. I say, we'd better clear out of this!"

"We'll have the giddy hamper first, now we've taken all this trouble about it," Crooke replied doggedly. "Where did you put the thing?"

"In a hollow tree, not ten yards away. I can find it all right. Oh!"

It was another flash of lightning that had caused the exclamation.

The storm was getting on Levison's nerves.

"Did you see them, Gussy?" asked Jack Blake.

"Yaas, the wottahs! We'd better cweep neawah, Blake. But keep to covah, or they may see us."

The four, on hands and knees, made cautiously in the direction of Levison and Crooke.

"What are you waiting for, you idiot?" they heard Crooke growl.

"Till it's lightened again," Levison answered. "Oh!"

The flash followed hard on his words, and the booming of the thunder was louder than ever.

In the glare the four chums had seen Crooke and Levison standing by a big hollow tree.

"Here it is!" they heard Levison say, in quivering tones. "Catch hold, Crooke! We'll bolt now!"

"Rush 'em!" yelled Jack Blake, and the gallant four charged.

Levison still stood close by the tree. The top of the hollow was about on a level with the bottom of his waistcoat. Herries caught him by the legs, and neatly up-ended him right into the hollow.

Crooke went down before the rush of the other three. He struggled and kicked and threatened. But they had no intention of wasting time with Crooke.

"Got the giddy hamper?" asked Blake.

"Yaas, I have it, Blake!"

"You and Herries catch hold of it and bunk. Dig and I will hold Crooke down till you're clear!"

From inside the hollow tree came woeful groans.

"Pull that rotter out before you go or he'll be stifled!" ordered Blake, as another flash of lightning lit up the scene, and revealed Levison's legs waving wildly in the air.

"Let Crooke pull him out," answered Herries. Then the thunder rolled again.

"You're going the wrong way, you asses!" cried Blake, as the two with the hamper started.

"No, Blake. It's quite wight. Just you follow us!" called back D'Arcy.

Blake and Digby scrambled up and followed. In a minute they had caught up their chums.

"What's this for, Gustavus?" asked Blake. "It will take us all we know to get back before the rain comes! It may come any minute, for that matter. What's the giddy sense of going round?"

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"We must take this hamper to the castle, Blake," answered Arthur Augustus.

"Oh, you're off your blessed rocker entirely! What for?"

"Because Tom Mewwy and Talbot are theah—at least, I'm pwetty well suah they have gone theah."

"You—you piffing ass! Do you think I'm going to help cart a hamper to the old castle in a thunderstorm just to have a midnight feed with those two? You're dotty, Gustavus!"

"But it isn't Tom Mewwy and Talbot, Blake!"

"You said it was! Can't you stick to the same story two minutes together?"

"I mean, the hamper isn't for them. I can't explain, Blake. I would if I could, weally!"

"Anyway," said Herries, "we can get to the castle quicker than back to St. Jim's."

"May as well go," added Digby. "I sha'n't sleep till I know what all this is about."

"Oh, the giddy mystery!" cried Blake. "Well, if going to the castle will solve that, count on me. Kim on, you cripples!"

Again and again the lightning flashed and the thunder bayed and rolled, but they were within a few yards of the castle when the first great drops of rain fell. Blake and Digby were now the bearers.

"Rush for it, you two!" yelled Blake; and he and Digby followed at the best pace they could make.

The first pair were scarcely wetted at all, but Blake and Dig were soaked to the skin. The rain had come down like a solid wall of water.

"Who's there?" called a voice that sounded like Tom Merry's.

Then once more came the lightning, and he saw the four.

"Gussy's brought the whole crowd along!" he said to Talbot, who was close behind him, when the thunder had ceased to crash and roar. "What a bizney this is going to be! As if it wasn't enough to have Featherstone on our hands, like a bear with a sore head!"

"We've got the hamper, Tom Mewwy!" called Gussy, out of the darkness.

Talbot chuckled quietly.

"If you ask me, Tom," he said, "Featherstone will reckon the price cheap. As far as I can make out, he thinks it's up to all St. Jim's to shield him and provide for him, and such a trifle as three more to share the secret won't trouble him much."

"Need we let them into it?"

"I guess we shall have to. They certainly won't part with the hamper at all cheerfully if we don't."

They drew nearer to the four, and Tom struck a match.

"I say, though, you fellows are beastly wet!" he cried.

"Couldn't be any wetter," Blake answered cheerfully.

"Never mind! We want to know what all this is about, Merry."

"Do you? Well, first of all you've got to explain how you come to have the hamper. Is this a trick of Gussy's?"

"No, Tom Mewwy, I assuah you it is not. As a mattah of fact, Cwooke and Levison follahed you, and we got on their twail, and wushed them just as they were getting the hamper out of a hollah twee."

"My word, Tom, this thing's getting a bit sultry!" said Talbot. "How do Crooke and Levison come into it?"

"It's all very well to have these fellows in the know, but I don't like those two rotters nosing round."

"Levison was doing that this afternoon," Herries answered. "We met him, and it was he who told us that Gussy had collared the grub."

"Where did you leave them?" asked Tom Merry.

"In the wood," Blake replied. "Old Herries yanked Levison headfirst into the hollow tree where he'd hidden the hamper, and we left Crooke lying on the ground. I say, you fellows, what is the blessed mystery?"

"Gussy won't tell us anything," said Digby. "But, of course, he couldn't if he'd promised not to."

"You'll have to know it, I suppose," Tom Merry said.

"The long and the short of it is that we've got an old St. Jim's boy hidden here. The police are after him, and

"Oh, I dunno!" said Blake. "I'm not sorry we came. We put it over Crooke and Levison, and that's all to the good. And we couldn't desert old ass Gustavus, of course. Then those two chaps down below, we may be able to give them a leg up, though I'm hanged if I think what they're doing is worth the trouble it costs!"

As to that, all four were agreed. For Featherstone they did not care a rap. But Tom Merry and Talbot were a very different proposition.

Five minutes more passed, dragging heavily. Then Tom Merry and Talbot appeared.

"Sorry to keep you fellows waiting," said Talbot.

"Especially as the bounder really isn't worth the trouble," added Tom. "I know you think that!"

"Don't you, too, old man?"

"Well, yes, I do, Blake! But we'll soon be rid of him now."

"What's the giddy dodge?" asked Herrie.

"Tell you as we go. The rain's leaving stars are shining out. Crumbs, that was what it was."

"Wonder how Crooke and Levison liked it?"

"Where did you leave the rotters?"

"My," answered Blake.

"We didn't. But those spiteful with us about it, you bet!"

They had started now, striking across road to the north, and so avoiding the wood altogether.

"How do you reckon you're going to get the bounder away?" asked Herries.

"In a disguise of some sort. We ought to be able to manage that."

"Kerr's the best chap at disguises. Lowther's better up to it than most of us, too, for that matter," answered Blake.

"But we don't want to drag any more into it," said Talbot. "There are too many now, in case trouble comes."

"When do you reckon to tell the rest about this, Merry?" Blake asked.

"I hadn't counted on telling them at all."

"But you'll giddy well have to! Figgins & Co. were no end wild over the hamper business—at least, Figgy was—and they'll go on feeling sore if you don't explain. Then you know very well that Lowther and Manners will get their hair off if it leaks out that you've kept them in the dark!"

"It might pay to tell Kerr," Tom Merry admitted; "he's the longest-headed chap of the lot of us. That means Figgy and Fatty must know, but they're safe. Manners and Lowther—I don't see how I can keep it dark from them if I tell the New House crowd. And Talbot would prefer Mayne should know, too, I guess. As for Skimmy, he don't count in a thing like this, and I guess he's forgotten by this time all about the picnic."

"When have you promised to take that specimen his disguise, old man?" asked Blake.

"Some time to-morrow."

"Good egg! The sooner's there's lodgings to let in the old castle vaults for somebody else the better, I reckon. See here, we'll undertake to keep a watch on Levison. He's in our Form, and it will be easier for us. I don't trust him a yard when he's got a chance to play a spiteful trick."

"Thanks, Blake! That would be useful."

They were drawing near St. Jim's now, and their talk ceased. In silence they climbed the outer wall, and got up on the outhouse roof, and reached the box-room window.

Then Tom Merry spoke.

"The rotters! They've fastened us out!"

"What's to be done?" asked Herries. "This is a sickening job altogether!"

"Let me try," Talbot suggested.

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"SCHOOLBOYS NEVER SHALL BE SLAVES!" SEE "THE MAGNET" OUT TO-DAY!

But he could not force the catch, though he had skill in such matters that none of the others possessed. He wasn't exactly proud of that special skill, yet in an emergency like this he was willing to use it.

"I know!" he said, giving up the attempt. "Mayne's bed is near a window. He sleeps lightly, and is pretty quick at twiggling anything. I'll get him to come and unfasten this."

He dropped from the outhouse roof, and made his way round to a place under the Shell dormitory windows. Picking up a handful of gravel, he took careful aim.

The small stones rattled against the pane with, what seemed to him, a good deal of noise.

It served to awaken Mayne, anyway. He pushed the sash up, and put out his head.

"Is that you, Talbot?"

"Yes. Box-room win."

"I know no more than you do," answered Mayne, with some difficulty, for Crooke was squeezing so hard that he did not find it easy to get breath.

"I'll go! I'll wake Manners first, though, to help you."

"No, don't! Cut along! I can deal with this sweep."

Lowther went. Fellows were sitting up in bed or getting out to see what was the matter. Crooke hugged on, but Mayne had got a leg behind him now, and was getting ready to deal with him.

Whack!

Crooke's head struck the floor. Half-dazed for the moment, he could do nothing. When he was fit to renew the struggle conditions prevented it, for Manners was helping Mayne to sit upon him.

