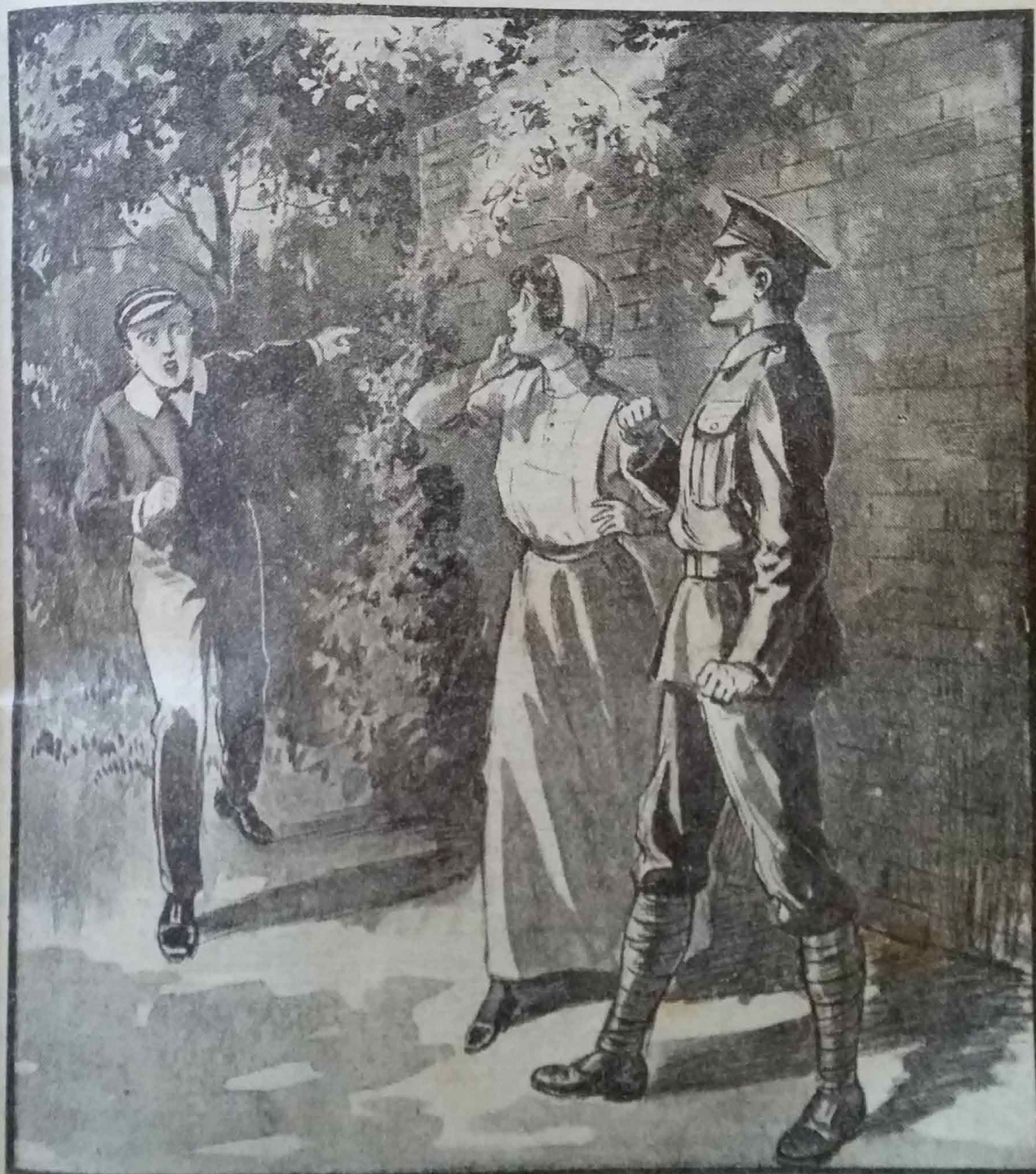


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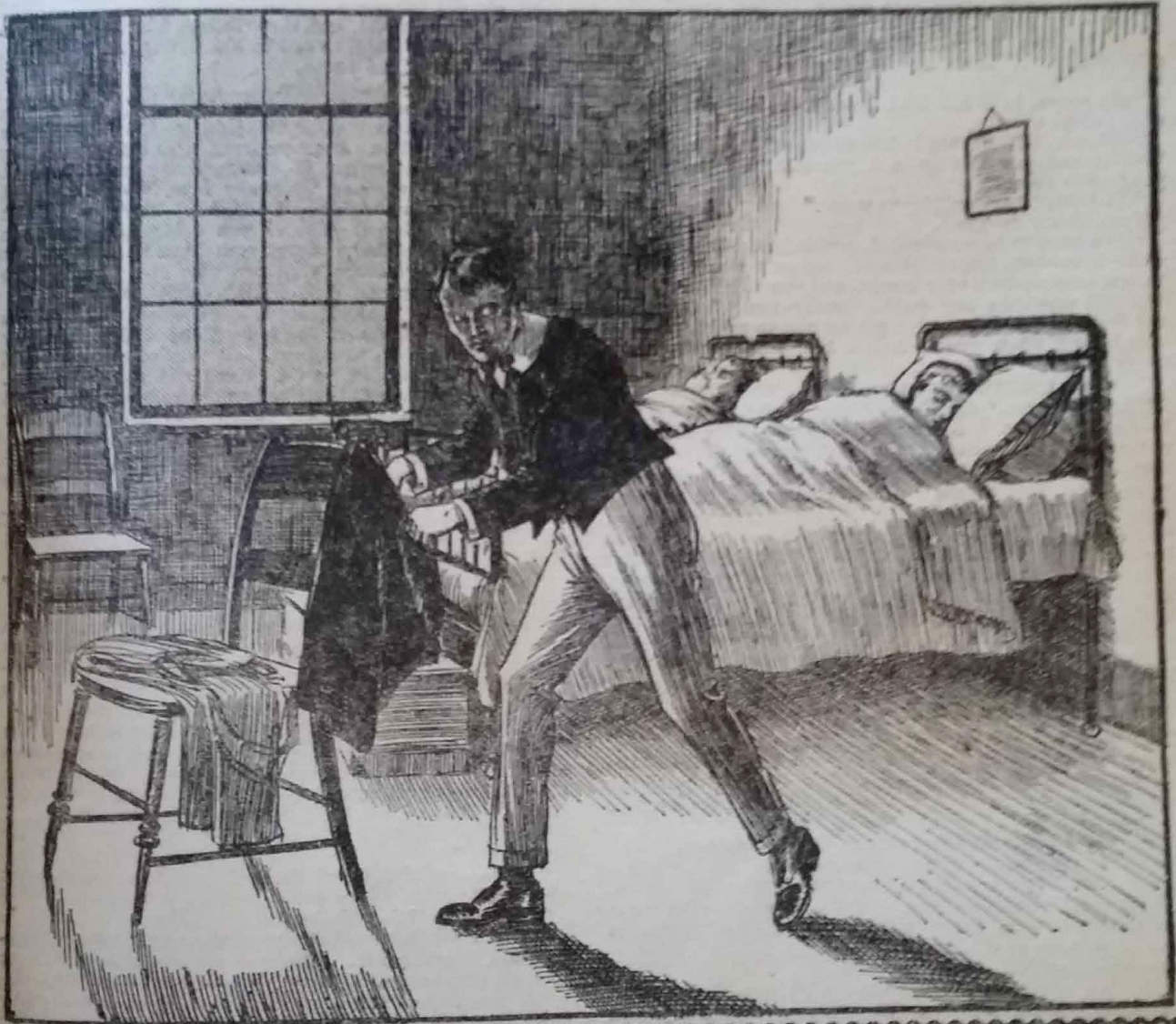
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By **MARTIN CLIFFORD.**



Talbot was deep in slumber, and Crooke turned softly to the chair upon which his jacket hung. His hands glided over the jacket. He was trembling a little now, and his breath came thickly. (See Chapter 7.)

CHAPTER 1.

Not a Success!

TALBOT of the Shell came along the passage, and paused outside Crooke's study.

There he hesitated.

It was unusual for Talbot of the Shell to show hesitation. He was generally a fellow of quick decisions. But he was hesitating curiously now.

He raised his hand to tap at the door, and lowered it again without tapping. He frowned a little, as if annoyed with his own want of decision.

It was just then that Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther came along, on their way to their study. Tom Merry had a parcel in his hand, which betokened a recent visit to the tuckshop.

He greeted Talbot cheerily.

"Just going to look for you," he remarked. "Extra special spread in the study, and we want you."

"Remittances all round," said Monty Lowther. "Quid for Tommy, ten bob for Manners, and five bob for yours truly. Shakespeare remarks that when sorrows come, they come not as single spies, but in battalions. It seems

Next Wednesday:

"WHEN DUTY CALLS!" AND "UNDER THE DRAGON!"

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to be the same with remittances. We're killing the fatted calf. Rolling in filthy lucre. Come along. Three kinds of jam, my son!"

"And sausage-rolls!" said Manners.

"And a cold chicken!" said Tom Merry.

Talbot smiled.

"Thanks! I'll come with pleasure!" he said. "But

"No buts! Kim on!"

"I—I was just going in to speak to Croke."

"Oh, rats!" said Monty Lowther. "You don't want to speak to Croke. You don't want any tips for Newmarket, I suppose."

"Or to borrow a cigarette," grinned Manners.

"Blow Croke!" said Tom Merry. "This way!"

"He's my cousin, you know," said Talbot, colouring.

"I suppose he is," admitted Tom Merry rather grudgingly. "Can't say he does you any credit, old chap."

"He seems to think that I don't do him any credit," said Talbot quietly.

"Oh, rats! Well, tea in ten minutes," said Tom Merry.

"Go in and jaw to Croke if you like; I fancy I know your little game."

"I—I don't know what you mean."

Tom Merry laughed.

"I've seen it in your mind, my infant. You want to make it up with Croke; not because he's worth speaking to, but because he's your cousin, and you think you ought. Well, it won't be any good. Croke won't understand, and he'll only think you've got an axe to grind. But go ahead, and when you've had a row with Croke, come along to tea."

"I'm not going to have a row."

"Yes, you are," said Tom Merry coolly. "It's bound to end in a row. I recommend you to give him your straight left; the same as you gave Grundy. Ta-ta!"

The Terrible Three went on their way grinning, and Talbot was left to his hesitation again. In his own breast there was a feeling that Tom Merry was right; that there would never be anything in common between him and the cad of the Shell; that Gerald Croke's bitter dislike and enmity would never be appeased by words. But the sense of duty was strong upon him, and his hesitation did not last long. He raised his hand and knocked at the door.

There was the sound of a hasty movement in the study. Then Croke's voice snapped out:

"Come in, can't you?"

Talbot opened the door. Croke of the Shell was on his feet, with a scowl on his face. There was a scent of tobacco in the study. Talbot understood the cause of the sudden movement he had heard. The black sheep of the Shell had been smoking, and he had hastily disposed of his cigarette when the tap came at his door.

His scowl became darker at the sight of Talbot. Evidently the Toff was not a welcome visitor.

"Well, what do you want?" snapped Croke.

"I want to speak to you, Croke, if you'll give me a few minutes," said Talbot mildly. He did not appear to notice the haze of tobacco-smoke.

Croke grunted.

"No law against it, that I know of," he said, throwing himself into his armchair again. "I suppose you've heard from old Lyndon."

"I have had a letter from my uncle—our uncle, Colonel Lyndon," said Talbot, with a nod.

"I thought so!" said Croke, with a sneer. "So have I. I've used his letter to light a cigarette with."

And Croke proceeded to light a fresh cigarette, using a twisted scrap of notepaper, upon which Colonel Lyndon's handwriting could be seen.

Talbot drew a deep breath. It was an unpromising reception, and he was inclined to abandon the matter there and then. But he went on.

"Look here, Croke, what's the good of our being on such rotten bad terms?" he said. "We're cousins—"

"Yes, and you are a credit to the family," said Croke.

"Never mind that," said Talbot. "What's past can't be undone. We've never been friends; but when I was first at St. Jim's I did not know that you were my cousin. I had not heard then that Colonel Lyndon was your uncle

as well as mine. You were not the only fellow who was down on me, and I didn't care much about it. But now—"

"Now there's no difference, that I can see," answered Croke. "I'm down on you now just the same."

"You don't like me," said Talbot. "I can't say you're the fellow I should choose to chum with, either. But our uncle wants us to be friends, and he's been jolly decent to both of us. He's gone back to Flanders, and at this very minute he is facing the German guns. I think that if we could please him by dropping all ill-feeling, it isn't so very much to do. I'm willing to be friends, if you are; and there's my hand on it!"

Talbot held out his hand frankly.

Croke did not move.

There was a pause, and then Talbot, his colour deepening, allowed his hand to fall to his side again.

"You refuse?" he asked.

Croke laughed mockingly.

"I think the same of you as ever," he said. "Worse, in fact. Since you've started the subject, I'll tell you just what I think. You came here fresh from being a member of a gang of cracksmen. You were pretty deep. You got pardoned, you wormed your way into the Head's good graces, you've made yourself popular. You're a big gun in the junior eleven. You've won a big prize, and you succeed in everything you put your hand to. The fellows are all willing to forget that you were once the Toff, the prince of cracksmen. Well, I don't choose to forget."

"You might," said Talbot, in a low voice. "All that is long past. I had no chance when I was a kid; you know how I was trained. I threw it all over as soon as I had a chance. My father was a ruined and desperate man, and I had no mother. And bad as the past was, I've lived it down. You are the only fellow who wishes to throw it up against me, and you're my cousin."

"Yes, your cousin," said Croke bitterly. "My uncle has found out that you're his nephew, too. Now you're his favourite. You've cut me out with him."

"I never tried to," said Talbot. "I never thought of it. And I have not cut you out, Croke. I refused at first the allowance the colonel offered me."

"You took jolly good care to accept it afterwards," sneered Croke.

"I accepted it, because it would have been ungracious and ungrateful to repel a man who only wished to be kind to me," said Talbot. "But it is a moderate allowance, and not half so much money as you have. You have more than you want. Why should you care about that?"

"It isn't only that," said Croke. "All you have from the colonel belongs to me by right. I should have been his heir, if he had never come across you. Do you think I don't know your game? You've made him think a lot of you. He's an old fool, and you've influenced him. I know jolly well that he's altered his will since he came down here."

"I know nothing about that. I've never even thought about it."

"So you say!" jeered Croke.

Talbot's hands clenched for a moment. But he unclenched them again. He was determined that Tom Merry's prophecy of a "row" should not be fulfilled.