Lowther slipped along the box-room, and opened the window. Digby climbed in first; then came Herries, D'Arcy, Blake, Talbot, and, last of all, Tom Merry.

"Oh, Tommy, Tommy!" said Lowther, more in sorrow than in anger. How could you do it? To go out night-prowling like this, and take those Fourth-Form kids with you, and leave me and old Manners slumbering in peaceful ignorance—which wasn't bliss at all, not by no manner of means!"

"I didn't," Tom Merry answered. "Only Talbot went with me. I'll tell you all about it later, Monty."

"What become of Mayne?" Talbot asked. "He answered when I called."

"He's attending to Crooke. Crooke seemed to have—don't ask me why, for I'm in the dark about the whole bizney—some objection to your being let in. Mayne is—er—removing that objection, I believe. Anyway, he preferred to attend to the Crooke department while I came along here."

The Fourth-Form quartet were already on their way to their dormitory. They had all had enough for one night, and Digby and Blake were still soaked through.

The Shell fellows found Crooke down on the floor between two beds, with Manners and Mayne sitting on him.

"Thanks, you fellows!" said Tom Merry. "Let him get up, but see that he don't bolt."

Manners growled something sulkily. Mayne said quietly:

"I'll see he don't!"

"Now, Crooke, what did you mean by fastening that window?"

"Oh, rats to you, Merry!"
"Slippers to you, Croke! Bend him over a bed, you fellows!"

Croke made another fierce struggle, but was forced down upon Mayne's bed, face undermost. Tom Merry selected a slipper with a stout but flexible sole, and gave him half a dozen stinging blows.

"Take your turn, Talbot!" he said.

"I will," answered Talbot grimly. And he did.

"If you fellows—"

"Tisn't worth while," growled Manners, "as you never gave us the chance to get locked out!"

"Oh, I'll explain all that in the morning. You can get into bed, Croke!"

"I'll be even with you roffers for this!" snarled Croke.

"Where are you off to, Tommy?" asked Lowther.

"Just to have a word with Blake."

But when Tom Merry reached the Fourth dormitory he found that Blake & Co. had already attended to Levison.

CHAPTER 11.

Keeping a Watch on Levison.

LEVISON was full of malice. It made no difference to him that all he had undergone came from his own fault. But he had been thrust headforemost into a hollow tree full of dirt and creeping things, he had been soaked through to the skin, he had passed one of the worst hours of his life in the wood while that thunderstorm raged over him, and, to crown all, he had been vigorously bumped by Blake & Co. on their return!

Ernest Levison meant to have his revenge, and for that he would stoop to any meanness.

It seemed to him that the best chance of getting it was to give Featherstone away.

For the fugitive himself he cared nothing, one way or the other. But those who had helped him would get into heavy trouble if he should be arrested.

Therefore, Levison devoted some hard thinking to the subject of how to ensure his arrest. With his eyes upon an English History he let his thoughts dwell upon the problem.

The biggest difficulty he saw was how to do it without exposing himself in the matter.

"Levison!" said Mr. Lathom sharply.

"Yes, sir!"

"Bring me that book! No, don't shut it up. Bring it open, as it is."

The cad of the Fourth stepped up to the rostrum, and handed over the book.

"I thought as much! You are understood to be studying the history of Charles the Second's reign, and I find your book open at pages dealing with the Battle of Hastings! Yet, to all appearance, you were hard at work. I abhor deceit, Levison. Hold out your hands."

Levison returned to his seat with smarting palms. He put down the pain also to the long account he had against those enemies of his—who would never have been his enemies had he given them a fair chance to be his friends—and felt more firmly resolved than ever to have vengeance.

A hurried skimming through the chapter devoted to the Merrie Monarch put him in a position, as he believed, to answer any questions asked with some slight chance of not being too far wrong. Then he dismissed Charles II. and Shaftesbury and Arlington and Van Tromp, and all the other big men of that far-off day from his mind, and let it dwell again upon Featherstone—or, rather, upon Tom Merry and his circle, and the harm that might be done to them through Featherstone.

An anonymous letter to Inspector Skeat at Rylcombe? Yes, that might do!

But it must not be put into the letter-box at St. Jim's; someone might notice it.

The surest way would be to drop it into the letter-box at the police-station.

But—was that safe?

It ought to be, Levison thought, if he hung about till nobody was in sight.

Mr. Lathom tapped on his desk.

"I am going to ask you some questions connected with the period you are supposed to have been studying," he said. "Levison, who or what were the Covenanters?"

Levison was totally ignorant. If there was anything at all about the Covenanters in the pages through which he had skimmed he had missed it entirely.

"I will try you again, Levison. D'Arcy, can you answer?"

"A vawietty of Scotch dissentahs, sir!"

"Humph! Not wholly wrong, but scarcely satisfactory. Kerr, can you tell me more?"

Kerr could, and did, history being rather in his line. "Now, Levison, who was the Dutch admiral who took his ships into the Medway?"

"Van—Van—Van something-or-other," thought Levison; and then blurted out triumphantly:

"Vanderdecken, sir!"

"Come here, Levison!"

The triumph had a speedy collapse. Sulkily the cad of the Fourth left his desk, and stepped to the rostrum again.

"Did you say Vanderdecken, Levison?"

"Yes, sir—at least, I meant—"

But the other name would not come.

"Vanderdecken is the name given to the pirate who is called by superstitious sailors 'The Flying Dutchman,'" said Mr. Lathom. "If I were a suspicious man, Levison, I should think that you had been reading Captain Marryat's 'Phantom Ship' instead of your history. As it is—hold out your hands again! I am determined to have proper attention given to work in this Form!"

Levison went back, raging inwardly.

Morning classes drew to an end. He made at once for the den he shared with Lumley-Lumley and Algernon Blinkinsop. Lumley-Lumley was not there, and Levison got rid of Blinkinsop by the simple expedient of turning that guileless youth out neck-and-crop.

Then he sat down to write the anonymous letter.

Not many words were needed. He used capital printed letters throughout, so that his handwriting might not give him away, and he wrote on a piece of white wrapping-paper, lest the use of exercise or notepaper might prove dangerous.

A beautiful bright day had succeeded the stormy night. If Levison—who was known not to care for cricket—fetched out his bike and started for a spin, nobody was likely to see anything suspicious in the circumstance, he thought.

But he reckoned without his host.

Digby saw him start, and at once reported to Jack Blake and Arthur Augustus, who were holding themselves in readiness.

Tom Merry and Talbot, in the meantime, were taking counsel with Figgins & Co., Lowther, Manners, and Mayne in Study No. 1.

"Kim on!" said Blake. "I'd like to hear what those bounders are jawing about; but it's up to us to attend to the evil Levison. So kim on!"

They fetched out their bikes, wheeled them to the great gate, mounted, and pedalled hard till they were within a hundred yards or so of Levison. Then they slackened speed.

The cad of the Fourth did not look behind him. He felt sure that he had got away unperceived.

He reached Rylcombe, took his machine to the repairer's, and asked to have a worn nut replaced at once, and then lounged up the sunny street as though his only object was to kill time.

The village street was practically deserted. He made towards the police-station. The four followed.

"I say, though, this is pretty thick," said Herries. "I do believe the rotter has nerve enough to go in and tell the inspector all about it!"

"Yes, I think not!" answered Blake. "Anyway, if that's his little game, he won't bring it off, for we've only to show ourselves to stop him."

"He's going there all serene," Digby said.

"Hi, Levison!" yelled Blake.

Levison did not turn at once. Before he faced round he took an envelope from his breast pocket, and when he did turn he held that envelope for an instant behind his back—then dropped it!

The thing was addressed to Inspector Skeat. Dropped thus, within a few yards of the police-station, it was almost certain to be picked up by somebody and handed to him.

Once he got rid of it, Levison walked smartly towards the four.

"What do you want, Blake?" he asked snarlingly. "I'm not at your beck and call, you know."

"Oh, nothing much," answered Blake. "We only thought that if you were going to give yourself up for trying to steal that hamper, our evidence might be worth something. That's all!"

"Go and eat coke, Blake!"

"Thanks! But I'm not hungry—not so hungry as all that, anyway. You see, you didn't manage to bone the hamper after all."

"No; but I'll bet you haven't eaten what was in it, all the same."

"Come along, Levison; your bike's ready now. We inquired about it as we passed the shop."

"I don't care about your company, Blake!"

"My hat! And we don't care about yours! But we're not going to have St. Jim's let down by one of the fellows—even if he is a rotter—going and giving himself up to the police!"

"Oh, if that's what you're afraid of, I'll come with you as far as the repairer's. As a matter of fact, I'd never even thought of the police-station; I just wandered this way while I was waiting."

They did not believe that yarn in the least. But they fancied that they had made it quite safe for the time being that Levison should not play informer.

The letter lay where it had fallen for half an hour or so. Then someone picked it up and carried it to the police-station.

But Inspector Skeat, chancing to be away at the time, did not see it until some hours later.

CHAPTER 12.

Tom Merry's Device.

"WHAT'S this chap Featherstone like?" asked Kerr. "A bit of a rotter, if you ask me," Lowther returned.

"Oh, that's only an inference—not but what I've made the same one myself. I mean, what's he like to look at?"

"Rather short for a man," answered Tom Merry. "About my height, I should say. That's what you're getting at, isn't it, Kerr?"

"You're right. The disguise may as well be something like a fit. Is he broad or narrow?"

"Well, on the whole, I should think my clothes would just about fit him."

"H'm! Now what do you say to an artistic make-up as a carter, with big bunches of whiskers?"

Tom Merry laughed.

"I don't think Featherstone would quite fancy it," he answered. "And he wouldn't play the part well, I guess."

"Cap and gown won't do. We could tog him up as an old woman—"

"No, we couldn't—not unless we knocked him on the head first! It's got to be something that will suit his highness, or he'll turn up his illustrious nose and say 'No, thanks!'"

"The boulder ought to be jolly well pleased if he can get away as a chimney-sweep," remarked Figgins.

"My hat, you don't know him!"

"No, and I don't want to, Merry! He's not my sort. Still, you can count on me for anything I can do. Makes me a bit sick, though, when I think of that specimen wolfing our grub."

"D'Arcy's grub, you mean!"

"Well, yes, if it comes to that. It's all the same thing."

"I think I've got it," announced Kerr.

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"What is it?" asked Manners eagerly.

"I'm not going to tell anybody. Featherstone must just take it or leave it. After all, my wardrobe of disguises wouldn't quite fill a giddy pantechnicon! When's the deed to be did, Merry?"

Tom looked at his watch.

"Better not try it before dinner," he said. "And there isn't time between dinner and classes. Afterwards will be best. Featherstone won't mind; he isn't keen on making a move. But I don't think it's safe for him to stay there another night."

"We'd better all go along," suggested Figgins. "If there's a giddy crowd of us no one will suspect that we're off to pay a call on a chap the police want. And we can keep old Kerr, with the disguise made up into a parcel, in the middle."

"I asked Herries to see if he could get a cheap safety razor in Rylcombe," Tom Merry said. "Wonder if he'll remember?"

Herries had remembered. He brought the razor, and reported that they had shepherd Levison away from the police-station, and made certain that he came straight back.

Levison made no move between dinner and classes that could arouse suspicion.

There were abstracted minds in both the Shell and the Fourth Form that afternoon. But the time wore through somehow, and directly the order to dismiss came the band of invincibles made for the bicycle-shed.

Kerr strapped a parcel to his handlebars. Everybody wanted to know what was in it, but the Scot would not tell them.

Levison watched them go. He was certain that this expedition was bound for the old castle. Why so many should go, and what they meant to do, were things that puzzled him.

He went off to Crooke.

"Not me!" said Crooke. "I had my fill last night!"

"But I don't want you to do anything," urged Levison. "only to come along and see what's up. We've as much right on the road as they have, I suppose."

"What's the use of it?"

"I want to know what happens. Don't you?"

On further consideration Crooke felt that he did, and agreed to go.

"Though, mind you, Levison, I shall jolly well lam you if this turns out a frost!" he said amiably.

They were some little time after the others in starting, and they came within sight of the castle without seeing anything of them.

"It's a do!" growled Crooke. "They ain't here at all!"

"Yes, they are," answered Levison. "There's somebody on the watch."

There was. Manners was doing sentry-go in a place that commanded both the road and the footpath from Rylcombe Grammar School.

"I say, Crooke, look there!"

Levison seized Crooke's arm and pointed to where two blue-coated forms moved quickly along the footpath on bicycles, one behind the other.

"Bobbies! There's going to be some fun, after all!" said the amiable Crooke.

But Manners had seen before they had, and was rushing down to the vaults to give the alarm.

He found Featherstone with his upper clothing off and his face shaved. Tom Merry, Talbot, and Kerr were with him, while the rest, who had been waiting above, followed Manners down.

"I tell you I'm not going to wear those things," Featherstone was saying. "Catch me in a soft hat like that, and goggles, and trousers that look as if they'd been made by a seamstress!"

"Don't matter much what you wear," announced Manners bluntly. "The police are coming, and they'll be here in half a mo."

"Walking?" asked Tom Merry sharply. "There's still a chance, if they are."

"No; on bikes."

"Oh, hang it! There's only one thing to do. Here, Mr. Featherstone, get into these things, and don't waste a sec."

Manners gaped with astonishment. The rest gaped too. For Tom Merry was stripping off his own jacket, waistcoat, and trousers!

"It's the only chance!" he said. "I'll give them a good run for it, anyway."

Even while he spoke he was getting into Featherstone's tweed suit.

"But, Tom——"

"Shurrup, Lowther! This fellow can't ride a bike, it seems. But the police don't know that. Let him stay among you; he'll pass in the crowd. They won't stop to examine, I guess. They'll be after me."

Blake came hurrying in. He had had sense enough to go to Manners's post when it was left vacant.

"There isn't a minute to spare," he said. "They'll be here directly. My hat, Merry! What——"

"It's all serene, old man! I say, you fellows, I shall make first for Wayland, but swing round towards home where the roads fork. If Mr. Featherstone can spare my clothes after the bobbies have passed, you might ride along by the direct road and bring them."

"We'll see that he does," answered Talbot, with firm decision.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"Dry up, Gussy! I'm off!"

He darted recklessly up the broken steps, seized a machine, and was in the saddle just in time.

Inspector Skeat and a constable, having cut across from the footpath, had been obliged to dismount owing to the roughness of the ground, and had thus lost a minute or two.

Had it not been for that he might have run right into their arms. As it was they were not fifty yards away when he mounted.

Tom would not turn his head lest he might be recognised. Out of the corner of his eye he had a glimpse not only of the two men in uniform, but also of Crooke and Levison.

He had on Featherstone's tweed suit, and his hair was much the same colour as the fugitive's. The police would have a description, no doubt, and in all likelihood would take him to be the man they were after.

They did; and so did Crooke and Levison.

"There he is!" yelled Levison.

"Stop! In the King's name, I arrest——"

But it was of no use for the inspector to go on. You cannot very well arrest a person who is leaving you behind at the rate of something like fifteen miles an hour.

The two climbed to their saddles, and made after him. They did not stop to look at the little crowd of fellows whom they saw among the castle ruins.

They had no doubt that their quarry was ahead, and did not dream for a moment that he was at the back of that crowd, with Figgins and Talbot in front of him, hiding him from view. The juniors had thought it safer that he should be with them than down in the vaults alone, lest one of the two policemen should stay behind to search.

For a brief space Tom Merry pedalled his hardest. The blood coursed quickly through his veins, and the excitement thrilled him.

He knew that, bar accidents, he could easily run clear away from the heavy men behind him. But he did not want to get too far ahead.

He had told the other fellows that at the forking of the roads he would turn towards St. Jim's. And he wanted Inspector Skeat and the other man in blue to follow him.

Talbot would understand, if Featherstone didn't, that thus the way would be left clear for the fugitive to reach Wayland Moor. There he might hide till darkness without much risk.

Tom slowed down.

No sign of the blue uniforms yet. He began to be afraid that the policemen had given up the chase.

No. There they were!

He spurted again.

"Stop! Stop, in the name of the law!" yelled one of the constables.

Tom bent over his handles, and pedalled faster. They were within sight of the fork now.

He swung to the westward road.

Now he rode for all he was worth. The direct way from the castle into the Wayland Road was very short. The fellows ought to be at the junction of the ways before he was. If they had brought his clothes along, every second would be precious.

CHAPTER 13. A Narrow Shave.

MEANWHILE, Talbot had not been idle. "You'll have to get over your dislike of those things, Mr., Featherstone!" he said sharply. "For Merry has yours, and I intend to take his to him." "Suppose I refuse to give up his?" snapped Featherstone.

"Then we'll take them off your back! Oh, you needn't scowl! Anyway, you've no chance of getting far in an Eton jacket. It doesn't quite go with your face, you know!"

"Where are the other things?" Someone had brought them up from the vaults, it seemed. Featherstone lost no time in making the exchange.

"What had I better do?" he asked.

There was small sign of gratitude in his words or the tone in which they were spoken.

"Make for Wayland Moor," answered Talbot, with a gesture to eastward. "But you know it?"

"All right! Much obliged to you, I'm sure!"

He was off, running hard, with bent head. Some of them stopped to stare after him.

"A grateful bounder, I must say!" remarked Mayne. "Never mind him! We've got to scorch for the Wayland Road. Pick that clobber up, Lowther!"

"Right-ho, Talbot! I say, what about Crooke and Levison?"

"Don't let them get ahead, that's all. We can deal with them, I guess, if their game's to give the show away. But once they're ahead the bizney's getting dangerous."

Crooke and Levison were trying to get in advance. But Blake and Figgins and Manners, riding hard, cut them off, and spread over the road in front of them.

"Just you let us pass!" yelled Crooke.

"Oh, you can pass, if you can find room, and can ride fast enough, and all that," answered Blake, lamming on speed and keeping ahead of the precious pair.

And now Talbot and the rest were coming up behind. One by one they passed Crooke and Levison.

"Want to see the fun, Crooke?" asked Talbot, quite as if nothing much out of the ordinary was in the wind.

"Yah!" was Crooke's elegant answer.

"They were bobbies, weren't they, Levison?" said Lowther. "Wonder what they could have wanted? Do you happen to know?"

"You'll know before long!" snapped Levison.

"Hope so, I'm sure! Feeling no end curious about it." Lowther passed on. Mayne dashed past without a word. Mayne seldom spoke to either Crooke or Levison if he could avoid it.

"They've made a mistake," said Herries. "At least, I reckon so. Wasn't it you they wanted, Levison?"

"Bai Jove, deah boy, I weally think it must have been!" Arthur Augustus said, as he followed Herries.

"Unless it was Crooke!" yelled Digby.

Kerr did not speak to the sweet pair, and Fatty Wynn, who came last, needed all his breath for his work. Yet Fatty, too, got ahead of them.

"I reckon I'll chuck it!" said Crooke suddenly.

"Oh, don't do that!" protested Levison. "We may as well see the end of it!"

"All right! But we're only two to a dozen, and if they set on to us I'll take it out of your hide afterwards, you bet. I say, where's Merry?"