"If you cannot take my word, I'd better not say any more about it," he said calmly. "But I knew nothing of it, and I don't see how you can know, Croke. Isn't it simply a suspicion?"

"I'm pretty sure, anyway," said Croke. "The old duffer caught me smoking when he was here, and that put his back up. He's told me to try to become more like you—more like a reformed cracksmen, by Jove! I like that! Now he's trying to make us friends—and do you think I don't know the reason? He thinks you're a better fellow than I am, and that it would improve me to pal with you. Cheeky old beggar! I was his only relation before he came across you here. I should have had everything if a German bullet had knocked him over."

"Croke!"

"Shocked—what?" sneered Croke. "Of course, you haven't thought of that yourself. I know he's altered his will, and you'll get half at least. Sheer robbery, I call it. It was all mine."

"I don't know. But even if it's as you say, surely our uncle has a right to do as he likes with his own money," said Talbot. "Besides, your father is very rich. You will always have more than you need."

"That isn't the point. If the colonel's killed out there you'll get half what ought to have come to me, and that's what you're calculating on—I know you, you see. That's why you've carried favour with him."

Talbot's heart throbbed. The baseness of Crooke's own nature made it impossible for him to understand.

"That hits you, does it?" said Crooke. "You didn't know I could see through and through you—eh?"

"You are mistaken. I have never thought—"

"Gammon!"

"I have thought sometimes that Colonel Lyndon may fall, as so many splendid fellows have fallen," said Talbot. "But as for the money, I should be ashamed to give it a thought!"

"That won't do for me," said Crooke. "I know you, you know. I dare say I should be thinking the same in your place."

"You would!" said Talbot, with a contempt he could not suppress. "But I am thinking nothing of the kind."

"But if I can help it," went on Crooke bitterly, "you won't succeed, clever as your little game is. I don't believe in your precious reform, for one thing—I believe you still keep up with the gang of scoundrels you used to mix with. And I've found something out, too."

"You cannot have found out anything of that kind," said Talbot, "for it isn't true."

"I'm speaking of Miss Marie!" said Crooke mockingly. Talbot started.

"Miss Marie?" he exclaimed breathlessly.

"Yes, Miss Marie, the dear little nurse—the Little Sister of the Poor!" said Crooke, grinning. "You are very chummy with her—very. I never thought of it at first; but I know now. You knew her before you came here—she had some connection with the gang you used to belong to. Her father was in it. You don't dare to deny it!"

"You hound!" exclaimed Talbot, his anger breaking out fiercely. "You have been spying—and listening!"

Crooke laughed.

"I've been keeping an eye on you," he said. "You see, I don't believe in these precious reforms. You've fooled the Head, and you've fooled the fellows, and now you've fooled my uncle. But I warn you that if I can bowl you out, I'll show you up, my boy. And if Colonel Lyndon once knows you as I know you, good-bye to your chance of fingering his money!"

"I offered you my hand just now," said Talbot, his voice trembling with passionate anger and scorn. "But now I would rather offer my hand to a poisonous snake. You are a cur!"

"Thanks; we're getting at your real feelings at last!" grinned Crooke. "I knew you were only humbugging; but you couldn't pull the wool over my eyes. We're enemies!"

"As you choose!" said Talbot contemptuously.

"And I'll catch you on the hop yet," said Crooke venomously. "Now I know that Miss Marie was one of you—that her father is what you were—I've got the whip-hand. You can look out, and she can look out, too!"

Talbot advanced a step towards him.

"I came here to try to make friends with you," he said. "Now I warn you, that if you say one word that would give Miss Marie pain, I will thrash you within an inch of your life! Bear that in mind!"

"I'm not going to jaw—I'm going to keep my eyes open!" sneered Crooke. "And when I catch you, you thief, you hypocrite—"

"Hold your tongue!"

"Thief and hypocrite I've called you, and I call you that again. That's what you are, and as for Miss Marie—"

Crash!

A hand of iron on his collar interrupted Crooke. He was dragged out of his chair, and the chair went flying backwards. The cad of the Shell was shaken like a rat in the clutches of a terrier.

"You cur—you cur!" panted Talbot. "Not another word!"

"Grooh!" stuttered Crooke. "Let go! Oh! Let go, hang you! Oh!"

Talbot, with a swing of his arm, flung the wriggling Shell fellow into a corner of the study. Crooke fell with a heavy bump, and sat gasping against the wall, his eyes burning with rage. Talbot waited a moment or two for him to get up; but Crooke did not get up.

Then Talbot, with a contemptuous glance, turned on his heel and walked out of the study.

CHAPTER 2.

Tea in Tom Merry's Study.

"D ONE to a turn!" said Manners. Manners was referring to the sausages, which were sizzling away merrily. With an artistic turn of the wrist, Manners pitched them into a dish.

"And here's the toast," said Tom Merry, rising with a ruddy face from the fire. "All ready! And where's Talbot?"

Tea was ready in Tom Merry's study, but Talbot had not arrived.

The festive-board looked more festive than usual; the unaccustomed plentifulness of cash had been nobly expended. The Terrible Three had held a debate before the cash was spent. They were uncertain whether they ought to be very economical with it in war time, or whether they ought to spend it for the good of trade.

There were arguments on both sides of the question. Manners, who was a thoughtful chap, had quoted the speeches of Cabinet Ministers on national economy, and pointed out that they must be real authorities on the subject, since they contrived to rub along on pittances of five thousand a year or so. But, on the whole, after due consideration of the pros and cons, the chums of the Shell had decided to expend the cash for the good of trade.

So plenty reigned in the study. The three chums agreed that, in order to give both sides of the question a fair show, they would be very economical with the next remittance, at least if it arrived while the provisions still lasted.

All was ready, but Talbot did not come.

"The boulder!" said Tom Merry. "He can't have forgotten."

"Forgotten that we've got three kinds of jam!" said Monty Lowther warmly. "Well, I like that!"

"The sosses will be getting cold," said Manners.

"I'll go and fetch him," said Tom. "He's jawed enough to Crooke by this time."

Tom Merry hurried down the passage to Crooke's study. He tapped, and went in.

Talbot was not there. Crooke was standing before the glass, putting his collar straight. He was looking red and furious.

"Hallo! Talbot gone?" said Tom cheerily.

"He's not here!" growled Crooke. "Go and eat coke!"

Tom Merry grinned as he stepped out of the study. His prediction had been verified—the attempt at peace-making had ended in a row. He went along to Talbot's own quarters, and looked in.

Gere and Skimpole shared Talbot's study with him, but they were not there at that moment. Talbot was seated on the edge of the table, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, and a troubled wrinkle deep in his boyish brow. He started as Tom Merry looked in.

"Forgotten tea?" exclaimed Tom.

"Oh! Sorry!" said Talbot, sliding off the table. "I—I was thinking."

"Made it up with Crooke?" asked Tom, his eyes dancing merrily.

"N-no."

"He was putting his collar straight," grinned the captain of the Shell. "Did you give him your straight left?"

"No," said Talbot, his troubled face breaking into a smile. "I—I lost my temper, but—but—"

"Well, you might have expected him to slang you, old chap. A rank outsider like Crooke wouldn't understand you."

"I didn't mind his slanging me," said Talbot, colouring; "I could stand that. But—Oh, he's a rotter!"

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broke off. "You may depend on it I sha'n't try to make friends with him again."

His brow clouded.

"Well, nothing to worry about," said Tom, in wonder. "It would be pleasanter to be on good terms with your cousin, of course; but lots of cousins are at loggerheads, you know. Crooke isn't worth bothering about."

"I know! I know! It isn't that."

"Then what's the trouble?"

Talbot's brow grew darker.

"You know about Miss Marie, Tom. You and Manners and Lowther know the secret—that her father was John Rivers, whom they called the "Professor"—the chief of the gang in the old days at the rookery in Angel Alley? It was Marie who induced him to give it up and take to a better way of living. And he enlisted, and you know that he's called Corporal Brown now, in Kitchener's Army. Tom, he was a rascal in those days; but he's done all a man could do—he's out there now fighting for his country, and a man can't do more than that."

"I know!" said Tom.

"But—but in the eye of the law Corporal Brown is still the Professor if he were found out," said Talbot, "and—and he would be in danger if it were known. And the disgrace to Marie—"

"But it won't be known," said Tom. "It's known to us, and to the Head and Mr. Railton. You don't think it's likely to get out?"

"It's got out," said Talbot.

"But how? Who—"

"Crooke."

Tom started.

"How could Crooke know? You can't imagine that we've said a word, Talbot?"

"I know you haven't, old fellow. Crooke as good as admitted that he'd found it out by spying. You see, Marie's very proud of her father in these days—rather a change from the old times. She talks about him sometimes, and Crooke must have listened; he's cad enough for that. He told me he knew that Marie was a Professor's daughter."

Tom Merry's brow contracted.

"That's bad," he said. "But he doesn't know about the Professor being in Kitchener's Army?"

"I don't know. He knows that he's Marie's father. If he was listening when Marie was speaking of him, I don't know what he may have found out. And—and if he tells all the fellows I—I don't think Marie would care to stay longer at St. Jim's."

"The cad!" said Tom. "So that's why you punched him?"

"Yes."

"He wouldn't dare," said Tom, after a pause. "He hasn't any proof. The fellows would regard it as a slander if he told. And Miss Marie is popular, especially since she nursed the fellows at the time of the 'flu' attack. If Crooke dared to say a word against her he would be scragged. Besides, even a cad like that couldn't want to hurt a ripping girl like Miss Marie."

"Only to get at me," said Talbot. "It's rotten to think it, but he hates me—for no good reason. He suspects that I am his rival for Colonel Lyndon's money, though you know, Tom, that I'm not the sort of chap to think of that."

"I know it," said Tom. "It's just what Crooke would think. By Jove, if he dares to say a word that would worry Miss Marie, we'll make St. Jim's too hot to hold him!"

Lowther looked in at the door with a cheerful grin.

"Sorry to interrupt the pow-wow," he remarked; "but the sosses are drying up, and it's time you dried up, too, and came to tea."

Talbot smiled.

"Right-ho!"

"Come on!" said Lowther. "Sosses and mashed, you know, and toast and a cold chicken, and three kinds of jam! Think of that!"

Tom Merry and Talbot followed Monty Lowther to the study, and the sosses were duly disposed of. Talbot made an effort to be cheerful over tea, but it was easy

for Tom to see that, at the back of his mind, there was a sense of trouble.

The Toff had found it easy to make friends. Even Levison of the Fourth, once his bitter enemy, was now his devoted champion. Even Mellish, the sneak of the School House, rather liked him. But with his cousin, Gerald George Crooke, he had failed. Naturally, old Colonel Lyndon had wished that his two nephews should be upon good terms; equally naturally, he had wished that Crooke should take example by his cousin. The slack, vicious cad of the Shell would have benefited by Talbot's friendship if he had been capable of appreciating it.

But it was evidently useless to think of it. Talbot had done his best, but he had made matters worse rather than better. There could be no friendship between natures so opposed.

The cold chicken followed the sosses, and the chums of the Shell had arrived at the "three kinds of jam," when there was a light tap at the study door.

"Come in, fathead!" said Lowther.

The door opened, and a charming face looked in. It was that of Miss Marie, the Little Sister of the Poor.

The juniors jumped up, and Monty Lowther turned crimson. He had not guessed that his remark was addressed to Miss Marie. The girl was smiling.

"I—I say," stammered Lowther, "I—I—I didn't know it was you, Miss Marie!"

Miss Marie laughed.

"Please excuse my coming here," she said, in her low, sweet voice. "I have news—great news for me—and I wanted to tell Talbot, and you, too, all of you, as you know my father."

"Victoria Cross?" asked Tom Merry.

Miss Marie shook her head.

"No, no! But my father is coming home on leave. I have had a letter." A letter was in the girl's hand, with "On Active Service" printed on the envelope.

"Toff, he is coming home, safe, and he has the D.C.M."

"The Distinguished Conduct Medal!" said Manners.

"Yes, yes! Isn't it splendid?"

"Hurrah!" said the Shell fellows all together.

They were glad to hear the news. Truly it was a change for the Professor to have won a medal for distinguished conduct in the Army in Flanders—distinguished among so many gallant fellows, the best ever produced by Britain.

"And he was wounded once, and sent down to the base, but he did not tell me then," said Marie. "He recovered, and has been in the trenches again, and now he has his leave. This letter has taken some time to come. He may be home to-morrow, and I shall see him again!"

The girl's eyes were dancing.

Never had the chums of St. Jim's seen the Little Sister looking so bright and happy. Marie's affection for her father, even when he had been a rascal, had always been strong, but now it was justified. He was now a father that anyone might have been proud of. He had redeemed the past. He was doing his duty, and doing it well. No wonder the Little Sister was happy.

"That's ripping news!" said Talbot. "Ripping! I—"

Talbot broke off.

There was a slight sound in the passage—a moving shadow. The other fellows had not observed it, but the Toff had had an unusual training. His face suddenly changed. He made a quick step past the girl, and looked from the doorway. Crooke of the Shell was passing hastily down the passage.

Talbot turned back into the study with a sinking heart. Crooke had heard!