"Didn't you twig?"

"Twig what, you fatheaded idiot?"

"Why, that it was Merry who rode off and drew those two bluebottles in pursuit! The other chap made away in that soft hat and those awful bags!"

"My word! That's pretty cool—even for Merry! He'll get it in the neck this time, you see if he don't!"

But fortune favoured Tom Merry. A dog ran across the road and got mixed up with the constable's bike, and the constable's front wheel struck the inspector's rear one and brought him down.

They were up again with only a minute or two wasted, and their machines had suffered no very great damage. But even seconds were of value, and a slightly bent crank on one bike and a twisted handlebar on the other meant less speed.

"Hurrah! Oh, good egg! Here's old Merry!" cried Blake, dismounting at the corner of the roads just as Tom came up, red-faced, streaming with perspiration, but unblown.

"Hand over my clobber, Lowther. Catch hold of this bike, Gussy! I'll get into the field over there and change!"

He was over the gate in a second, and had effected the change of clothes in less than a couple of minutes.

"Hallo! What do our dear friends here want?" he asked, returning, and espying Crooke and Levison.

"To give the game away, I reckon," answered Piggins. "Oh, is that it? Some of you will oblige me by sitting on Crooke, then!"

Three or four of them dragged Crooke down and promptly sat upon him. His threats and struggles were in vain, and when he tried to shout Manners threatened him with a handful of dust held close to his nose.

"You keep quiet, or I'll pop this down your throat," he said.

The policemen were not yet in sight. Tom Merry turned to Levison.

"You put them on the track, you rotter!" he said sternly.

"I—I didn't! I—I swear I didn't, Merry! Why should you think I did?"

The eyes of Levison were anywhere but upon Tom Merry's face, and Levison's own face had turned a sickly green colour. Tom knew that his accusation was justified. A confession would have made him no more sure.

"Come into this field, Levison," he said. "Will you come along, Kerr and Talbot?"

The two followed him, wondering what he meant to do. "Get into these clothes, Levison!" he ordered, pointing to Featherstone's tweed suit.

"I won't! You can't make me! You don't suppose—"

"We can make you, and we will! Strip off his things, you fellows!"

The exchange was made quickly, Levison whimpering with fear and wonderment while it was under way.

"Here they come!" cried Blake. "Over the gate, Levison, quick! You're on in this act! In fact, this is your cue!"

Almost stupefied with amazement, Levison clambered over the gate. Next moment Inspector Skeat jumped from his machine, his face like the setting sun for redness, and the sweat trickling into his eyes.

He clapped a hand on Levison's shoulder.

"In the King's name! I arrest you, Vincent Featherstone— Why, you're not the man! You—you're Master Levison! What on earth do you mean by this, you young scoundrel? A pretty chase you've led us, and meanwhile it's likely the chap we were after has skedaddled!"

Then Levison saw it all, and was nearly mad with fear and rage; and the rest saw too, and grinned, and had all their knees how to do to keep from bursting into laughter.

"I say, inspector, easy does it!" said Tom Merry coolly. "You mustn't call a fellow a scoundrel because he happens to have been taken for someone else."

"That sort of talk's no good, Master Merry! I—"

"You've nothing to arrest Levison for, have you? Not at present, anyway?"

"Don't you be cheeky, young sir! These clothes—"

"Is there any law against tweeds?"

"You St. Jim's boys don't wear them. And I've information—"

"A good deal of it, I should say, inspector. But I don't quite see what you have to do with the St. Jim's rules about clothes."

"Confound you!"

Then the inspector, who was not without a sense of humour, burst into laughter.

He had been had—badly had! When he came to think of it, he had nothing to go upon except an anonymous letter. The clothes Levison now wore answered the description of those which Featherstone had been wearing when he escaped arrest, but that was not sufficient to prove them the same.

Inspector Skeat looked round. They knew that he was noting who were present.

Then he mounted and rode away, followed by his aide.

"You can let Crooke get up now, you fellows!" called Tom Merry.

"Let me get at Manners!" roared Crooke. "I'll—I'll—"

"Oh, no, you won't, Crooke, because we sha'n't allow it! Just wait till your dear friend Levison has made a change in his attire, and then escort him home! He really looks so off colour that I don't think he ought to ride back alone, and we don't want him!"

But Crooke, with a snort of rage, mounted and rode, waiting not for Levison.

Nor did the rest wait, and they never heard what became of Featherstone's tweeds. Perhaps some tramp had a pleasant surprise when he found them where Levison had left them!

They heard what had become of Featherstone, though not until some little time afterwards.

But it was not direct from Featherstone they heard.

Kildare, the captain of the school, came up to Tom Merry and Talbot as they paced up and down the quadrangle together one evening, just before the prep, and put a hand on the shoulder of each, forcing his way to a place between them.

"I've something to say to you fellows," he said, "and it's rather serious."

"Say on, Kildare!" answered Tom Merry.

"Did you ever meet a bounder of the name of Featherstone?"

"Rummy thing, we were just talking about him! He knew your brother, Kildare!"

"And my brother knew him, and didn't think much of him; doesn't now, for that matter! It's from him I've heard. He ran against Featherstone in town a few days ago. The fellow had just managed to clear himself of a charge of embezzlement. When I say clear himself it's hardly right, though, for it was the luck of the police happening to get hold of the right man in the nick of time that saved him!"

"He wasn't guilty, then?" asked Talbot.

"Not of the charge made against him. But he's a wrong'un—a sponger, a soaker, a gambler, and a funk! What's this yarn about you fellows helping him out of a hole?"

"Did he say anything to your brother about that?"

"Of course he did! How else should I know? He didn't seem to think it called for any warm gratitude on his part, but my brother says the young asses—that's you and the rest!—must have behaved like bricks, and he's got somehow the notion that you did it for the sake of St. Jim's ruder than the sake of Featherstone."

"So we did, Kildare," Talbot answered. "He appealed to us 'for the old school's sake!'"

"Ah! Precious lot he cared about the old school when he was here, I reckon! Not quite a Lev., not quite an utter rotter, but very near it! Tell me the yarn. I've only got fragments of it."

They told him everything, except for Levison's part in it, that is.

"You young idiots!" he said. "You might have had to go to prison yourselves for that!"

But his hands were still on their shoulders, and the pressure of those hands was kindly.

And if they had heard what Kildare murmured as he strode away, they would have known still better what he really felt about it.

Only five words—"for the old school's sake!"

But to Kildare, as to them, those words meant what they could never mean to such as Featherstone and Levison and Crooke!

The First Instalment of Our Grand New Adventure Serial.

UNDER THE DRAGON.



The opening chapters of a great new story of thrilling adventure in the Far East.

BY

PETER BAYNE.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Abandoned—Fighting with Fate—in the Chinese Courtyard.

The sun blazed in the sky like a great spinning ball of liquid fire.

Beneath its scorching rays all living things suffered an almost insupportable faintness and fatigue. The verdure that had grown in the rocky soil during the spring was now all withered and dried into a powdery substance that dissolved into dust at the slightest touch. The scanty foliage of the few stunted trees that were visible afforded the poorest shade to man or beast.

In all the vast expanse of undulating plain, bounded on every side by mountain ranges, no welcome prospect met the eye. Here were solitude and loneliness like unto that to be met with in the Valley of Death itself.

And the three figures who moved forward across this trackless wilderness, with halting, staggering footsteps, bore rather the appearance of spectral shapes than that of human beings.

Famine, thirst, and hardships innumerable had robbed them of their strength. Their clothes were in tatters that hung loosely from their gaunt bodies. Their feet were bare, bruised, cut, and swollen; for shoe-leather had given out entirely many days before.

"It's no use, Guy," whispered the youngest member of the tragic little band, uttering the words with a hard and painful effort. "I can't go on any farther. I'm done!"

Even as he spoke, Norris Brent lurched, swayed forward, and fell to the ground. He made a futile effort to rise, rolled slowly over on to his back, and stared up at the pitiless sky with dim, unseeing eyes.

Silently Guy Melville gazed down at his young cousin. He made no attempt to help the other in any way. In fact, the expression of his dark, haggard face was, for one swift moment, one of cruel joy and relief.

"Water!" gasped Norris Brent, with quick, panting breath. "A drink—of water—will pull me round!"

The shadow of a hard smile played over Melville's lips, and he shook his head; but Brent, whose power of sight was fast failing, saw him not.

"The water!" said a queer, toneless voice. "You have some in the flask. Give it to the young master!"

With an angry, guilty start, Guy Melville swung round. Until that moment he had almost forgotten the existence of Yen How, the Chinaman, who was now standing close at his elbow.

"What are you drivelling about?" he exclaimed. "I have no water-flask. You're dreaming!"

Yen How laid a long, yellow hand on Melville's arm.

"You have it," he said, his face devoid of expression. "It is hidden under your coat. Here it is."

His hand slipped down towards the precious flask, and his fingers touched it, but next moment he was pushed violently away.

"Get back!" snarled Melville, his face writhing with evil passion. "Have you gone mad that you dare to touch me?

Show me any more insolence, and I'll leave you here to die and rot with him!"

He glanced at his cousin, then back again at Yen How, who regarded him with stony-eyed calm.

"Give me the flask," said the Chinaman. "The water will save his life."

Then, seeing the look in the face of the man confronting him, he gave a spring. Melville took a running step forward to meet the attack. He struck Yen How between the eyes with his fist, but the other clutched at and held him, and both men lost their footing and crashed to the ground.

Like brute beasts they fought, hitting, scratching, biting, and raising clouds of fine dust as they rolled over and over. The blind, awful rage of primitive man fired them, but with Yen How it came from a grand and noble motive—the burning desire to save the life of the British lad whom he loved and served with doglike devotion.

Yet he was to lose in the struggle. His strength, already worn down to vanishing point through days of bitter privation, failed him now when he most needed it. With a deep, sighing catch of his breath he fell away from Guy Melville, who, panting and gasping, staggered to his feet.

Snatching the water-flask from underneath his tattered coat, he uncorked it and raised it to his lips. The precious fluid stirred new life within him. Faintness and fatigue vanished as if by magic.

Giving vent to a savage laugh he kicked the prostrate body of Yen How again and again. He was leaving the Chinaman to a terrible fate—to the same cruel and lingering death as that to which he had condemned his own cousin—and the thought filled his mind with a gloatingly-vindictive pleasure.

Both Norris Brent and Yen How were now out of the way. It was a nuisance having to dispense with the services of the Chinaman sooner than was convenient, but that could not be helped, and it seemed a certainty that things were turning out for the best.

"The fellow is better where he is," said Melville heartlessly. "His native cunning might have proved too much for me in the end. He was a slave to Brent, and would have given his very life for him. Well, they're together now, and all things in this world will soon be at an end for them."

With barely a parting glance at the victims of his base treachery he turned and moved away from the spot. To leave one of his own kin and kin there to die in that sun-scorched wilderness cost him no single pang of remorse. He exulted in the deed. The opportunity he had watched for had come, and he had seized it. Fate had swept Norris Brent for ever from his path, and none but himself would ever know the exact truth of how death had come to his young relative.

Time passed on. The awful heat of the sun increased as the afternoon lengthened towards its close. Dark, swiftly-moving objects appeared in the sky, birds of loathsome aspect, and came hovering down to earth near the two cast-aways lying there in helpless plight.

Oblivious though Norris Brent was to all that surrounded

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him, his mind focussed a strange phantasmagoria of past events. He lived over again in imagination the year he had spent in that little known part of southern China with his cousin, who had been sent out from England by a famous naturalist to search for specimens of a certain rare plant only to be found in that part of the world.

Led by native guides, the little expeditionary party, of which Guy Melville was the chief, traversed many hundreds of miles of unknown country in their quest. Through the long months failure and misfortune dogged their footsteps.

The guides deserted one by one, and the climax came when the Chinese pack-carriers mutinied in a body. Plundered of almost all they possessed, and left stranded in a wild, inhospitable land far from the nearest settlement of the white man, Norris Brent and his cousin set out on their return journey to the coast with but faint hope of ever reaching civilisation again.

With them was Yen How, who engaged as servant by Norris Brent in Hong Kong, had remained loyal and faithful to his young master through every hour of danger and suffering.

Now he and Brent were alone, callously abandoned to their fate by Guy Melville for some sinister reason that was unknown to both of them.

It was not until long after Melville had gone that Yen How, stirring from his prostrate position, sat up and looked round with a dull, vacant stare. Like one in a trance he saw the outstretched figure of Norris Brent, the hideous, watching vultures, the bare and sandy upland flaming yellow in the sunlight as far as the eye could see.

Slowly comprehension returned to his dazed brain. He remembered the fight, his useless struggle with Guy Melville for the water-flask, and the memory spurred his wearied strength to fresh effort.

Not of his own terrible thirst did he think at the moment. The needs of his companion were greater than his own.

Bending down, he peered anxiously into the other's face. Norris Brent looked back at him, vacantly at first, and then with the light of dawning recognition in his eyes. He opened his lips to speak, but no sound came from them, and he moved his head with a slight gesture of impatient annoyance at his impotence.

"Me go look for water," said Yen How, with an encouraging smile that showed all his white teeth. "More better you stop here till I come back. Velly soon you see me again."

Norris Brent looked his understanding of the words, and closed his eyes, for the sun was hurting them. The thought of water tantalised and tortured him beyond endurance. For one long, splendid draught of it he would gladly have bartered life itself.

Yet where was Yen How to find what was so vitally necessary to the continued existence of him and his friend? The Chinaman had not the faintest glimmering of an idea. There was not so much even as a dry water-course in sight. The burning sun had sucked the last drop of moisture from the arid soil. It seemed a waste of effort, a mockery of hope, to do aught else than lie down and await the coming of the last eternal sleep of all.

Fatalist as he was, Yen How, had he only had himself to think about, would have resigned himself to death with the uncomplaining calm of his race. It was only his whole-hearted devotion to his comrade that now urged him onward.

When crossing a swift and dangerous river the boat he was in had overturned, and had not Norris Brent rescued him at the risk of his own life, he would have been drowned. This it was which had made Yen How a grateful slave of the young Britisher who was now lying in the shadow of a merciless doom.

His eyes searching every yard of the ground, Yen How made his way towards a bare, rugged hill which he had fixed upon as a landmark to guide him in his quest. He walked steadily on, with the sun beating pitilessly down upon him, careless of the physical torture he was suffering except in so far as it wore away his already overtaxed strength and threatened to defeat his purpose.

It was not long before he realised that he had undertaken too great a task. His legs bent beneath him, his bare feet dragged heavily over the rough ground, and the dazzling reflection of the sun danced before his eyes like a sea of fire.

Through the infernal glare the hill showed like a burning cinder of immense size. It was the magnet that drew Yen How on. By some blind process of reasoning he associated it with the water of which there was no sign in earth or sky. Could he but reach it his desire would be attained, and the life of his comrade saved from a miserable end.

The hill was much farther off than Yen How had imagined it to be. The belief took shape in his mind that he would never be able to reach it. This acted as a fresh spur to his flagging energy.

At last, more dead than alive, he came to the foot of the rise. The ground was hard as iron, covered with rocks, as rugged and stern a spot as one could find anywhere in the world. No bubbling spring of fresh water here.

A rush of fierce but futile anger overcame Yen How, to be swiftly followed by a sense of sickening despair. Far better, he reflected, had he remained by the side of his comrade, whom he would never see again, for he knew that he could not hope to retrace his steps across the burning desert in his exhausted state.

Groaning aloud, Yen How sank helplessly down against a large upright piece of rock standing near him. The sudden pressure of his body against it overturned the stone, disclosing a deep square hole in the ground beneath it.

Directly he looked into the cavity, Yen How, a hoarse cry bursting from his lips, sprang to his feet as though struck by an electric shock. In the hollow space that the rock had concealed were five skin water-bottles of the largest size.

Shaking with excitement, Yen How eagerly bent and took up one of the receptacles, drawing the stopper with his teeth. It was filled to the brim with cold water, and the Chinaman, almost sobbing with joy, greedily slaked his thirst.

The filled water-bottles, as he shrewdly guessed, were placed in the hollow by a passing caravan party for the benefit of those travellers who might need assistance, and who knew where to look for it.

In the great desert regions of the Far East, where there are regular caravan routes, such welcome, though hidden, oases are to be found at frequently recurring intervals by those initiated into the secret. By pure chance Yen How had stumbled upon one, and so saved himself from a dreadful fate.

Seizing three of the water-bottles, he set off back across the plain. The danger was passed. His strength had come back to him. Quickly he traversed the distance that separated him from his comrade.

He found Norris Brent lying where he had left him, solemnly watched by a circling crowd of vultures, who flew off, uttering loud, discordant cries, at his approach.

Raising his head on to his knee, Yen How moistened Brent's lips. The effect was almost instantaneous. The lad breathed heavily, opened his eyes, and struggled up into a sitting posture.

"That you, Yen How?" he said faintly. "Thought you'd left me. Must have been dreaming." The Chinaman pointed to the skin water-bottle.

"Drink!" he said. "Have plenty good long drink." Never in his life before had Norris Brent experienced such keen and exquisite delight as he did during the next few minutes.

He drank until he could drink no more, and as the water went gurgling down his throat he felt the new life-force surging through all his limbs, calling him back from the death that had so nearly claimed him for its victim.

"Your luck was in that time," he declared, after hearing Yen How speak of his discovery. "We couldn't have dragged on a much longer without water."

The puzzled expression that was there deepened in Norris Brent's face. "What became of Mr. Melville?" he inquired.

Yen How did not hesitate to reply. He had expected the question, and made up his mind how to answer it. Not yet, he had resolved, was it the proper time for him to tell his comrade of Guy Melville's wicked treachery.

"Suppose he went on," he said, his gaze fastened on the far horizon. "He think we die. No good he stop this side."

"Did you see him go?" asked Brent. "Yes," Yen How answered. "He walk away velly quick. No look back. He have big surprise when he see us next time."

The puzzled expression that was there deepened in Norris Brent's face. Doubt and suspicion started to work in his mind. The reasons advanced by Yen How for Melville's strange departure would not bear close examination. Had there been foul play on his cousin's part? His cheeks flushed at the thought, which seemed unworthy of him, but he could not rid himself of it.

"Oh, well," he said to Yen How. "I hope he gets through safely to the coast. No doubt we shall come across him there."

When the sun had gone down the comrades renewed their interrupted journey. They pushed on through the night without a halt, crossing a mountain range and descending into a valley, where they were able to obtain both food and water.

They travelled for a week without seeing a sign of human life. Then they began to pass scattered villages on the way, and Yen How gathered from native information that they were on the direct road to Canton, the wonderful Chinese city near the sea.

"Once we are there," said Norris Brent, "we shall be out



"Look!" she said. "Ming Yung!" Turning his head, Brent saw the figure of a tall, spare Chinaman standing in the garden path about five yards off. The man was motionless as a carved image. (See page 27)

of our troubles. Gad, but what scarcrows we look! Our friends of a few months ago wouldn't recognise us now."