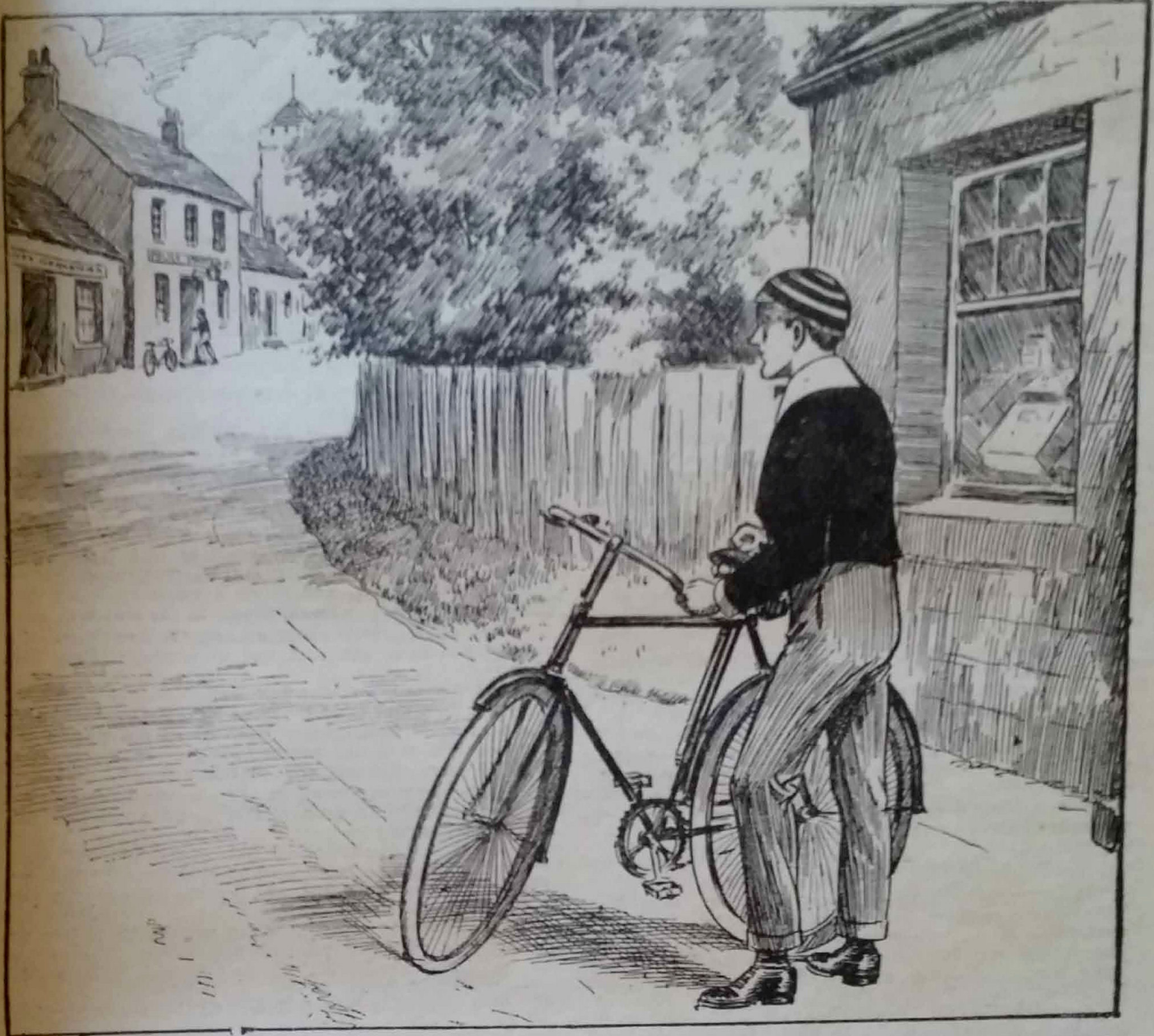
Marie looked at him in surprise. She did not understand the Toff's action, or the cloud that darkened on his brow.

"What is the matter, Toff? You do not look glad."

"Nothing," said Talbot, forcing himself to smile. "Now you are here, Marie, you must stay to tea."

"Yes, rather!" said Tom Merry emphatically. "You've never had tea in the study, Miss Marie, and this is a special occasion."

"Three kinds of jam!" chanted Lowther.



At the end of the village street, Talbot jumped down, and kept his eyes on Crooke. The cad of the Shell dismounted outside the police-station, and went in. Talbot drew a quick, sobbing breath. (See Chapter 10.)

Miss Marie laughed merrily.

"But I have had my tea," she said cheerily. "I came to tell you the news. You were not in your study, Toff, so I came here."

Talbot understood. Crooke had been in the study, and he had followed, and he had learned that Marie's father was coming home.

But the Toff said nothing of that. He would not cloud the girl's happiness by a hint of danger. Monty Lowther opened the ginger-beer with a loud series of pops.

"Well, if you won't have tea we'll drink the health of Corporal Brown," he said. "Now, then, bumpers!"

"Hear, hear!"

Miss Marie, smiling, accepted the foaming glass of ginger-pop.

"Here's to Corporal Brown and all the ripping fellows in Kitchener's Army!" said Lowther.

And the toast was drunk with enthusiasm.

Talbot, with a nod to his chums, left the study with Miss Marie. Monty Lowther made a comical grimace.

"Talbot's forgotten the three kinds of jam!" he remarked. "Fancy three kinds of jam going begging!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the Terrible Three themselves proceeded to do full justice to each of the three kinds.

CHAPTER 3. D'Arcy's New Idea.

"TOM MEWWY!"

The three kinds of jam had been done justice to when Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth Form came in. Upon the noble and aristocratic countenance of Arthur Augustus was an expression of unusual seriousness. Monty Lowther waved his hand to the table.

"Pile in!" he said.

"Thank you, deah boy, I have not come to tea."

"Oh, I thought perhaps you'd heard about the jam!" said Lowther. "Three kinds—raspberry, strawberry, and apricot. In the strawberry kind there are real strawberries. I have seen one. You don't want to miss a chance like this, Gussy."

"Pway don't be fwivolous, Lowthah. I have looked in to speak to Tom Mewwy on a vewy sewious mattah."

The Terrible Three composed their faces into expressions of great gravity. Monty Lowther, who couldn't help being humorous, took out his handkerchief and wiped away a tear. Arthur Augustus turned his eyeglass very severely upon the humorist of the Shell, who sobbed a little.

"Lowthah, I wegard you as an ass!" said Arthur

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NEXT
WEDNESDAY:

"WHEN DUTY CALLS!"

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of
Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

Augustus. "This is not a time for sillay twicks. You are pewwaps awah that it is wah-time."

"Is it?" said Lowther, with interest. "Now you speak of it, I believe I've heard something about it. Yes, I distinctly remember seeing it mentioned in the 'Daily Mail.'"

"If it's in the 'Daily Mail,' it is so!" said Manners, with due solemnity. "We may as well admit at once that it is war-time. Go on, Gussy. Tell us some more of these new and startling things."

"You uttah ass—"

"That's nothing new," said Lowther, shaking his head. "We know that."

"Why, you fathead—" began Manners warmly.

"Tom Mewwy—"

"Hallo!"

"I have learned that you have weceived a vewy decent wemittance to-day."

"Quite so," agreed Tom. "Behold the result!" He pointed to the tea-table.

"Three kinds of jam," explained Lowther.

"I trust you have not wasted your wemittance in wiotous livin', Tom Mewwy. You have no wight to waste money in war-time. I have come heah for that wemittance."

"The merry deuce you have!"

"Yaas, wathah. I am collectin' up all the cash I can lay hands on," explained Arthur Augustus.

"Great Scott!"

"You see, I have an ideah."

"Whose?"

"Will you be sewious?" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, exasperated. "Tom Mewwy, I am shocked at you. At a time when food supplies are goin' down, and pwices are goin' up, you are wollin' in jam—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I am speakin' figuwatively, of course. Instead of thinkin' of jam, you ought to be thinkin' of cabbages."

"Cabbages?" said Tom Merry faintly.

"Yaas. That's the ideah. Haven't you wead the speeches of the Cabinet Ministahs on national economy?"

"My dear chap, I don't have time to bother about Cabinet Ministers," said Tom Merry, in surprise.

"It is pwobable," said Arthur Augustus, unheeding, "that there may be shortage of vegetables this yah or next yah. If the wah goes on, I mean. Now, I suppose you fellahs are agreed that the wah must go on till those disgustin' Huns are licked wight out of their boots."

"Certainly!" said Monty Lowther. "I shall firmly decline to make peace until the Kaiser has been captured, and sentenced to at least three months in the second division, and had his moustache cut off."

"You are a fwivolous ass, Lowthah! The wah will pwobably go on for at least thwee yahs longah, and pwices will go up and up. I have heard that there are some howwid wascals makin' money out of the wah, but I wefuse to believe that anybody could be wascal enough to put up pwices simply for the purpose of makin' money. Such conduct would only be worthy of a Pwussian. But it is vewy pwob that pwices will go up, and undah the circs it is ewery citizen's dutay to gwow his own vegetables."

"We'll have a window-box," said Lowther. "We could get a box, about three feet long, in the study window. Lemme see; we'll grow cabbages, potatoes, vegetable marrows, and wheat. How much wheat ought we to plant at once in a window-box, Gussy?"

"I wefuse to ansawah fwivolous questions, Lowthah. It is impos for us to gwow wheat, I feah. But we can gwow cabbages, and I am going to gwow cabbages. By the wintah I expect to have a vewy large cwop of cabbages, and then—"

"Then you will start as a cigar merchant?" asked Lowther.

"You uttah ass! I have wequested permish to use the piece of gwound next to the Head's garden. It is wathah wuff gwound, but plentay of diggin' will make it all wight, and of course it will want a lot of waterin'. I have ordahed a splendid watah-can, and I am goin' to watah it mornin' and evenin'. I am going to bowwow

Taggles's spade, to keep down expenses. I am willin to let you fellahs help me."

"Thanks!"

"Not at all, deah boys. This is a time for ewerybody who calls himself a Bwiton to pull shouldah to shouldah. I want you to put in all your spare time diggin', and all your spare money in buyin' eeds and things. If the ideah catches on, as I twust it will, St. Jim's will soon be self-supportin' in the mattah of vegetables."

"My hat!"

"So I will twouble you for what is left of your wemittance, Tom Mewwy," said Arthur Augustus, with dignity.

"Certainly!" said Tom Merry heartily.

"You are willin' to contwibute all you have left to cawwy out this gwand ideah?"

"Quite."

"Vewy good. I am glad you are so patwiotic, deah boy. Pway hand it ovah."

Tom Merry groped in his pockets, produced two pennies and a halfpenny, and with a flourish dropped them into D'Arcy's palm. Arthur Augustus looked at the coins, and looked at Tom Merry.

"Is that a fatheaded joke, Tom Mewwy?" he asked.

"No; that's twopence-halfpenny," said Tom affably. "And I devote it, with a whole heart, to the grand scheme. I shall not require any dividend. I contwibute that to the national welfare, and refuse even to entertain any idea of making any personal profit in the matter."

"You uttah ass!" shouted Arthur Augustus. "I wegard you as a fatheaded and unpatwiotic idiot, Tom Mewwy."

Slam!

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy retired from the study, closing the door after him in a manner which did not in the least consort with the repose that stamps the caste of Vere de Vere. A merry chuckle followed him.

Arthur Augustus paused in the passage to cool down, and then looked into the next study. Gore and Skimpole were there, having tea.

"Isn't Talbot heah?" asked D'Arcy.

"Doesn't seem to be, does he?" said Gore. "But you can look under the table, and up the chimney, if you like."

"Goah, deah boy, pewwaps you would like to join me in my new ideah of gwowin' vegetables. The fellahs in my studay are backin' me up. There's an awful lot of diggin' to be done."

"They can do it," said Gore. "I'll leave it to them with pleasure."

"Weally, Goah, you are a big, stwong chap, and could do the diggin' splendidly," urged Arthur Augustus. "I shall be there to diwect you."

"Oh, you're not going to do the digging?" said Gore.

"I feah that would be impos, as it makes blistahs on the hands."

Gore looked at the swell of St. Jim's as if he would eat him.

"What about my hands, then?" he demanded, in a sulphurous voice.

"Bai Jove! I nevah thought of that."

"You blithering ass—"

"Pway do not become abusive, Goah, simply because I am urgin' you to do your dutay as a patwiot and a Bwiton. I twust you are not a pwo-German. Skimpole, deah boy, pewwaps you would like to wiah in and do some diggin'?"

"I should be very pleased, my dear D'Arcy," said Skimpole, blinking over his big glasses. "But at the present moment I am very busy upon the three-hundredth chapter of my book on evolution—"

"Oh, cwumbs! Pway don't tell me about it, deah boy. Now, Goah, I twust you are comin'?"

"Rats!"

"You know vewy well that Mr. Asquith says ewery Bwiton ought to buck up, or words to that effect. Of course, he says it in vewy long words, but that is what he means. Fall in and follow me, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus encouragingly.

"Will you get out of my study?" roared Gore.

"Yaas, certainly. But I twust you are not goin' to

be a slackah. If you wefuse to lend a helpin' hand, Coah, I shall wegard you as a pwo-Hun."

Whiz!

"Oh, cwumbs! You howwid wottah!" yelled Arthur Augustus, as a chunk of butter caught him full on his noble nose. "You—you feahful wuffian! I will give you the thwashing of your life—gwoooooop!"

A jam-tart followed the butter, and Arthur Augustus made a jump into the passage. He was just in time to escape a stream from a teacup.

"Come in again!" roared Gore. "I'll teach you to call me a pro-Hun! Come on! I've got some treacle ready for you."

Arthur Augustus did not come in for the treacle. He snorted, and went down the passage dabbling at the butter.

CHAPTER 4.

The Letter from the Professor.

TALBOT was crossing the quadrangle with Miss Marie when old Blagg, the postman from Rylcombe, came stumping towards the School House. He paused.

"Anything for me, Blagg?" he asked.

The Toff had few friends outside the walls of St. Jim's, and he was not, as a rule, anxious about his correspondence. Old Blagg did not bring him remittances from fond parents and kind uncles, as he did to the other fellows. But it was in Talbot's mind that if John Rivers was coming back he would write to him, and he was anxious and uneasy about the Professor.

"Yessir," said Blagg, touching his hat. "One for you, sir."

Blagg fumbled in his bag and produced the letter. It was not marked "On Active Service," but it was addressed in the Professor's hand. John Rivers was already in England.

Talbot's brow was grave as he walked on with the Little Sister, the letter unopened in his hand. He did not know that Crooke of the Shell was watching him from his study window, a sneering grin on his face. His thoughts were with the Professor—the man who, leaving the danger of the trenches behind him, was facing another danger in coming home to see his daughter.

"From my father, Toff?" asked Marie.

"Yes," said Talbot. "We'll read it together in the garden."

"I'm so glad that you and my father are good friends now, Toff," said Marie softly. Marie always called the Shell fellow by that old name.

"We shall never be anything else," said Talbot, with a smile. "The past is dead and done with. Hallo!"

Three juniors raised their caps to Miss Marie, as they came up to the Head's garden. The three were Blake and Herries and Digby of the Fourth, the trio who had the honour of sharing Study No. 6 with the Honourable Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

They were not looking quite so cherry as usual, and they were equipped in a decidedly unusual manner. Blake carried a heavy spade, Digby had a large garden-fork, and Herries a rake. What they were going to do with those formidable-looking agricultural implements was a mystery.

"You are going to do gardening?" asked Miss Marie, with a smile.

"Yes," said Blake. "It's Gussy, of course."

"Gussy!" snorted Herries. "He's jawed us for a solid hour in the study, and we've taken this on simply to make him shut up. It was that or suffocating him."

"He's got permission to use that bit of waste land at the end of the Head's garden," explained Digby. "We're going to dig it. He's going to grow cabbages."

"Cabbages!" exclaimed Marie.