That same day the comrades passed close to a large native house surrounded by wooded gardens that attracted their interested notice. It was evidently the summer residence of a Chinese mandarin of high rank and great wealth.

The ornamental towers and roofs, brilliant with gilt and paint, flashed and glittered in the sunlight. Miniature lakes, crossed by rustic bridges, were in the gardens, where beds of brightly-coloured flowers dazzled the eye to look on them.

But what excited Brent's attention more than anything else was a wireless telegraphy pole surmounting one of the towers of the building.

"Name of Marconi!" he exclaimed. "This is the last place in the world where I should have expected to find wireless in use. Wonder who the owner is? He may know something of Melville. I'll call and see him."

Turning in at a convenient gateway, he and Yen How followed a path that opened out into a big courtyard, where several Chinese servants were sitting and smoking in the sunshine. Some native dogs rushed barking, at the comrades, who were speedily surrounded by a shouting, gesticulating crowd of yellow men, obviously imbued with the most hostile sentiments.

"Tell them who we are," Brent said to Yen How. "They evidently take us for a pair of beggars. No wonder, either, come to think of it."

In vain did Yen How attempt to make his voice heard in the babel. He and Brent were jostled and pushed from side to side. Moreover, the sight of a white face infuriated the Chinese, and Brent was seized and brutally struck about the head and face.

His fighting blood roused, the lad, snatching a bamboo pole from one of his enemies, laid around him with such effect as to clear a wide space on every side. But the rush was stopped only for a moment.

Uttering cries of rage, the Chinese came on again. In a

few moments Brent and his companion were struggling for their lives. Murder showed in the fierce yellow faces in front of them.

The bamboo pole Brent wielded was wrenched from his grasp. He struck at the fellow who took it from him, and at the same moment a heavy weapon fell with terrible force on his right arm, breaking the bone below the elbow-joint.

A groan burst from his lips at the excruciating pain, and a feeling of deadly sickness swept over him. Yet somehow he stood his ground, remembering that if he did go down it would be all-over with him, and that he would be kicked and trampled to death. He must fight on to the last.

The roaring tumult suddenly ceased to deafen his ears. What had happened? The Chinese were drawing back away from him and Yen How, their clamour stilled, and with sullen, foolish faces that were turned as with one accord to a beautiful girl who had appeared on the scene.

Her hair and eyes were dark as night, but her face was fair as a rose and of exquisite shape and contour. She was attired in the Eastern style, and Norris Brent, as he gazed at her, realised in a flash of thought that he was looking at such a vision of perfect loveliness as he had never seen before in his life.

With his gaze still on the girl, he swayed dizzily into Yen How's arms and lost consciousness, the last sound he heard being a voice whose musical sweetness was like unto that of a golden bell, and the last thought that flashed across his brain was that the owner of the voice was the girl with the dark eyes.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Ming Yung, the Chinaman—The White Horseman—At Dawn.

A camel caravan was travelling inland from the sea. Night had long since fallen, but the sky was ablaze with

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 392.

OUR WONDERFUL SUMMER DOUBLE NUMBER NEXT WEEK. AMAZING ATTRACTIONS!

stars, such stars of radiating brilliance as are only seen in the East, and the travellers had no difficulty in keeping to the rough, winding track that they were following.

They were Chinese, and all of them were armed for protection against possible attacks by parties of prowling bandits, although the name of their master, who was with them, was in itself sufficient to inspire a wholesome fear in those who might be tempted to rob and murder them.

This individual was Ming Yung, a Chinese mandarin of the highest rank, and a man possessing great wealth and influence. He had been for some time in Hong Kong and Singapore, and was now on his way home, a princely abode where he worshipped the spirits of departed ancestors who had borne his name throughout two thousand years.

He was at the head of the caravan, behind the guides, and he sat on his camel with a perfect ease and mastery that could not have been equalled by any Bedouin of the desert.

The long purple gown falling from his shoulders, decorated with the design of the Imperial Dragon threaded into the silk in gold wire, that denoted his exalted rank, was enveloped in a light skin cloak to keep off the dust.

This cloak had a hood which completely covered his head and brows, and his eyes looked out of the shadow with a cold, slumbering light in them that signalled the volcanic forces making up the personality of their owner. They were dark eyes, almost black, with a tinge of green, resembling those of some serpent in repose, but over on the watch.

The face was the colour of ivory yellowed by age. It was flat and expressionless. But for the wonderful eyes, one would never have suspected Ming Yung to be the man he was—a man in a million.

The caravan moved swiftly on across the sandy wastes. Save when a camel coughed scarcely a sound was heard, for the men were as silent as their leader, and anxious to be at the end of their journey. They hoped to be home by early morning.

A sharp exclamation from one of the guides caused Ming Yung to look up. Advancing from the shadows of a group of trees he observed two men mounted on wiry little Chinese ponies. In the moonlight they were plainly visible, and Ming Yung frowned both with displeasure and surprise as he saw that one of them was a white man.

"Halt those men!" he ordered. "I must speak to them." The strangers, who were about to make a detour in order to avoid meeting the caravan, were stopped by the guides. Directly afterwards Ming Yung rode up to them. He gave all his attention to the white man, for the other was obviously a native coolie, and of no importance.

"Feringhee!" said Ming Yung, using the Chinese word of contemptuous reference to white people. "What is your name? What are you doing here? Answer"—as the horseman seemed to hesitate—"or I will have you shot, and your dead body thrown to the vultures!"

The threat was uttered quietly, but in a tone of voice that made the person it was addressed to shudder and turn cold for a moment.

"My name is Guy Melville," he replied, a trifle nervously. "I am the sole survivor of an expeditionary party, led by me, sent out from England some time ago to look for certain plants in the eastern part of southern China. All the other members of the expedition perished of hunger and thirst. Two weeks ago I reached a village in the last stages of exhaustion. There I remained for several days, and then, having engaged this guide to show me the way, set out for Canton, which I hope to reach to-morrow night."

Ming Yung was silent for a minute or two. His gaze never left the face of the man before him. It seemed to pierce right through the mask of flesh to the brain behind, to seize upon all the hidden secrets of the soul, and to drag them out into the light.

"You were fortunate," said Ming Yung at last—"you were fortunate to escape while your friends died. I remember to have read something of your expedition. Was there not a young relative with you?"

The question made Guy Melville start with mingled fear and surprise. How much did this Chinaman know about him? He would have lied had he dared to, but with this doubt in his mind it was best for him, he decided, to speak the truth.

"My cousin," he said, "a mere lad who could not bear up against the terrible hardships of the journey. I blame myself bitterly now for having allowed him to come with me, but he was so eager to travel and see the world."

"You left him to die?"

Again Guy Melville experienced a curiously chilling sensation as he met the gaze of those snakelike, fathomless eyes bent upon his face.

"It was out of my power to help him at the last," he replied. "He died for want of the water that I was unable to give him."

Ming Yung knew that the other had lied to him, knew it as surely as if he had been supplied there and then with actual and visible evidence of the fact. Yet neither by look nor word did he betray his conviction. At a sign from him the caravan guides moved on again.

"Feringhee," he said, "you will doubtless be returning to England soon? Before long I shall be in your country. Then you will see me again. My name is Ming Yung. You will remember it when we next meet."

Saying no more, he shook the driving-cord of his camel, which bounded forward, followed by the rest of the caravan. In a few minutes he and his followers were lost to sight in the night shadows, and Guy Melville, a vague, disturbing fear at his heart of he knew not what, rode away in the opposite direction.

As soon as he had turned his back on him, Ming Yung dismissed all thought of the Englishman from his mind. The same brooding silence as before settled down on the caravan.

League after league was swiftly covered by the fast-stepping camels. With no halt or abatement of their speed they swept on through the night.

As morning dawned, Ming Yung was within a few miles of his journey's end. The rising sun shone on the gilded towers and cupolas of his home among the hills as it had done on them for centuries. The spectacle was one that never failed to arouse Ming Yung to an intense feeling of ancestral pride, but his impassive face showed no sign of emotion. Looking at him a casual observer would have declared that he was as devoid of sentiment as a stone image.

The approach of the travellers had been seen from the house. A man came hurrying down the hill to meet them. He was bent and wizened, with scanty, white hair and a thin, wrinkled face whose expression was one of infinite craft and cunning. Seeing Ming Yung he bowed before him with Oriental obeisance.

"Welcome home, wise master!" he exclaimed, in a thin, droning voice. "Your slave prostrates himself at your feet!"

"Ho Beng," said Ming Yung, knowing that the appearance of the other there portended some revelation of unusual importance, "speak, and tell me what is in your mind."

The old Chinaman came a step nearer to his master. "There is a feringhee up there," he said, glaring towards the house. "For nearly three weeks has he lived beneath your ancestral roof."

Darts of fire seemed to shoot from Ming Yung's eyes. "A feringhee!" he said. "A feringhee under my roof! How comes it that he is there?"

"A cursed fate sent him," answered Ho Beng, hate and bitterness in his look. "One day he entered the courtyard begging for food. The coolies set upon him. He fought them, and his arm was broken. Then would your slaves have made an end of him, but Silver Pearl appeared and forbade them to carry out their just purpose. The feringhee was taken into the house, where, with such attention given to him as might be bestowed on a prince of Royal blood, he has been ever since."

"Why has this thing happened?" Ming Yung inquired, the look of a cobra about to strike more than ever pronounced in his face. "This feringhee should have been slain long ere now. Who has dared to protect him?"

"Silver Pearl," almost whispered Ho Beng. "Who else could have stood between him and the poisoned cup or the dagger-blade? It is Silver Pearl who has saved the feringhee from death."

Ming Yung fixed a terrifying stare on his aged servant. Ho Beng met the look without flinching. Had he quailed for an instant his doom would have been sealed, for his master would have known thereby that he had been somehow remiss in the discharge of his duties as steward of the estate.

Ruthless and inexorable, Ming Yung never showed mercy to one who was guilty of a breach of trust. Death, swift and cruel, was the penalty for the fault.

"Ho Beng," said Ming Yung, in a voice that sounded like the clink of steel on steel, "this feringhee shall be offered up as a sacrifice to the great dragon on this my homecoming, and Silver Pearl herself shall be at the ceremony."

Then the camels and their riders moved on up the hill.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Young Romance—Surprised—Flight.

The girl who had saved him from the murderous rage of the Chinese coolies three weeks before was standing with Norris Brent in the shade of an enormous cherry-tree that was the chief ornament of one of Ming Yung's beautiful gardens.

The tree was a mass of pink-and-white blossom, which

dropped full-blown petals as the dawn wind stirred it, and spread a carpet over the ground that fairies might have danced on.

In the cool fragrance of the early morning, Norris Brent and his companion had come to this lovely spot. They were alone. No one else was in sight. The Chinese at the house were still asleep. No one, or so they imagined, had seen them enter the garden and make their way to the old cherry-tree.

It was their favourite meeting-place. Frequently had they been there, choosing the hour when they knew that they would be free from the prying gaze of Ho Beng and his myrmidons, and reeking little of the danger that was ever stealing nearer to suddenly spring on them.

To Norris Brent existence seemed an unreal thing. Saved from death in the courtyard he suddenly found himself being treated more as an honoured guest in Ming Yung's household than as a stranger and an outcast.

That this was due to the beautiful maiden who had so unexpectedly intervened on his behalf in the attack made upon him by the Chinese he quickly discovered. She exercised the powers of a young queen, and even Ho Beng unquestioningly obeyed her every command, although, had he had his own way in the matter, he would have tortured Brent to death with his own hands.

Under the care of a Chinese physician the English lad soon regained health and strength. His broken arm was reset with a skill that amazed him. He was provided with the choicest food. In comparison with his previous experiences he seemed to be dwelling in a heaven on earth.

She whom he owed all this lavish care and kind attention to was named Silver Pearl, a name that Brent decided was charmingly appropriate to its owner. He heard from her own lips that she was the ward of the absent Ming Yung, who had adopted her when she was an infant, but who her parents were she had never been told by her guardian.

Stern and cold to everyone else, Ming Yung was kind and indulgent to her, and she was allowed to have her own way in almost everything. She had been for some time at an English school in Hong Kong, but for the last few years had lived at home, and during that time she had never seen a white man.

The interest Norris Brent had taken in the girl from the very first soon strengthened into a deeper feeling. He was at the right age for romance. Silver Pearl was beautiful and charming beyond anyone he had ever met before, and his young heart went out to her in a rash of emotion that changed his whole idea of life.

"It seems to me, Silver Pearl, that I've always known you," he said to her, as they talked together under the blossom-laden branches of the great cherry-tree.

"And yet," said Silver Pearl pensively, "in a little while we shall have seen each other for the last time. You will go away across the seas, and I shall remain here. Then you will forget that you ever saw me."

"Never!" replied Brent impetuously. "Never shall I live to forget you! Can you doubt me? But for you I should have died a dreadful death. You have cared for and tended me in my illness; and I hate and dread the thought of leaving you, Silver Pearl. You say that Ming Yung is good and kind to you; but from what you've told me about him, I believe he could be as cruel and merciless to you as to anyone else."

"He would be if he found you here on his return," said the girl. "I heard from Ho Beng yesterday that he would not be back for some time yet, but I mistrust Ho Beng. Nothing would please him better than for you to fall into Ming Yung's power."

A light laugh broke from Norris Brent's lips.

"I'm not afraid of Ming Yung!" he declared gaily. "He would think twice before he harmed me. Britain has a very long arm, Silver Pearl, to protect her sons."

"I know that," said Silver Pearl gravely; "but Ming Yung, believe me, is beyond its reach. His power is immense. He is above the law of his own country. The greatest men in Pekin fear him. When enemies rise up against him, they disappear and are heard of no more. Little you know of Ming Yung when you believe that he would not dare to harm you."

Incredulous though he was in the matter, Brent could not but be impressed by the girl's earnestness.

"Perhaps you're right," he said. "You know Ming Yung and I don't; but, none the less, I fancy that he'd accept my explanation of my presence here in a friendly spirit."

Silver Pearl shook her head.

"You cannot understand," she said. "You belong to a different race. The East and West will never see alike in anything."

An eager light glowed in Norris Brent's eyes.

"We see alike, Silver Pearl," he said. "You and I understand each other."

A soft flush crept up into Silver Pearl's cheeks. She bent her head in sudden sweet confusion.

"How can I know that?" she murmured.

"You do know it," answered Brent. "Look at me. You do know it, Silver Pearl!"

Slowly she raised her head. As her dark, luminous eyes looked into his, Norris Brent, swayed by an irresistible emotion that was altogether new to him, leaned forward and kissed her on the lips.

Then Norris Brent, gazing ardently at the girl whom he loved, saw the expression of her face suddenly change from shy delight to an overwhelming terror and surprise. She looked beyond him, to something that held her frightened gaze, and some part of her own fear infected her companion.

"What is it?" inquired Brent anxiously. "What are you staring at, Silver Pearl?"

The answer came in an agitated whisper from her lips.

"Look!" she said. "Ming Yung!"

Turning his head, Brent saw the figure of a tall, spare Chinaman standing in the garden path about five yards off. The man was motionless as a carved image. His yellowish-white face was a mask that might have belonged to a mummy.

But his eyes were living coals of fire. They darted lambent flames that seemed to scorch and wither the vital forces of Norris Brent's very body. The lad felt the blood in his veins turn cold as ice. An appalling sense of powerlessness had him swiftly in its grip.

The hideous spell was broken when Ming Yung stepped forward, his outstretched right hand pointed menacingly at the young lovers.

"Go!" murmured Silver Pearl imploringly. "Fly for your life!"

Brent did not move.

"I'll stay here," he answered. "You're in danger as well as myself."

"You must go!" said Silver Pearl. "I command you to go."

She pushed him from her side. In a moment the garden seemed to be full of running men. They came from all sides, and almost before he knew it Brent was swept away from Silver Pearl, and was struggling fiercely with his foes.

Unable to use his right arm, which was in a sling, he still managed to hold his own, and rushed away into the open. As he drew clear of the Chinese a hand clutched his coat-sleeve.

"Come with me," said the voice of Yen How. "I know a way out."

Side by side they raced across the gardens, crashing through bushes, clambering up and leaping over quaint old rockeries, with a stream of shrieking yellow men close at their heels.

A large ornamental lake suddenly opened out ahead of them. They sprang up the stone steps to the frail bamboo bridge spanning it, and darted to the far side.

Then Yen How, quick, cunning, and resourceful, picked up a heavy slab of rock, and hurled it down on the bridge with all his strength. The slight structure immediately collapsed and pitched into the lake, some of the Chinese accompanying its downfall, and the pursuit was shaken off for the time being.

"This way," said Yen How, as he and Brent came suddenly to the brink of a precipitous slope. "We go down this side. The river is at the bottom, and we can escape in a native boat."

Brent halted and looked back.

"I can't go and leave Silver Pearl," he said. "Ming Yung will vent his rage on her. She will need me."

Yen How frantically waved his hands in the air.

"You go back," he declared, "and you go straight to death. You never see Silver Pearl again—Ming Yung see to that—and not much harm come to the girl. Ming Yung shut her up some days, and then let her out. What for you stop, then? No good you can do."

Silently Brent followed his companion down the rocky slope. The going was dangerous in the extreme. At almost every step they took loose stones rolled away from under their feet, causing them to slip and slide, and bringing them time after time within an ace of breaking their necks.

Level ground was reached again at last. Hurring on, they plunged into a dense grove of trees that ended on the banks of a deep and swiftly-rushing stream.

Moored to the bank was a small, flat-bottomed boat, little better than a raft. The comrades jumped into it, cast loose the mooring-rope, and pushed off from the shore. Caught by the current, the boat sped away down the river.

(The forthcoming instalments of this great story are exciting in the extreme. If your chum wants an adventure yarn of the very best, recommend to him "UNDER THE DRAGON!")



THIS WEEK'S CHAT



Whom to Write to —
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GRAND SUMMER DOUBLE NUMBER NEXT WEEK.

Wednesday of next week will be a red-letter day in the history of this journal. In the words of a powerful contemporary paper, I advise you all to

GET READY TO SHOUT!

for the great double-length story of school life which will be presented to you next week is

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tale of its kind ever written!

Martin Clifford, that young and vigorous author who is first in the affections of the youth of this country, has scored another bull's-eye with

"THE HOUSEMASTER'S HOMECOMING!"

in which popular Mr. Railton reappears, and Tom Merry, Talbot, Marie Rivers, and all the old favourites come into the limelight.

The first part of this powerful story describes the circumstances under which Mr. Railton returns to resume his duties. With him, from the firing-line, comes a certain colonel, who happens to be Crooke's uncle, and incidentally, a governor of the school. Crooke hereupon sees an opportunity for blacking Talbot's character in the colonel's eyes. This he does, with the result that, at a meeting of governors on the subject, Talbot is requested to leave the old school where he is learning to forget his chequered past. At this stage Dr. Holmes, who has always taken the kindest interest in Talbot, becomes indignant, and tenders his own resignation to the Board of Governors!

The upshot of this unparalleled proceeding, and what befalls Reginald Talbot, is admirably described, and cannot fail to be of absorbing interest to every reader of THE GEM LIBRARY.