"Yes," grunted Blake; "cabbages. We're going to keep the school in cabbages, if the war lasts another thousand years. If the Yankees in Chicago put up the price of wheat, and the coal-owners won't let us have any coal, we shall have plenty of cabbages to fall back on, according to Gussy."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Talbot.

"Tain't a laughing matter," said Blake. "We've got to dig. Gussy's called us slackers, the checky owl, and we're going to dig till he cries off. We'll dig as long as he does, anyway. He's going round getting recruits for digging, and he expects to bring a regular crowd. My idea is that he won't bring anybody. We've borrowed these things from Taggles. You should have seen Taggles grin, the old duffer. This isn't my size in spades."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Now we're waiting for Gussy," said Blake. "Have you seen the idiot?"

"I saw him talking to Kangaroo," said Talbot, laughing. "Kangy was saying rats, or something that sounded very like it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Talbot and Marie went on into the garden, leaving the three juniors still waiting for Gussy and his horde of digging recruits. In the pleasant old garden, Talbot slit the envelope, and opened the letter from "Corporal Brown."

Marie and the Toff read it together.

It brought a dark cloud to the brow of the handsome Shell fellow. At any time the thought of the danger that attended Marie's father in England would have troubled him. But since his interview with Crooke, he understood how real and terrible that danger might be. For if the cad of the Shell discovered that "John Rivers" was at hand, there was not the slightest doubt that he would do his worst. Talbot could not desert the man who had been his companion in the old days, and who was leading a new life in khaki. But the law still regarded John Rivers as a criminal, and the prison doors were wide open for him. And if Talbot's continued connection with a criminal could be proved, Crooke's purpose was served. Colonel Lyndon believed in Talbot; he had strong faith in him. But how was he likely to look upon Talbot's friendship with a member of the old gang?

Even the fact that the Professor was now in the Army would not be likely to move the colonel. John Rivers was in Colonel Lyndon's own regiment. He had fought in Flanders under the eyes of the colonel—though he did not know him. What was the grim old soldier likely to think, if he knew that a cracksmen had taken refuge in khaki? Would he not be certain to believe that the man had donned the khaki simply to escape the police, or, worse, to carry on his old operations in a new sphere? He could not be expected to believe what Talbot knew to be true.

The Toff knew only too well that, in keeping up his connection with the Professor, as he was placing it in Crooke's power to cause him serious trouble, if the cad of the Shell secured proof of it. And for the sake of injuring Talbot with his uncle, Crooke would not hesitate to sacrifice "Corporal Brown." Marie's father would suffer, to gratify Crooke's hatred and suspicion of his cousin.

The letter ran:

"I am in England now on leave. I can get down to Rylcombe on Wednesday. I cannot, of course, come to the school, but I must see Marie. I know you will arrange it for me, Toff, if only for Marie's sake, and the sake of old times. Wednesday is a half-holiday with you. Will you come on Wednesday afternoon and meet me at the Feathers—it is far enough from the School—and then we can arrange matters. Bring Marie with you if all serene.
JOHN BROWN."

Marie's eyes danced.

"I shall see him on Wednesday!" she exclaimed.

Talbot nodded.

"Yes. Surely it will be safe," he said. "It is risky for him to come near the school, but the Feathers is a good distance up the river. Yet—" He paused. A vague fear was in his heart.

Marie gave him an anxious look.

"What is it, Toff? You do not fear for my father?"

"There is always danger," said Talbot. "But you must see him. That is settled."

"I must, Toff. This is his first leave from the front, and who knows what may happen when he goes back?" The girl's lip trembled. "When I think of him out

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there it makes me tremble, Toff. But—but is his danger here so great? He is in khaki, and it is so long since the Professor was heard of that he will have been forgotten. Nobody could be on the watch for him, and only our own friends know that he is my father."

Talbot was silent.

He could not tell her what he knew—but the hard, cynical face of Gerald Crooke was before his eyes. Crooke knew, and Crooke was watching, and he would do his worst. There was danger—danger that Marie never dreamed of; but he would not darken her happiness by telling her. That was useless.

"Toff, he will be safe? If he is not safe here, I must not see him."

"He must come, Marie. He would not stay away," said Talbot. "Besides, there is no address on his letter; you could not write. He will be at the Feathers on Wednesday, and you will see him. We must be very careful, that is all."

"He has been through so many dangers, Toff, I shall be so glad to see him. But if he is threatened here—"

Talbot forced a smile to his lips.

"Do not think of that," he said. "It is no use meeting trouble half-way. You must see him—and he will go, safe and sound. Only we must be careful."

But when Talbot left the Head's garden, though he left Marie reassured, his own brow was clouded. Instinctively he felt that there were breakers ahead, that the coming of John Rivers meant black trouble.

CHAPTER 5. The Gardeners.

"WELL!"

Blake and Herries and Digby uttered the monosyllabic question together.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy joined them with a slight frown upon his brow. And he came alone.

"Well," said Arthur Augustus, "I feah there are a feahful lot of slackahs in this school, deah boys. I have wequested lots of the fellahs to come and dig, and they all made wude weplies. Goah was simply beastly about it. Even Tom Mewwy was fwivolous. Figgins & Co. weplied that they were goin' to keep white wabbits, weady for the time when wabbits wan short. But I do not believe they are goin' to do anythin' of the sort, you know—it was simply a fwivolous we remark."

"Go hon!" said Blake, with heavy sarcasm. "Was it?"

"Yaas. All we can do, deah boys, is to set an example to the school—a shinin' example, you know. We are goin' to show that Studay No. 6 are not slackahs, and that we realise the importance of a countwy bein' self-feedin'. Whatevah may happen, we shall always have plenty of vegetables to live on, if we grow them ourselves. Every chap who does not grow his own vegetables is a slackah. Mr. Wailton said it was a good ideah."

"So it is," said Dig. "Railton's right; it's a good idea. But the way it's going to be carried out mayn't be so good."

"It will be cawwied out wippingly, Dig, since it is goin' to be cawwied out undah my personal diwections."

"Bow-wow!"

"And when we are seen hard at work, I twust that the example will spwead," said Arthur Augustus loftily. "I should be sowwy to think that St. Jim's was simply cwammed with slackahs. A lot of the fellahs said they would come and look on. Pway let us get to work."

Blake & Co. grunted, and followed the swell of St. Jim's to the vegetable garden to be. It was a piece of ground by the fence of the Head's private garden, and extended as far as the school wall. Generally that patch of ground was used by the youngest fags for playing marbles or tip-cat, and as it was a secluded spot, almost shut in by trees, it had also been adorned by lumber fellows did not want—a broken kettle, and a damaged saucepan, and so on. There were patches of scraggy grass and weeds and nettles growing there. Certainly it was, as D'Arcy had remarked, a pity that even an odd corner of waste ground should be going uncultivated at such a time. It was not large; it was not convenient to get at; it was far from the water supply,

and it was poor soil, but with patience and hard labour there was no doubt that something could be made of it.

"Heah we are!" said Arthur Augustus. "Heah, Talbot, deah boy!"

Talbot glanced round as he came away from the Head's garden.

"This way, Talbot!"

Talbot, a little surprised, joined the juniors on the forthcoming cabbage-patch.

"What's the little game?" he asked.

"Work!" said Arthur Augustus impressively.

"Oh!"

"You have heard of the Garden Beautiful?" said Arthur Augustus loftily. "Well, this is it."

"By Jove, is it?"

"Of course, it does not look very beautiful at pweent," admitted Arthur Augustus. "But Wome was not built in a day, you know."

"Is making it beautiful going to take as long as the building of Rome?" asked Talbot, with a smile.

"Ahem! We hope shortly to be pwoducin' fine spwing cabbages, at any wate."

"Spring cabbages!" ejaculated Talbot.

"Ahem! I mean autumn cabbages," said D'Arcy hastily. "I suppose cabbages grown in the autumn are autumn cabbages. I weally do not know vewy much about gardenin'."

"Not really!" snorted Blake.

"Howevah, with hard work, we shall soon have it flouwishing. Pway go and bowwow a spade fwom somewhah, and pile in, Talbot, deah boy. You are not a slackah!"

"I should think that ground needs a pickaxe," said Talbot, with a glance at the unpromising soil, which had been trampled hard by the feet of generations of fags.

"All sewene! Go and bowwow a pickaxe."

Talbot laughed.

"I don't mind," he said. "If I can borrow a pickaxe I'll come back with it."

"Bwavo!"

Talbot walked away; the cloud lifted from his brow. Arthur Augustus as an enthusiastic gardener would have put any misanthrope into good spirits.

Fellows were coming up to look on. Kangaroo of the Shell came along with Dane and Glyn, and Reilly and Kerruish and Julian of the Fourth arrived. Figgins and Kerr and Wynn came over from the New House.

They had not come to work, evidently, as they brought no agricultural implements with them. They looked on, and somehow seemed amused.

Study No. 6 had to begin operations under quite an army of eyes.

"Pway wiah in, deah boys!" said Arthur Augustus encouragingly. "The first thing is to get the ground well broken up. Dig can turn it up with the fork, and Blake can whack at it with the spade, and then Hewwies can wake it ovah. Put your beef into it."

"And what are you going to do?" demanded Blake.

"I shall be vewy busy superintendin'."

"Oh!"

"Pway go for it; don't slack."

Blake snorted, and the diggers started. The spade, the fork, and the rake crashed and clashed on the obdurate soil. Arthur Augustus looked on with keen interest, his eyeglass in his eye.

A fire of humorous remarks came from the onlookers. Wally of the Third wanted to know if they were digging for buried treasure. Kangaroo asked them if they would give a message to his people, when they got through to Australia. Blake & Co. turned a deaf ear. They threw off their jackets, and piled in. The sweat of honest toil ran down their brows. The sentence passed on Adam of old, that by the sweat of his brow he should earn his bread, was being fulfilled for Study No. 6, though it was cabbages and not bread that they had in prospect.

But the cabbages, as Arthur Augustus politely informed them, were merely a beginning. Potatoes would follow, and he had an idea of bananas. How he was going to grow bananas Arthur Augustus did not explain. But as he truly said, bananas were a healthy diet, very

useful in war time, and it would be undoubtedly beneficial if they could be grown. Arthur Augustus had a vague idea that, if the ground were once thoroughly dug, a banana planted there would soon sprout forth with tropical luxuriance. As he had correctly remarked, he was not well up in gardening.

"Don't you fellahs feel inclined to join in?" asked Arthur Augustus, turning his eyeglass severely upon the grinning spectators. "Pway don't be slackahs. Don't you want to take a spade, Figgins?"

"I'll tell you what," said Figgins. "I'll do the superintending, if you like, and you can take a spade."

"Pway don't be widiculous, Figgins. I should hardly be likely to leave the superintending to a New House duffah. Weally, deah boy, don't you feel ashamed of lookin' on with your hands in your pockets while we are workin' away like niggahs?"

"Divil a bit!" said Reilly cheerily.

Blake paused. Blake was hot and damp with his exertions. The spade, which was big and heavy enough for a powerful navy, was a little too much for Blake. Not that he was thinking of giving in. He was only thinking of chucking it for good reasons.

"When are you going to begin, Gussy?" he asked, in measured tones.

Arthur Augustus looked at him in surprise.

"I began with you, deah boy!"

"Eh? What are you doing?"

"Superintendin'."

"Are you going to hang about doing nothing while we're digging?" roared Blake.

"I am goin' to superintend. My dear chap, ewevy job wequiah a foreman. You fellahs can do the spade work; I superintend. Pway go for it. Don't slack, you know."

Herries leaned on his rake, and gave Arthur Augustus a deadly look.

"So we're going to work, while you slack about and jaw?" he demanded. "That's the idea, is it?"

"Pway don't be unweasonable, Hewwies. I am not slackin'. You may wegard me as bein' in the posish of a geneval commandin' troops," explained Arthur Augustus. "Naturally, there must be superintendence."

"Take a turn with that spade!" roared Blake.

"Imposs!"

"And why?"

"It would wuin my hands!"

"Your—your hands!"

"Yaas; howwid blistahs, you know!"

That was too much for Study No. 6. Blake's spade, Herries' rake, and Dig's fork went to the ground with a crash together, and they fairly hurled themselves upon their superintendent.

"Ywaooh!" yelled Arthur Augustus, in astonishment and wrath. "What is the mattah with you? Yow! Leggo!"

"Your hands—eh?" yelled Blake. "It don't matter about ours—what? Bump him!"

"Ywaooop! Somebody must do the wuff work, you ass! Any sensible chap ought to know that. Yow-ow-ow! Yooooop!"

Blake & Co. had not dug very deep. But they had a hole excavated, and into that hole they plumped their superintendent. Herries jammed the rake on his chest, and pinned him down there, and Blake and Dig, with greater energy than they had shown so far, shovelled in the earth upon him.

There were roars of laughter from the spectators. There were roars from Arthur Augustus, though not of laughter.

Blake and Herries and Dig, breathing hard, threw down their implements, and walked away. Arthur Augustus struggled out of the hole, casting clods of earth to right and left, amid shrieks of merriment from the spectators. The natty "clobber" of the swell of St. Jim's was in a parlous state.

"Gwooh! Wwoh—wooh!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "Where are those wottahs? Gwooh! I am goin' to thwash them all! Gwooh! Wound! Ugh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"This is not a laughin' mattah, you duffahs! Gwooooh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the juniors.

"Gwooooh! Oh, deah, I am fwightfully dirtay! Gwooooh! Bai Jove, I will give those uttah wottahs a feahful thwashin'!"

Arthur Augustus rushed away, shedding chunks of earth as he went. He left the juniors almost in hysterics. Ten minutes later Talbot of the Shell arrived with a pickaxe, but he found the cabbage-patch deserted. Talbot laughed, and added his pickaxe to the spade, the rake, and the garden fork, and sauntered away. And the cabbage-patch still lay sterile and innocent of cabbages.

CHAPTER 6.

Monty Lowther Lends a Hand.

"HOW are the cabbages going on, old chap?"

Monty Lowther asked the question when Arthur Augustus appeared in the junior common-room that evening.

All the School House was interested in Gussy's idea of a vegetable garden. The way it had started had interested them greatly. They did not expect that Arthur Augustus would be able to supply St. Jim's with vegetables for "three years or the period of the war."

Arthur Augustus sniffed in response to Lowther's question.

"They are goin' on all wight," he said. "I have decided to take the mattah in hand personally, as I cannot depend on my own fwields to back me up." This was accompanied by a withering glance at Blake and Herries and Dig, who did not even blush. "I have been diggin'."

"Digging! My hat! How much have you dug?" asked Tom Merry.

"Nearly a yard."

"What kind of a yard?" asked Lowther. "A backyard?"

"Weally, Lowthah, you know very well that I mean a yard in measure."

"Square or cubic?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You uttah ass, square, of course! There is no need to dig a yard down to plant cabbages. It is only necessary to cover the woots. And I have put the cabbages in," concluded Arthur Augustus D'Arcy triumphantly.

"By Jove! How many?"

"I could not put in a gweat numbah in a square yard. Howevah, I have planted four," said Arthur Augustus. "I wode down to Wylcombe and bought them specially at the gweengwocahs. I asked him specially for gwowin' cabbages, and he said they would gwow beautifully if well looked aftah. They are vevy young at pwesent—quite small, you know. That is a beguinin'. Every square yard I get dug I shall put in four more cabbages, and I shall decline to allow you wottahs to help me any more. I am goin' to make you ashamed of yourselves."

"Let's go and see the cabbages," said Monty Lowther. "You may look at them, deah boy, but don't touch them. You don't undahstand these things, you know."

Monty Lowther made a sign to Tom Merry and Manners, and the Terrible Three strolled out of the common-room. The dusk was falling in the quadrangle.

"What's the little game?" asked Manners. "We don't want to look at Gussy's idiotic cabbages."

"Yes, we do," said Lowther. "Come on, and don't jaw!"

"Look here—"

"Shurrup, and follow your uncle."

Tom Merry and Manners, in surprise, followed Lowther to the cabbage-patch. They could see that the humourist of the Shell had some scheme in his fertile brain.

They grinned as they reached the cabbage-patch. The earth was scarred with gashes where the amateur gardeners had been hacking at it. Arthur Augustus's four cabbages looked very lonely, all by themselves in the middle of the waste. They were very young cabbage, and looked considerably yellow and skinny. They could not help suspecting that the local greengrocer had somehow failed to pick out his best young cabbages for the amateur vegetable gardener.

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"The rotten things won't grow," said Manners. "Why, the sea has hardly covered the roots, and he's got stones and clay stuck all round them. And they're more than half dead anyway."

Monty Lowther cocked his eye at the cabbages.

"Gussy ought to be encouraged," he said. "He's setting us an example. He has soiled his noble hands with mere work. He has come down off his pedestal, and worked like a common or garden human being. Very likely he will have a blister on his angust hands. Therefore—"

"What on earth are you getting at?" demanded Tom Merry mystified.

"Those cabbages are going to grow," said Lowther. "When Gussy sees them in the morning he will notice a difference at once."

"Lot you know about it," said Manners. "Cabbages grow pretty fast, but you can't tell the difference in a single night."

"You can if a kind friend has helped them on," said Lowther. "Let's go and ask Kildare for a pass out of gates."

"What on earth for?"

"To cycle down to Rylcombe, and send a parcel to the Tommies before the post-office closes."

"We haven't got a parcel ready."

"Go and get it ready, then, while I ask Kildare for the pass."

"Look here—"

"Oh, follow your uncle!" said Lowther. "What fellows you are for talking!"

"Greatly mystified, Tom and Manners proceeded to the study, where the parcel for the front was duly fastened up. When they were in funds, the Terrible Three made it a point to send off chocolates and other dainties to some regiment they fancied, and part of their usual flow of wealth that day had been thus expended. Monty Lowther looked in as they finished.

"Ready?"

"Yes. Got the pass?"

"Here it is. Kildare's a brick. Come on."

Taggles grunted and let them out at the gates, and the chums of the Shell rode down to the village. The parcel just caught the post before the village office closed, and then Monty Lowther wheeled his bike along to the greengrocer's. His chums followed him in amazement.

"Yes, sir? What can I do for you, sir?" asked Mr. Green.

"I want four good-sized cabbages," said Lowther.

The greengrocer looked a little surprised. It was not often that juniors from the school dropped in for cabbages. They did a good deal of cooking in their own studies, but, as a rule, they did not cook cabbages. However, an order was an order, and Mr. Green selected the cabbages for his customer.

They were wrapped up carefully in a bundle, which Monty Lowther attached to the handle-bars of his bike. Then the Terrible Three rode homeward. Tom and Manners were still more puzzled. They understood now that they had come down to post the parcel, simply to enable Lowther to get to the greengrocer's for his cabbages. But what he was going to do with them was a great mystery.

They wheeled in their bikes, and Lowther detached his parcel in the shed.

"This way for the cabbage-patch," he remarked.

It was quite dark in the quad now. The juniors groped their way through the trees to the cabbage-patch. Dimly in the starlight the four lonely little cabbages met their gaze. Monty Lowther, with a merciless hand, jerked them out of the ground.

"You fathead!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "What are you up to?"

"I say, that's a rotten joke, if you call it a joke!" said Manners.

"There's an old proverb," remarked Lowther; "it says, 'Fools and children should not see work half done.' I haven't finished yet."

And Lowther proceeded to plant his four cabbages in the place of those planted by Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. The original plants he dropped over the school wall.

Tom and Manners watched him in wonder at first, and then they burst into a sudden chuckle.

They understood at last.

"There!" said Lowther, stepping back and surveying his handiwork. "Gussy will be pleased in the morning. His cabbages will have doubled in size."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"To-morrow night they will double again."

His chums yelled.

"Come away," said Lowther. "We mustn't be seen here."

And the Terrible Three, chuckling gleefully, quitted the cabbage-patch. There was no doubt that Arthur Augustus would be delighted in the morning, when he found the immense growth that had taken place in his cabbage-patch.

CHAPTER 7.

Crooke Makes a Discovery.

THE Terrible Three were smiling when they came into the Shell dormitory. They had provided innocent pleasure for their schoolfellows, so naturally they were pleased with themselves. As Lowther remarked, it made him feel like Good Little Georgie in the story.

"What's the joke?" Talbot asked, as he noted the beaming faces of his chums.

Monty Lowther explained.

There was a ripple of laughter in the dormitory.

"Keep it dark, my sons!" cautioned Lowther. "It will be quite cheering to watch Gussy in the morning—and every morning. The growth of those cabbages will be a record in cabbage-growing."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Terrible Three turned in, chuckling. They were quite anticipating the morning, and the beaming face of Arthur Augustus when he saw his cabbages. Crooke of the Shell had not joined in the merriment—he had not listened. Crooke's thoughts were very busy, and they were not pleasant.

Kildare put the lights out, and one by one the Shell fellows dropped off to sleep. But Crooke did not close his eyes.

It was not an unusual thing for Gerald Crooke to remain awake after his companions had gone to sleep. On more than one occasion the black sheep of the Shell had "sneaked" out of the dormitory after lights out, to steal down to the Green Man in Rylcombe and meet the sporting gentlemen there. But it was not of breaking bounds that Crooke was thinking now.

He lay silent while the chatter ran from bed to bed. It died away at last, and the steady breathing announced that the Shell fellows were asleep.

Still Crooke waited, with sleepless eyes.

Eleven o'clock tolled out from the tower, and still he did not move, and still his eyes did not close.

Midnight came at last.

At that hour all St. Jim's was asleep. The last light was extinguished, the last door had been shut.

Then Crooke sat up silently in bed, and peered round him in the dimness of the dormitory. Through the high windows a faint glimmer of starlight fell.

"You fellows asleep?" whispered Crooke.

Only steady breathing answered him.

"I say, you chaps!" His voice was a little louder now.

But there was only silence. All the Shell fellows were asleep.

Satisfied now, Crooke slipped quietly out of bed.

With quiet and stealthy steps he made his way to Talbot's bed. For a moment he stood by the bedside, listening intently.

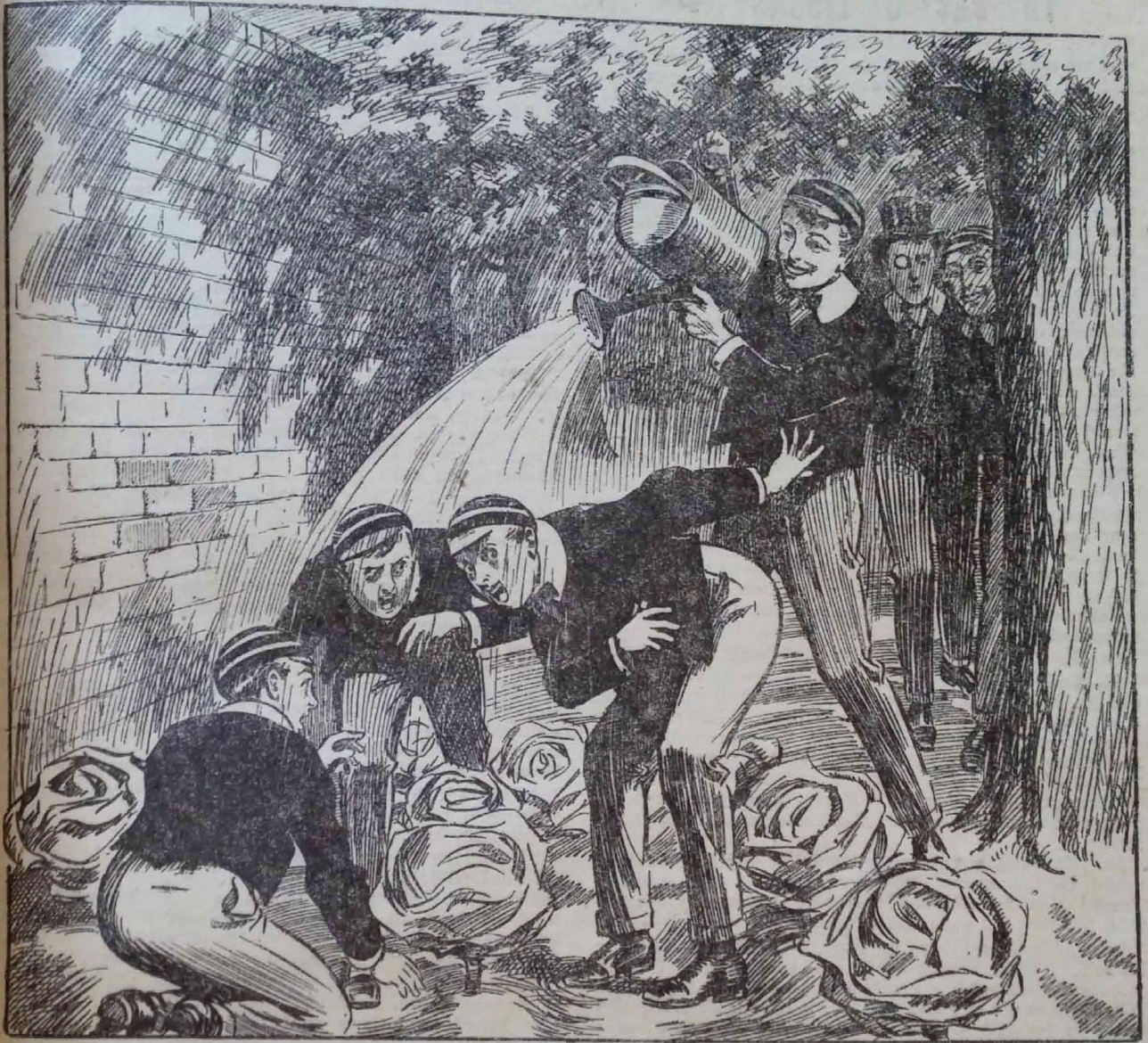
A ray of starlight fell on Talbot's face, and showed the eyes closed, the breath coming and going regularly.

The Toff was deep in slumber.

Crooke turned softly to the chair upon which Talbot's jacket was hung. His hands glided over the jacket.

He was trembling a little now, and his breath came thickly.

If any of the Shell fellows had awakened and seen him at his work, there would have been bad trouble for Crooke. A fellow who "nosed" into other fellow's pockets,



The Shell fellows stooped down over the cabbage-patch cover. Squish—swizz—sloosh! Over the three stooping forms, the shower of water from the can came as a sudden surprise. (See Chapter 9.)

while the latter was asleep, would have received short shrift from Tom Merry & Co. But at midnight the juniors were not likely to awaken.

And Croke made no sound. A skilled thief of the night could not have been more cautious.

His fingers glided through pocket after pocket in search of something. They closed on a letter at last.

He drew it out and peered at it in the gloom.

Whether it was the letter he sought he could not tell. In the dimness he could not see a word. With the letter in his hand, Croke crept away towards the nearest window. There, in the starlight, he examined the letter.

By straining his eyes he made out a few words, but still he could not read it. He muttered something under his breath.

It was the letter Talbot had received that afternoon, he was sure. And he was almost sure that that letter was from John Rivers.

He had heard what Miss Marie had told, in Tom Merry's study, that her father was coming to see her. Believing, as he did, that Talbot was keeping up his connection with his former associates, Croke had no doubt that John Rivers was coming also to see the Toff. To surprise them together, to prove to all St. Jim's that Talbot was still the comrade of a cracksmen who was "wanted" by the police, that was Croke's little game. Of what happened to Rivers he did not care. It would

ruin Talbot with his uncle, and that was all he cared about. Indeed, Croke felt that it would be so much to his credit if, by his means, a man wanted by the police could be laid by the heels. He had spied upon Talbot, and had heard Marie speaking to the Toff of her father, and of his reform. But in that reform Croke did not believe for a moment, any more than he believed in Talbot's. Like the fallen Archangel of old, Croke was always ready "out of good still to find means of evil." It was easy for such a nature to suspect and distrust, and not so easy for him to have faith.

Talbot had few letters at the school, and Croke felt that he was certain to have one from the Professor before the Professor came. It was very probable that that was the letter, and Croke had no scruples about reading it.

He stood with the letter in his hand, straining his eyes, but he could not make it out in the dim starlight. He glanced towards the beds. He dared not strike a match, neither dared he keep the letter in his possession, for Talbot would have missed it the next day. It was not his purpose to put the Toff upon his guard.

He hesitated for some minutes, and then crept away to the door of the dormitory. With great caution he opened it, and stepped out into the passage, and drew the door shut after him.

In the dark passage he struck a match. With eager

eyes he scanned the letter, in the flickering light of the match. He caught his breath sharply, his eyes were glittering.

The letter was the one he sought, and its contents could leave him in no doubt. The man who referred to Marie there must be Marie's father, and he was coming on Wednesday afternoon, and Talbot and his girl chum were to meet him at the Feathers Inn, up the river. The signature to the letter puzzled him for a moment, but only for a moment. "John Brown," of course, was another name for John Rivers. The cracksman would not be likely to sign his own name in black and white. To any other fellow the letter would have revealed nothing, but Crooke's inner knowledge shed light upon it. Talbot was to keep an appointment with John Rivers, the cracksman, the criminal, who had once come to St. Jim's as "Mr. Packington," and attempted to rob the school, the cracksman who had once been arrested there. Could proof be clearer than that, that Talbot was not what he seemed, that his new life was the sheerest hypocrisy from beginning to end?