Remember, then, when you go to purchase your two copies of THE GEM next Wednesday—one, of course, being for your soldier-chum—that you are on the verge of one of the finest treats you have had in your career—that of reading, delighting in, and enthusing over

"THE HOUSEMASTER'S HOMECOMING!"

READERS' ANNOUNCEMENTS.

CRICKET.—Teams within a radius of three miles from Wolverhampton or Birmingham with open dates can obtain matches by applying to R. V. Hoggins, Secretary, St. Matthew's Cricket Club, Granville House, Woodsetton, Dudley. Average age 17½. Good ground.

BOOKS WANTED AT THE FRONT.—Will those Gemites who wish to do our Tommies a good turn by sending spare copies of the companion papers to the trenches kindly note that the following are in need of them:

- 1178 DRIVER WALTER HILL,
1/3rd West Riding Brigade,
Royal Field Artillery,
Ammunition Column,
49th West Riding Division,
British Expeditionary Force.
- 2539 DRUMMER P. W. BRACKLEY,
"C" Company, 1/8th Battalion,
Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders,
British Expeditionary Force.

FOOTBALL.—A team, average age 15, desires home and away matches for next season. Write W. R. Tanner, Secretary, 7, Warner Street, Barnsbury, N.

REPLIES IN BRIEF.

Robert Patterson (Co. Antrim).—Cutts and St. Leger are seventeen years of age. Sorry I cannot supply you with the statistics asked for.

"A Constant Reader" (Tunbridge Wells).—The characters you mention in your letter are all fifteen years of age.

R. W. (Galashiels).—Write to Messrs. A. W. Gamage, Ltd., Holborn, London, E.C.

"Anxious One" (Oxford).—Send me your full name and address, and I will see what I can do for you.

Amy Turner (Worcester).—Thank you for your very interesting letter. The ages of the boys in the First and Second Forms vary, but eleven to thirteen is a good average. It was very thoughtful of you to distribute your spare copies among the wounded Tommies in your local hospital. The flowers you so kindly sent me were highly appreciated, and occupied a place on my office mantelshelf for some time. Many thanks!

L. W. (Newcastle).—The book you require is out of print, and unobtainable from this office.

W. S. (Loughborough).—I am afraid I know of no way in which to raise the money you require, except by hard work.

"An Old Reader".—The habit of smoking may be allayed by sucking an acid-tablet occasionally, although this is of no use unless you exercise your will-power also.

Stanley Harris (Thornton Heath).—St. Jim's was established in the seventeenth century.

S. Sinclair (Auckland).—It is ridiculous on your part to expect Tom Merry & Co., and Figgins & Co., and Blake & Co., to say nothing of Redfern & Co., to advance in age until they become tottering and enfeebled old men. My chums like to read of youthful, healthy boys, and not of old jossers with the gout. The interest in the stories would be utterly and wantonly destroyed if I instructed Mr. Clifford to let the characters ripen into manhood. I prefer that they should emulate Peter Pan, and not grow up.

X. Y. Z. Stubbins (Manchester).—I am afraid you will have difficulty in obtaining the numbers you mention. They are out of print.

B. Perkins (Manchester).—Jack Blake is fifteen years of age.

"A Gemite" (Queen's Park).—See reply to Stanley Harris, printed above.

Nora Hennessy, Mary Ellen Byron, Alice Dwyer, and May Quain (Tipperary).—Thank you, my chums, for your letter and loyalty. I am sorry you experience difficulty in getting "The Penny Pop" each week. Your sleepy news-agent wants waking up, and you'll excuse my saying so, won't you?—it's up to you to do it.

E. Jenkins (Woodside).—St. Jim's is in Sussex.

"A Girl Reader" (Walkley).—So you think my correspondent who takes exception to Talbot, on account of his upbringing, is a snob? So do I. And I never like to see snobbishness among the "Gem" readers. Tom Merry is fifteen, and his guardian is Miss Priscilla Fawcett.

"Patriot".—Thank you for your letter, and the decidedly "British" sentiments expressed therein.

Ivy Reeder (Nottinghamshire).—I am sorry I have not replied to your letter before. To judge by the manuscript you submitted to me, you certainly stand a chance of becoming a good author; but do not give up all your time to literature yet. Stay where you are for a year or two, until you have a sufficiently matured style to launch out, as it were, on your own.

"A Loyal Gemite" (Cape Town).—I appreciate your suggestion very much, but cannot see my way clear to publish a copy of "Tom Merry's Weekly" every week in "The Gem."

THE EDITOR.

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OVERHEARD IN THE STRAND.

"Busman (to driver of waggon loaded with scotch): "Now, then, admiral, pull on one side; you can't have all the road!"

Waggon Driver: "Who are you calling admiral, you red-faced hot-potato-can-pusher?"

"Busman (soothingly): "Now, admiral, don't get out of temper, even if you are taking the German Fleet home!"— Sent in by R. Williams, Plaistow, E.

THE SPECULATIONS OF YOUTH.

Small Boy: "Daddy, s'pose the Zeppelins were to come to Hampstead?"

Father: "Well, my son?"

Small Boy: "And s'pose they dropped a bomb on our school, and it killed the headmaster?"

Father: "Well?"

Small Boy: "Do you think we'd get a half-holiday?"— Sent in by H. Fagan, Westcliff.

A WISE PRECAUTION.

Just before the commencement of the melodrama, the villain of the piece rushed on to the stage, and shouted in his loudest voice:

"These cheers for the Kaiser!"

Immediately there was a fusillade of dead cats, rotten eggs, tomatoes, etc., etc., directed upon him; but the villain had anticipated these, and managed to dodge them all.

Then the stage manager came rushing before the curtain, waving his arms wildly.

"What the dickens do you mean by that, you fool?" he cried. "You've nearly ruined the whole show!"

"Oh," said the villain, calmly. "I only wanted to draw their stock of ammunition before I started acting!"— Sent in by W. R. Dick, Cathcart, N.B.

DIPLOMACY.

With a complacent smile and an outstretched hand, Cadger approached his old friend Brown.

"Good gracious!" he exclaimed. "How bad you're looking!— Anything the matter?"

"Nothing. I'm quite well, thank you!" replied Brown. "Never felt better in my life, in fact," he added emphatically.

"But you do look bad," protested Cadger. "I know what's the matter—you've no 'baecy in your pouch, eh?"

"Wrong again," replied Brown. "I've a pouch full!"

"Oh!" murmured Cadger, with a sigh of relief. "Just as I'm a pipeful, old man. My pouch is absolutely empty!"— Sent in by J. Hodgson, Walton, Liverpool.

HE RECOVERED HIS DIGNITY.

A battalion of Kitchener's Army were on parade, when a sergeant called out:

"Any man here who understands motors?"

This was Gussy's chance. Although he had enlisted as a private, he had never missed an opportunity of informing his comrades that he came from a wealthy home.

"Well—er—my guv'nor keeps a couple of Daimlers, you know," he began blandly.

"One's sixty-horse-power, and the other—"

"That's all right; you'll do," broke in the sergeant.

"Fall out and clean the colonel's motor-bike!"— Sent in by M. Green, Writlington, Manchester.

OH, THOSE OLD-LUBBERS!

He hadn't much experience as a sailor, but the skipper of a tramp-steamer was particularly anxious to get away while the tide served, so, without asking many questions, he engaged him on the spot.

The steamer was about to start, and the new hand had been sent for.

"Let go that for'ard rope, there!" roared the captain.

But the new hand ignored the order.

"Why don't you let go that for'ard rope?" yelled the captain from the bridge, dancing with rage.

"Who's touching yer bloomin' rope?" came in indignant tones from the new hand. "I'm not."— Sent in by J. Gildea, Walton, Liverpool.

BETTER THAN HANDCUFFS AND LEG-IRONS.

After the great Turkish defeat at Sarigirdi, a Russian officer met a party of five hundred captured Turks being brought in by fifteen smiling Cossacks. There was something obviously the matter with the prisoners; their hands were all mysteriously occupied, and they were walking delicately.

"Hallo! Have you got a dancing class there or what?" the officer asked the Cossacks in charge.

"Well, you see, Excellency," replied one of the Cossacks, "there's more than five hundred prisoners, and only fifteen of us, so there was a chance that they might be up to some mischief if we weren't careful. Before we started our journey, therefore, we went round and cut off all their hooks, belts, and trouser-buttons. Now they've got their hands fully occupied, so it's no use them plotting mischief!"— Sent in by A. S. Glen, Paisley, N.B.

SOME GALOOT.

The commercial traveller was in a hurry. He had only a few minutes to spare in which to catch his train.

In the hall of the hotel where he had stayed the night he suddenly remembered he had left something behind in his room.

"Here, boy," he shouted to the page, "run to Room No. 45 and see whether I have left a small box on one of the chairs there! Be quick! I have only a few minutes to spare."

The boy rushed up the stairs, and in two or three minutes returned, out of breath.

"Yes, sir," he panted. "It's there now on the chair near the door."— Sent in by B. Fox, Cressington, Liverpool.

A POINTED ANSWER.

A soldier, taking a short cut back to camp across a field, came to a gate to which was attached with a fragile chain a vicious-looking dog. The animal barked loudly, pulled at the chain, and broke it and then rushed with a savage snarl at the Tommy.

Taken by surprise, the soldier struck at the dog with his bayonet, thus causing its death.

"Why did you not strike the dog with the butt-end of your rifle?" asked the magistrate, when Tommy was brought before him and charged with the offence.

"I would have done so, yer honour, if the dog had me with his tail," the soldier.— Sent in by Clark, Dover.

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 story, or a graphic 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.