The match went out.

Silently the spy of the Shell entered the dormitory and closed the door. He groped his way to Talbot's bed, and replaced the letter in the pocket he had taken it from. The Toff was still sleeping soundly. In the old days it had not been easy to catch the prince of cracksmen napping. But the cad of the Shell had succeeded.

Crooke stifled a chuckle as he crept back into bed.

He had learned all he wished to learn, and Talbot had no knowledge that he knew. On Wednesday John Rivers was to be at the Feathers Inn. What would be easier than to put the police on the scent? To seize him there, to arrest him, while in company with the Toff!

What was he coming for? Merely to see his daughter, or to plan some new crime? Crooke inclined to the latter theory.

He felt quite a virtuous glow as he reflected that he might be the means of preventing some new robbery. True, the methods he had used were not exactly honourable, but that did not trouble Crooke.

"Catch 'em together, by Jove!" Crooke chuckled to himself. "What will Talbot be able to say then? Caught in consultation with a cracksman wanted by the police. What the deuce did the girl mean by the D.C.M., and being on leave?" Crooke had puzzled a good deal over that. "Is the man in the Army? What an awful rascal, if he is, to hide from the police in the Army! He ought to be sent to penal servitude for life. Anyway, he will be jolly well shown up on Wednesday, and so will Talbot."

Crooke closed his eyes at last.

He slept the sleep of the just, and he had pleasant dreams of John Rivers and Talbot surrounded by the police, of the Toff driven in disgrace from the school, and cast off and disowned by the grim old colonel. Talbot's luck had been wonderfully good so far. Many times danger had threatened him, and the shadows had seemed to close upon him for ever, but he had pulled through. Would he pull through this time?

CHAPTER 8.

Really Remarkable.

CLANG! Clang!

Tom Merry & Co. were out of bed with the first clang of the rising-bell in the morning.

But they were not quite so early as Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth. The swell of St. Jim's had not waited for the rising-bell.

He was too anxious to see how his famous cabbages were getting on.

His great idea had not been received with enthusiasm, but Arthur Augustus did not despair of rallying the whole school to the vegetable-growing scheme. When they saw with what eminent success he had started, the other fellows would follow suit, he was sure of that.

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Four cabbages, certainly, was not a large crop; but it was a beginning. As those cabbages flourished, so the idea would grow. Nothing succeeds like success!

"Turn out, you slackahs!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, jerking the bedclothes off his chums. "Buck up!"

"Grooh!" came sleepily from Blake. "'Tain't rising-bell!"

"There it goes, deah boy."

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Blake sat up and rubbed his eyes. Arthur Augustus had nearly finished dressing.

"Buck up!" said D'Arcy severely. "Pway don't slack in wah time, Blake. Are you not anxious about the cabbages?"

"Not in the least little bit," said Blake cheerfully. "They're dead by this time. The hardiest cabbages couldn't survive your gardening."

"Weally, Blake—"

"We'll pull 'em up and sling 'em in at Figgy's window," said Digby. "Wake up those New House slackers, you know."

"Bai Jove! If you pull up my cabbages, Dig, I shall give you a feahful thwashin'. I have no doubt that they are flouwishin'."

"Bow-wow!"

"I watahed them last evenin', you know, and I am goin' to watah them again this mornin'. My new watah-can is wippin'. It leaks a little wheré that ass Hewwies bified it with the wake, of course. Latah on I shall have a hose—a special hose—wiggd up for my vegetable garden. There is nothin' whatevah to sniggah at. If the wah lasts anothah five or six yabs, we may wun vewy short of vegetables, and you will be jollay glad of my cabbages then. And that's only a beginnin'. I am goin' to have a fine cwop of potatoes latah on, and some first-class bananahs."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Pway don't cackle, deah boys. Bananahs are a splendid food, and quite cheap. You have wead about the man who always cawvied acorns in his pocket, and used to shove them in odd corners of his estate, and his descendants had a wippin' lot of oak twees. Well, I am goin' to shove in bananahs in the same way."

"Your giddy descendants won't have a ripping lot of banana trees, I think," grinned Blake. "I fancy I've heard somewhere that the banana is a tropical johnny."

"Of course I'm not well up in gardenin' yet. But I believe that with plenty of watahin' you can gwow almost anythin' anyhow. Buck up, deah boys, and let's go and see the cabbages."

"You go and see them and tell us about it," said Blake. "Take a yard measure to spot their growth. A foot rule wouldn't be big enough."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus sniffed and quitted the dormitory, leaving his unbelieving chums still at their toilet. In the passage he ran into half a dozen Shell fellows.

"How are the cabbages?" sang out Monty Lowther.

"I'm just goin' to see, deah boy. You can come if you like. And if you feel inclined to give up slackin', there is plenty of diggin' to be done."

Tom Merry & Co. followed Arthur Augustus out of the School House. The swell of St. Jim's hurried for his water-can, and filled it at the nearest tap, and bore it away in triumph towards the cabbage-patch.

There was a slight leak in the water-can caused by an unfortunate collision with the rake wielded by Herries. The water dripped from it over Arthur Augustus's elegant trousers, but the enthusiastic gardener did not even notice it. Even his beautiful bags were a secondary consideration with Arthur Augustus now.

"Heah they are, deah boy! Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus halted, spellbound.

His knowledge of gardening was not extensive. Exactly how much a cabbage might be expected to grow in a single night, he did not know. He had hoped to see his specimens increased in size.

But he had never ventured to hope for such a tremendous increase as this.

The cabbages had doubled in size!

"Gweat Scott!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus. "Bai Jove! Look at them, deah boys! This is what comes of watahin' them carefully!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"They have gwown wonderfully—simply wonderfully! Don't you notice it?"

"They do seem a little bigger," admitted Tom Merry.

"A little!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus indignantly. "Why, they are twemendously biggah!"

"A shade larger," said Manners.

"Weally, Maunahs, you must be an ass! They have vewy neahly doubled in size!"

"Oh, draw it mild!" murmured Kangaroo.

"I measured them thwee times yestahday," said D'Arcy. "They were six inches high. Now they are a foot at least."

"Wonderful!"

"Marvellous!"

"Miraculous!"

"Extraordinary!"

Arthur Augustus beamed.

"Yaas, you are quite wight!" he assented. "It is weally miwaculous! Some fellahs are born gardenahs, you know! There are ways of doin' these things. That ass Blake said this was a wotten soil; but it must be wippm' for the cabbages to gwow like that. Of course, a lot is due to the way they are watahed. Plants wequiah a lot of watahin'."

Arthur Augustus started with the water-can. He gave it a swing, and there was a yell from the Shell fellows.

"Bai Jove! I'm sowwy, deah boys!"

"Yow—you ass!"

"You shouldn't stand too neah a gardenah, deah boys. I am sowwy you have caught it—it wastes the watah! Ewewy dwop ought to go into the gwound. Pway, stand a little further off."

The juniors did not need telling that; they were already moving further off. Arthur Augustus finished watering his cabbages, with great glee, and then hurried to the School House to tell the great news to the doubting Thomases of Study No. 6.

"Well, have they grown a foot or a yard?" asked Blake, as he came in.

"They have gwown six inches, deah boy!"

Blake jumped.

"Six what?"

"Inches."

"Not feet?" grinned Herries.

"Or yards?" asked Dig.

"Or leagues?" suggested Blake.

"Pway, don't be funnay! They have gwown six inches, and they are in splendid condish. At this wate, my garden will soon be able to supply the whole school. I shall make some awwangement with the Housemastah to supply vegetables for the kitchen, and save twadesmen's bills. If ewewybody did the same, all the twadesmen would be able to go to the wah and weinforce the lwave fellahs in Flandahs."

"Look here! Are you dotty?" demanded Blake.

"What do you mean by saying that your silly cabbages have grown six inches in the night?"

"Secin' is believin, deah boy! Come and look at them!"

Study No. 6, greatly puzzled, followed the triumphant swell of St. Jim's to the cabbage-patch. They almost fell down at the sight of the cabbages. Those four healthy-looking plants, each a foot high, bore little resemblance to the somewhat scrubby and mangy cabbages D'Arcy had put into the ground the previous evening. Blake rubbed his eyes and looked again.

"Well, what do you say now, Blake?" chirruped Arthur Augustus. "Pewwaps you will admit now that I am a pwetty good gardenah—what?"

"You fathead!" ejaculated Blake. "They can't be the same cabbages!"

"Weally, Blake, you are a duffah! Wiches take unto themselves wings and fly away, but cabbages don't!"

"They do when there are funny merchants hanging

round watching for a chance to pull a silly fathead's leg!" said Blake.

"Wats!"

"I tell you they're not the same cabbages!" yelled Blake.

"Wubbish!"

"They can't be!" said Herries.

"I wegard you as an ass, Hewwies! They have gwown wonderfully, I know. That is entiahly due to the way I put them in, and to plentay of watahin'. To-mowwow they will pwobably be weady for gatherin'. I hope it won't wain to-day."

"Eh? Why not?"

"I don't want to have to come out in the wain to watah them, you know. Howevah, I would wisk it to make my garden a weal success. What are you cacklin' at now?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Of course, I should bwing an umbwellah—weally, deah boys, I cannot see any weason why you should yell in that widiculous way!"

But Blake & Co. persisted in yelling in that ridiculous way. The idea of Arthur Augustus, with an umbrella, watering the garden in the rain, was a little too much for them.

CHAPTER 9. Well Watered!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS was highly satisfied with the progress of the cabbage-patch.

Blake and Herries and Digby were not quite so satisfied.

That some unknown practical joker was pulling the noble leg of the Honourable Arthur Augustus, they felt convinced. They had no objection to pulling Gussy's noble leg themselves, but they objected to its being pulled by outsiders. That was up against Study No. 6, and it had to be stopped, as Jack Blake declared with emphasis.

They did not openly state their suspicions. They resolved to keep their eyes open, and their suspicions naturally turned upon Monty Lowther, whose misplaced sense of humour was well-known.

"Some ass—most likely Lowther—must have changed the cabbages last night," Blake remarked to his chums. "I remember now those three bounders were out in the evening. And Lowther says he wouldn't be surprised if Gussy's cabbages grew still more to-night. He's not done yet. But he's not going to be funny at the expense of Study No. 6! We bar that!"

"We do—we does!" agreed Digby.

"So we'll jolly well keep an eye on the cabbage-patch this evening," said Blake, "and we'll have the water-can with us."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The water-can was busy that day. The moment he escaped from lessons, Arthur Augustus bolted out to water the garden. He was somewhat disappointed to find that the cabbages had not perceptibly increased in size during the morning. But he confided to Blake that very likely they grew quickest at night—to which Blake replied with a snort.

"There are lots of things to be learned in gardenin'." Arthur Augustus remarked, very truly. "What is it Shakespeare says, you know: 'There are more things in whats-its-name, and what-do-you-call-it, than are dreamt of in your thingummybob,' or somethin' like that. I think that is vewy twue."

When afternoon lessons were over, Arthur Augustus was to be seen ruefully gazing out into the quad. A shower had come on.

"Rotten!" growled Tom Merry. "No cricket!"

"Nevah mind the cwicket, Tom Mewwy," said Arthur Augustus lugubriously. "There are more important things to think of than cwicket in wah-time!"

"Well, you ought to be glad of the rain as you're a giddy gardener," said Monty Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah, I wegard it as wotten! I am just hangin' about waitin' and wastin' time, you know."

"What are you waiting for?"

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"To watah the garden, of course!"

"Eh?"

"I don't want to go out in this beastly wain to watah it, but, of course, I cannot miss it, or the cabbages will suffah!"

The Terrible Three shrieked.

"It is not a laughin' mattah! I am takin' my gardenin' vewy sewiously. I am not a slaekah!" added Arthur Augustus loftily.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Tom Merry. "But don't you think—perhaps—the rain will answer the same purpose as a water-can?"

"Bai Jove! I nevah thought of that!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus brightened up.

"On second thoughts, I shall not watah it at all this evenin'," he remarked. "The wain will do vewy neahly as well. I don't see what you fellahs are cacklin' at."

Fortunately the rain passed off in the evening, and Monty Lowther was able to run down to Rylcombe before the gates were locked. He returned with an immense parcel, which he proceeded to conceal in the wood-shed.

Quite unknown to the humorist of the Shell, three pairs of eyes were on him. Blake and Herries and Digby were on the watch.

Monty Lowther departed, chuckling, for the School House when he had deposited his parcel in the shed. Then Blake & Co., also chuckling, stole into the wood-shed, and peered into the parcel.

"Cabbages!" said Blake.

"The cheeky ass!" said Herries.

The three Fourth-Formers left the wood-shed and strolled into the School House. They found Arthur Augustus D'Arcy in the study; he was perusing a large volume entitled "Every Man His Own Gardener."

"I'm afwaid I sha'n't be able to gwow bananahs, aftah all, deah boys," he remarked, as his chums came in. "Bananahs would not gwow heah."

"Go hon!" said Blake. "Suppose you try the bread-fruit tree? That would come in very handy when the Yankee speculators put up the price of wheat. Bread-fruit is awfully good prog, you know! Shipwrecked sailors live on it on desert islands."

"What a wippin' ideah, Blake! But pewwaps bwead-fruit would not gwow any more than bananahs!" added Arthur Augustus thoughtfully.

"Perhaps it wouldn't," admitted Blake. "It's barely possible it wouldn't. Well, what about cocoanut palms?"

"If you are wottin', Blake——"

"Not at all," said Blake blandly. "Cocoanut palms would get on about as well as your cabbages, anyway!"

"Wats! My cabbages have doubled in size already."

"And they're going to re-double to-night, if we don't chip in," said Blake. "Your cabbages are like giddy bridge-players, with their doubling and re-doubling. But we're going to stop their growth. You're going to help us. Come on!"

"Weally, Blake——"

"Bring your water-can."

"I use the watah-can to make them gwow, Blake, not to stop them fwom gwowin'."

"Well, we're going to use it to stop them from growing this time," said Blake. "We're going to catch that giddy joker in the act, and water him, and perhaps he'll grow—less cheeky."

"If any sillay ass is wottin' with my cabbage-patch——" began Arthur Augustus wrathfully.

"Has that just dawned on you?" asked Blake pleasantly. "Come on, fathead, and we'll keep watch for him—with the water-can!"

Arthur Augustus breathed hard through his noble nose. The bare idea of anybody, for the sake of a practical joke, chipping in with his vegetable

garden made him wrathful. A time of national emergency was not a time for practical jokes.

Study No. 6 slipped quietly out of the School House, and the water-can—filled to the brim—was taken down to the cabbage-patch. Then they waited in the cover of the trees as the dusk deepened.

"Look heah, whom are we watchin' for, Blake?" asked Arthur Augustus. "I don't undahstand all this at all!"

"You'll understand soon," said Blake. "Didn't I tell you that they weren't the same cabbages?"

"You did make that absurd wemark, Blake, but, of course, you do not know much about gardenin'."

"Shush!" murmured Digby.

There was a sound of footsteps, and three forms loomed up in the dusk. The juniors under the dark trees hardly breathed. Even Arthur Augustus could not doubt that this meant a raid on his cabbage-patch.

One of the dim forms dumped down a huge parcel. Then a chuckle was audible.

"Four of the best!" It was Lowther's voice. "Gussy will find his cabbages a good eighteen inches high to-morrow. It was worth the money—what?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus breathed hard. Blake and Herries and Dig grinned silently.

"They'll be fit for pulling to-morrow," went on Lowther, "and I'll tie a note to the roots——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Just mentioning that we've helped Gussy to grow his cabbages. He will be quite pleased when he pulls that message up!"

The Terrible Three chuckled gleefully. Arthur Augustus's face was a study. He appeared to be about to choke.

The Shell fellows stooped down over the cabbage-patch. Blake lifted the water-can and ran forward from his cover.

Squish—swizz—slooosh!

Over three stooping forms the shower of water from the can came as a sudden surprise.

Swissssssh!

"Great pip!"

"Yahoooooh!"

"Groooooogh!"

The Terrible Three spun round and received the shower in their faces, instead of on their backs.

"Yaroooh!" roared Lowther. "What the—who the——yooooop!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! Watah the wottahs, deah boy!" shrieked Arthur Augustus. "And where's that wake? Go for the wottahs with the wake!"

"Groooogh! Oh! Ow! Ah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Terrible Three jumped away from the spouting water-pot, but Blake followed them up grimly. They had to have it to the last drop. They dodged in vain. By the time the can was empty Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther were drenched.

"Perhaps you'll grow, too, by to-morrow," chuckled Blake. "You've been jolly well watered, anyway!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! Heah's the wake! Go for 'em!"

"Scrag that silly idiot!" shrieked Lowther. "I'm drenched! Yow-ow! Collar him!"

"Look out!" yelled Manners.

Arthur Augustus was charging with the rake.

A rake is rather a dangerous weapon at close quarters, and Arthur Augustus was so excited and indignant that some damage would certainly have been done if the Shell fellows had not dodged.

"Stop, you wottahs!" panted Arthur Augustus. "You wotten pwactical

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John Rivers gripped Talbot's hand. "You're a good pal, Toff. You're taking a lot of risk in this—" "That is nothing. For Heaven's sake ride now—ride hard!" (See Chapter 11.)

jokin' boundahs! Stop, you feahful beasts! You have been muckin' up my cabbages! Oh, you wottahs! Lemme get at you!"

But the Terrible Three were in full flight. They did not want Arthur Augustus to get at them with the rake.

Three drenched and dripping juniors fled wildly from the cabbage-patch, with the excited swell of St. Jim's in hot pursuit, frantically brandishing the rake. Blake threw himself on the ground and shrieked. Herries and Dig were doubled up.

"Ha, ha, ha! Oh, my hat! Ha, ha, ha!"

Three drenched practical jokers reached the study in the Shell passage and sank down, gasping, in three chairs, round which three separate pools of water promptly collected.

"Oh, dear!" gasped Tom Merry.

"Oh, crumbs!" said Manners.

"Oh, crikey!" said Lowther.

"Look at my clothes!" howled Manners. "Oh, my hat! If you suggest any of your rotten wheezes in the study again, Lowther—"

"We'll scrag you!" roared Tom Merry.

"Scrag him, anyway!" said Manners.

"Here, hold on, you silly idiots!"

Lowther dodged out of the study just in time; but it was out of the frying-pan into the fire. Arthur Augustus was coming along the passage, raging for gore.

"Bai Jove, there you are, you wottah! Lemme get at you with this wake!"

Monty Lowther fled for the dormitory and locked himself in. Arthur Augustus breathed blood-curdling threats through the keyhole and departed. Monty Lowther had made the discovery that the way of the humorist, like that of the transgressor, is sometimes hard.

CHAPTER 10.

Danger!

"CRICKET this afternoon!" said Tom Merry.

It was the following afternoon—Wednesday—and a half-holiday. There had been no more rain, and the cricket pitch was dry and hard; likewise Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's cabbages.

patch. Tom Merry looked out into the sunny quadrangle after dinner with much satisfaction.

"You will have to leave me out this afternoon, Tom Mewwy," remarked Arthur Augustus. "I have no time for cwicket now."

"Still gardening?" asked Talbot, with a smile.

"Yaas, wathah, and gettin' on wippin'ly. I have eight cabbages now—Lowthah was kind enough to pwesent me with four new ones yestahday."

And Arthur Augustus chuckled. Lowther's new cabbages had remained on the cabbage-patch. It was a case of, as Blake remarked, "to the victor the spoils."

"Fathead!" growled Lowther. Lowther did not seem to see anything humorous in the termination of his practical joke.

The School House fellows had yelled over it—indeed, they seemed to regard the end of that joke as the funniest part of it. But Monty Lowther's sense of humour, keen as it was, failed him at that point.

"Well, we shall beat the New House to-day if Gussy's going gardening instead of playing cwicket," said Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"I don't know," said Tom. "Talbot's standing out, too. Sure you don't want to play this afternoon, Talbot?"

"Well, I do want to, as a matter of fact," said Talbot, "but it can't be done. You don't mind, Tom?"

"Not if it can't be helped," said Tom cheerily. "You know we shall miss you. But that new kid, Julian, is coming on jolly well, and I shall give him a trial. You're not swotting this afternoon?"

"Oh, no!" Talbot coloured a little as he sauntered out into the quad with the Terrible Three. "I'll explain if you like, Tom."

Talbot had not told his chums of the Professor's letter. That they would not blame him for helping Corporal Brown to come in safety to see his daughter he knew. They knew that the corporal was coming, from what Marie had said, but they did not know when or where, and they knew that the Toff would doubtless see him.

But Talbot had an almost morbid shrinking from the thought of bringing his chums into contact with anything that was connected with his old life. He could never be quite clear himself of the past, but he could keep his chums clear of any risk or trouble in connection with it. And the risk was real enough, and the bitter enmity of Gerald Crooke made it greater.

"You needn't explain," said Tom. "I think I can guess. A certain gentleman in khaki—what?"

Talbot nodded.

"You don't blame me, Tom?"

"Of course not, fathead! Marie must see her father now he is home on leave," said Tom. "All the same, it would be best for him to get off again as quickly as possible. He is safe enough in Kitchener's Army; but there are people about here who know him, Talbot, and if he should be seen——"

"I know it, Tom."

"Not that anybody would be likely to think of a connection between the Professor and a corporal in khaki," said Tom. "But for Miss Marie's sake he oughtn't to run any risk. Old Skeat at Rylcombe would be glad to see him again, and it would be rotten if anything happened. You see, he's done his duty in Flanders, and that sets him right in our eyes; but the law is another matter. It's risky for you to see him."

Little did Tom realise how great the risk was as he spoke, and Talbot did not enlighten him. But the Toff could not help thinking of Crooke. Crooke had found out that the Professor was coming. If Talbot had known that the spy of the Shell had seen the letter, his uneasiness would have been greater still. But of that fact he had as yet no suspicion.

Crooke came along the drive, wheeling his bicycle. He gave the chums of the Shell a glance in passing, and Talbot caught his eyes and started. The look of triumphant malice was not to be mistaken.

Talbot's brow clouded darkly.

His eyes followed Crooke. The cad of the Shell wheeled his machine out into the road and mounted, and pedalled away towards Rylcombe.

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Crooke was off the scene, apparently, for the afternoon, but Talbot did not feel easy in his mind. What did that look in Crooke's eyes mean? Was it possible that the cunning spy had made a discovery? Yet how?

Half-past two sounded from the clock-tower, and Talbot started from his troubled thoughts.

"Time you were off?" asked Tom.

"Yes; Miss Marie will be waiting for me," said Talbot. "It is rather a long walk to—the place of appointment. Her father may be there by this time. I—I wonder——"

He paused.

"What's the trouble?"

Talbot did not reply. He fumbled in his pocket and drew out a letter, and breathed more freely as he looked at it. The letter was safe enough. A fear had come suddenly into his heart that it might have been purloined. If Crooke should have seen it—and he was capable of any meanness——

Then, as he looked at the letter, Talbot gave a sudden start, and his handsome face turned pale.

He wrinkled his brows over the page. A startled look was in his eyes. On the notepaper there was a brownish mark—slight, hardly noticeable, but plain enough for the keen eyes of the Toff. He gazed at it, hardly breathing. That mark had been made by a flame held close to the letter; the paper had been slightly scorched. That he had held the letter nowhere near a flame Talbot knew. The letter had been in other hands, yet he had found it intact in his pocket.

A bitter smile came over his lips.

There was only one time when it was possible for the letter to have been taken out of his pocket—at night. It had been so taken, and in the dark it had been necessary for the purloiner to strike a match to read it, and the match had flicked against the paper and scorched it.

He did not need telling in whose hands the letter had been. Only a fellow in his own dormitory would have taken it, and only Crooke was base enough. Crooke must have known that he had the letter somehow—more spying, no doubt—and in the night he had read it—last night or the night before. The tell-tale scorch on the paper could not be doubted.

The Terrible Three were regarding Talbot in amazement and alarm.

"What on earth's the matter?" exclaimed Tom Merry, catching him by the arm. "Are you ill, Talbot?"

"Ill!" muttered Talbot. "No!"

"You're as white as a sheet," said Lowther anxiously.

"Am I?" Talbot pulled himself together with an effort. "I—I—— It's all right. Tom, will you go and see Miss Marie—she will be in the Head's garden—and tell her I can't come yet?"

"Yes, if you like; but——"

"I can't stop now. Excuse me, old chap!"

Talbot dashed away, leaving his chums astounded. He did not look back; he knew there was not a second to lose. He ran hard to the bike-shed, and rushed his machine out. Tom Merry called to him as he ran the machine down to the gates, but he did not answer. He did not even hear.

He leaped into the saddle, and rode away at a furious speed in the direction Crooke had taken.

Crooke had seen the letter; he was sure of that. What steps had his enemy taken? He knew that Marie's father would be at the inn that afternoon. Had he told already, or had he gone to tell now? That was what Talbot had to learn.

He rode as if for his life. Crooke had a good start, but he was no rider. Talbot came in sight of him as he cycled into the village. At the end of the village street Talbot jumped down, and kept his eyes on Crooke. The cad of the Shell dismounted outside the police-station and went in.

Talbot drew a quick, sobbing breath.

Crooke knew, and he had gone to denounce the Professor—to tell Inspector Skeat where he could find the man who had baffled him before. Well the junior knew with what delight the inspector, sore from his defeat, would receive the information. And Corporal Brown was probably already at the Feathers, little dreaming that the coils were closing in on him.

Talbot turned his machine and remounted. He did not ride back to the school. Marie must wait! There was only one thought in his mind now—to save the corporal from the trap into which he was falling. The bicycle fairly flew along the white, dusty road. Talbot rode as if he were riding for his life. Indeed, he was riding for what was as dear to him as his life—the happiness of his girl chum, which was bound up in the safety of her father.

CHAPTER 11.

A Soldier of the King!

A STURDY figure in khaki stood in the old garden of the Feathers Inn, looking out across the towing-path towards the shining river.

Those who had known the Professor in the old days would hardly have recognised him now.

The Professor had been thinner, paler, and older-looking. His face had been shifty in its expression, his eyes cunning.

Corporal Brown was a new man.

The thin form had put on muscle; the pale face of the city-dweller was healthy and sunburnt now. The old look was gone, as if a healthy and manly life had revived youth. The face was open and frank, the eyes were steady and clear. Truly, life in the King's Army had wrought a change in John Rivers. He was still a young man, though his way of life had made him old. The soldier's life had given him back his youth and taken years from him.

There was the whir of a bicycle on the towing-path, and the man in khaki strode nearer to the fence. The old stealthy movement was gone. It was with a man's stride that John Rivers moved now.

His clear and steady eyes looked down the towing-path. A schoolboy was riding hard towards the inn.

The corporal's face lighted up.

It was Talbot.

Then his brow clouded. Talbot was alone. Where was Marie? It was to see his daughter that the reformed cracksmen had come—the girl whose sweet influence had succeeded at last in winning him from evil. For the first time Marie would see in her father a man whom she could honour and respect; and John Rivers had looked forward to that meeting, and longed for it, and thought and dreamed of it in the shell-swept trenches of Flanders. The thought of it had comforted him when he lay upon the hospital pallet, with a German bullet in his body. It had helped him back to health and strength.

He had taken the risk of coming back to the place where, in former days, he had been known, and he knew now real was that risk. But he could not leave England gain without seeing his daughter. For across that narrow strip of the sea he had to pass again into the Valley of the Shadow of Death; and who could tell whether his eyes would ever look again upon his daughter's face?

Talbot jumped, breathless, from his machine. He had seen the figure in khaki over the fence.

He ran the bike to the fence, panting.

"Where is Marie?" That was John Rivers's first question.

Talbot gasped.

"You are in danger."

The corporal shrugged his shoulders.

"I know that! I have been in too much danger to care much for it now, Toff. I must see Marie!"

"You don't understand! You are known to be here, and I have come to warn you. Thank Heaven I found it out in time! Even at this moment the police have started to come here for you!"

"But—but how—"

"A spying rascal in the school—a fellow named Crooke—he has found it out, by spying. I have just watched him going to the police. He spied on your letter, and knows that you are here."

The corporal's sunburnt face paled a little.

"They are coming for me?"

"Yes."

The soldier's hand wandered for a moment to his bayonet. Talbot uttered a quick exclamation:

"Professor!"

John Rivers laughed.

"True; that would be useless," he said—"worse than useless. But I will never be taken, Toff—death rather than that! Not only for my own sake, but—but"—his voice failed a little—"for the sake of the regiment. They shall never be disgraced by me."

Talbot looked at him in wonder. It was a strange change in the Professor. The hard and cynical cracksmen of old days—what a miracle had been worked in him by the wearing of the khaki, by facing death at the side of gallant comrades. It was the honour of his regiment he was thinking of rather than his own safety and his own life!

"It will not come to that," said Talbot. He looked round quickly, fearful of listeners. Old George, the waiter, was polishing glasses at the other end of the garden, with his back turned to them; there was no one near. "Professor, you have time; they know you are here, but they do not know the name of your regiment—they know nothing. Fly as fast as you can, and you are safe. I will tell Marie."

The corporal was silent; his bronzed face worked strangely.

Talbot laid his hand on the soldier's arm, across the low fence.

"Quick! I tell you they have started!"

"I must see Marie!"

"You cannot—now! For Marie's sake you must go!" urged Talbot. "I tell you every minute is precious!"

"I will go, if you like; but I shall not leave the neighbourhood till I have seen my daughter," said the corporal grimly. "When my leave is up I am going back to face the enemy—thousands will fall, and I may be one of them. It may be the last time I can see my daughter. I will not go without seeing her."

Talbot's heart throbbed wildly.

He could understand the corporal's feeling—he could feel for him. But it was no time for hesitation.

"You must save yourself first, Professor. Somehow it can be arranged—it must be arranged. But now you must go. Even now it may be too late. Take my machine, and ride."

"Tell me when and where I shall see my daughter."

Talbot turned a searching look along the towing-path. His heart was full of fear for the man in khaki. It would break Marie's heart if he should be seized now—now when the past had been atoned for, when a new life of duty and honour lay before him. He must be saved.

But the corporal stood like a rock. He knew his danger, but he was resolved.

His eyes watched Talbot's face calmly.

"Tell me," he said. "I must see her, before I go to what may be my death. You don't know how I've looked forward to it, Toff—how it's strengthened me out there when the bullets were flying and the poison-gas creeping on us. It was only Marie that made it worth while. I've got to see her once."

"You shall—you shall!" muttered Talbot desperately. "You shall—at any risk! Listen! Take my machine now and ride—anywhere, only as hard as you can. Then come to the school to-night—after dark. It is risky, but it's the only way. I will tell Marie. Come to the wall at the end of the Head's garden—you know the place. I will be there. At nine o'clock if you can. Until you come keep out of sight—lie low in the wood. Leave the machine there—that doesn't matter. But go now. You shall see Marie to-night, I give you my word!"

The corporal gripped his hand.

"You're a good pal, Toff! You're taking a lot of risk in this."

"That is nothing. For Heaven's sake, ride now—ride hard!"

The corporal said no more. He vaulted over the fence to the towing-path and grasped the machine. In a moment more he was riding away. Talbot stood in the path and watched him, till the figure in khaki vanished round the bend of the river.

He drew a quick, sobbing breath.

"Safe—safe now! But to-night!"

He turned and strode away, taking the footpath through the wood. It was necessary that he should not be seen there.

But in the wood, he turned from the path, and climbed the branches of a big beech, where he could watch, unseen, the approaches to the inn. The minutes passed all too quickly. Every minute that passed was a minute more of safety to the hunted man. It was a quarter of an hour before the hoot of a motor was heard on the dusty lane that ran by the inn doors. A car was coming from the direction of Ryloombe. It came into sight, and in the car was seated Inspector Skeat and Police-constable Crump.

Talbot watched them with throbbing heart.

The inspector and the constable alighted from the car and disappeared into the inn. Then Talbot turned his eyes upon the inn garden, stretching down to the river. The burly inspector appeared there, followed by the constable. He stood for some moments in talk with old George, the waiter. Talbot could not hear what was said, but he could guess. He saw the two officers searching the garden, scanning the towing-path and the river. He read the black disappointment in their faces.

Ten minutes later the car departed again, with the inspector and the constable in it, looking grim and savage. They had come too late—the bird had flown. A soldier had been there—he had gone before they arrived. That was all they had been able to learn. Was he the man they sought? Even of that they could not be sure.

Talbot dropped from the branches, and strode away through the wood. His brow was clouded. The danger had been averted—his prompt action had saved Marie's father. But the meeting of that night—at St. Jim's? It was the only way, but the danger of it oppressed him. What if the inspector should suspect—if he should watch—if—There were a thousand "ifs," and Talbot's heart was sick with doubt. But the die was cast now.

CHAPTER 12.

Going Strong!

TOM MERRY & CO. came off the cricket-field in cheerful spirits. They had beaten the New House by a single run. It was not a tremendous victory, but it was a victory, and the chums of the School House rejoiced accordingly.

"Jolly lucky to win without old Talbot to help us," said Tom Merry, as the Terrible Three refreshed themselves with ginger-pop. "Let's go and see how Gussy is getting on with his gardening."

And the ginger-pop being finished, the chums of the Shell sauntered down to the cabbage-patch. Arthur Augustus was there in all his glory.

The swell of St. Jim's was taking his gardening seriously. He had his jacket off and his shirt-sleeves rolled up. His hands were encased in stout gardening gloves, and he was wielding a spade with energy. The perspiration of honest toil rolled down his brow.

He paused, and leaned on his spade as the Shell fellows came through the trees.

"Warm work, deah boys," he remarked.

"Looks like it," agreed Tom Merry. "How are the cabbages getting on?"

"Wippingly. I have a dozen in now," said Arthur Augustus. "Some of them do not look vevy lively, I admit, but I'm goin' to keep them thowoughly watahed, and I am suah they will flouwish all wight. I am goin' to get the whole patch turned ovah this evenin', if I can, from the garden-fence to the school wall. The unfortunate thing is that I am gettin' blistahs on my hands."

"In a time of national emergency," said Tom Merry seriously, "even blisters on the hands can be faced."

"Yaas, but it is vevy wotten, all the same. You see, the gloves keep my hands clean, but there seems no way of keepin' off the blistahs."

"Your hands will harden in timé," said Lowther, encouragingly. "Keep it up, and you will get a pair of horny paws like old Taggles, and then the blisters won't worry you."

Arthur Augustus shuddered. All his patriotic enthusiasm could not reconcile him to the idea of having horny paws like old Taggles.

"Besides, think of the dismay amoug the Huns, when

they get to know what you're doing," added Lowther. "The German spies will report this to the Kaiser, and it will make him feel a bit sick—what?"

"Pway don't be an ass, Lowthah! Instead of makin' wotten jokes, suppose you take the wake, and wake ovah the ground I have dug."

"Ahem!"

"Don't be slackahs, deah boys. I wegard it as wathah disgwaceful that I should be the only fellah at St. Jim's doin' any patwiotic work."

"Ahem!" said Manners. "We've just played a hard game, you know."

"You would not play much cwicket if the Huns got heah."

"Hum! No. But your cabbages won't stop the Huns, will they?"

"Wats!"

"You can't stop Huns by chucking cabbages at them," said Lowther, with a shake of the head. "They won't face bayonets, but they'd face cabbages."

"I wegard you as a fathead, Lowthah!"

And Arthur Augustus drove his spade into the earth again, and set his elegant boot on it, and dug away. The Terrible Three watched him in silence for some moments. Then Tom Merry, without a word, threw off his jacket and picked up the garden-fork.

"Hallo!" said Lowther. "What about tea?"

"Let's earn it first," said Tom, laughing. "After all, it's a jolly good idea. Everybody ought to grow food if he can. Gussy's cabbages mayn't be a howling success, but we can grow something—potatoes, turnips, and things. Dashed if I'm not going to back up Gussy!"

"Oh, dear!" said Manners. "I've got a lot of films to develop, but here goes."

Manners seized the pickaxe.

Monty Lowther sighed, and picked up the rake. Arthur Augustus surveyed them with great approval.

"Vevy glad to see you slackahs bucklin' to at last," he remarked. "This is bettah than playin' wotten jokes with a chap's cabbages, Lowthah."

"Hum!" said Lowther. "It's jolly hard work."

"All the bettah. Think of what the chaps in khaki are doin'. When you're doin' some hard work yourself, your conscience will be easiah, deah boy."

"Bow-wow!" said Lowther.

However, the Terrible Three piled in. Arthur Augustus might be somewhat comic as a gardener; there was no doubt he was. But the idea was good, there was no denying that.

And even that unpromising stretch of waste ground could be made something of by sheer hard work.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Blake, arriving on the scene with Herries and Dig. "Taking to honest work in your old age, you Shell bounders?"

"They are followin' my patwiotic example, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus. "I twust that you will do the same."

"Well, perhaps we will, now you're doing some honest work yourself," said Blake. "If you're going to dig, we'll dig. None of your superintending rot, you know."

"I can superintend while I work, I find. It has occurred to me that example is as good as instwuction."

"Hear, hear!" said Blake. "Perhaps that may occur some day to the clever johnnies who are preaching economy on five thousand a year. Who knows? Pile in, you chaps; it's up to us."

Three more diggers set to work. Implements were wanting. But Blake found a spade, and Herries a fork, and Digby a trowel.

The news that recruits for the gardening scheme had been found at last soon spread, and quite a crowd of fellows came to watch. Figgins & Co. of the New House looked on for some minutes, cogitating. Then they disappeared, and returned after a time from the direction of the New House with spades.

After that there were many recruits.

Kangaroo and Dane and Glyn of the Shell joined in, and Reilly and Hammond and Kerruish and Julian of the Fourth. They found all kinds of implements, and piled in at the work. Contarini, the Italian junior, joined them, and then came Redfern and Owen and Lawrence

and Lumley-Lumley and even Levison. Then more and more, with what implements they could find.

Mr. Railton, sauntering in the quadrangle, heard the buzz of voices and the crash of implements, and came along to see what was going on. Probably he suspected that some "jape" was in progress. He paused in surprise at the sight of over a score of juniors in their shirt-sleeves, pegging away at the cabbage-patch.

The Housemaster looked on in wonder. Arthur Augustus paused, and wiped his brow, and turned his eyeglass upon Mr. Railton.

"We're gettin' on, sir," he remarked.

"Dear me!" said Mr. Railton. "But what—"

"This is the vegetable garden, sir. You wemembah I mentioned it to you."

"Dear me! Yes, I remember," Mr. Railton smiled. "Quite an excellent idea—quite excellent! I am very glad to see you so honourably occupied, my boys. If my arm would allow me, I would join you myself." The soldier Housemaster's arm was still in its sling.

That was all that was needed to spur on the junior gardeners. Even Patty Wynn forgot tea-time as he delved away. It was not till dark was falling that the gardeners gave it up and quitted the cabbage-patch, ed, but feeling very well satisfied with themselves.

Talbot met them as they came back to the School House, looking somewhat dusty and earthy. He regarded the gardeners with surprise.

"What have you been up to?" he asked.

"Following in our fathers' footsteps!" said Monty Lowther. "It was reserved for the one and only to show the way. Gardening, my son. You can come and lend us a hand to-morrow. We hope in the course of time to raise enough cabbages for home consumption, and next year to have a surplus for export."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'll help you, by all means," said Talbot, laughing. "It's a jolly good wheeze!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "We have dug up the whole ground, you know. The soil is wathah wuff, but we shall make it all wight; only hard work is needed. I am wathah tired, but I am goin' to watah the garden latah. Nothin' like keepin' it well watahed."

"Let's get some supper now," groaned Blake. "I'm famished."

"So am I, deah boy. I shall watah the garden befoah we go up to the dorm. To-morrow we will have a whip-wound to waise the money for a hose."

The junior gardeners simply devoured their supper. Certainly gardening had a wonderful effect on the appetite. Indeed, Monty Lowther averred that the work would make them so extra hungry, that they would eat the extra supplies they raised, so that the ultimate result of the gardening would be nil. To which Arthur Augustus replied disdainfully and monosyllabically:

"Wats!"

CHAPTER 13.

Father and Daughter.

TALBOT of the Shell sat in his study, his pen idle in his hand, his brow clouded with thought. Gore and Skimpole had finished their work and gone down to the common-room. Talbot sat alone; his work was done, too, but he had not moved. He was thinking of what was to come that evening. The time was close at hand now.

He had told Marie. The Little Sister, though her heart ached with fear for her father, had been quite calm. She was to be by the wall of the Head's garden at nine o'clock, to wait, and Talbot was to join her there. He had to slip out of the School House unobserved, but that would not be difficult. In the shadow of night, Marie was to see her father—the man in khaki who had come home from the war, but whose grim past made him a fugitive in his native land. And the ever-present sense of danger—not to himself, but to Marie and her father—weighed upon the mind of the Toff, and darkened his brow.

He hardly noticed the door of his study open, but he looked round as he heard a footstep. Crooke of the Shell came in, a bitter and sneering smile upon his face.

Talbot rose to his feet.

It wanted less than half an hour to the rendezvous. What had Crooke come there for? Had the spy of the Shell made another discovery? Talbot's heart beat faster, but his face was quite composed. The Toff had learned to give no expression to his feelings in his looks; he had learned in a hard school.

"You managed it," said Crooke.

Talbot did not speak.

"You got to him and warned him somehow," went on Crooke. "Don't tell me any lies; I know you did. They'd have had him, otherwise. They nearly had him. But you managed to beat me this time. He's gone; and you've won. But my time will come. I've come here to tell you that. He will come again, and then look out."

Talbot drew a deep breath.

The baffled rascal of the Shell was seething with angry disappointment. But that very fact showed that Crooke had no suspicion of the appointment made for that evening. He believed that John Rivers was gone.

Far as it was from his intention, Crooke had brought relief to Talbot's heavy heart. It was one danger the less.

"You've nothing to say," sneered Crooke. "You don't deny it. You went to the Feathers and warned that criminal."

"I have nothing to say to you," said Talbot, speaking at last. "Only this. Get out of my study! The sight of you makes me sick!"

Crooke ground his teeth.

"You know I can't prove it," he said. "I know it well enough. The police would have caught you together if you hadn't found it out somehow. But it's no good telling Colonel Lyndon that. I've got to have proof for him. But I'm going to get it. I've proof enough for myself. I've proved that you're keeping on with the old gang, as I said all along. Wait till I can bowl you out!"

"Will you go?"

"I know the man's in the Army, now," resumed Crooke. "I know that much. I only want to know his regiment and his number. I know the name he goes by. It was in the letter; if he used the name he goes by in the Army. Of course, a criminal might use any name. But I'm going to find out, and then— You've got out of a good many scrapes with your cunning, but you won't get out of this."

Talbot clenched his hands.

"And the inspector is on the watch now," grinned Crooke. "I've told him that John Rivers is Miss Marie's father. He only half believes it, but he would catch at any straw to lay that rascal by the heels. He doesn't forget that John Rivers got away from him once. And as soon as he's arrested it will all come out; even my uncle won't be able to doubt that you are still the pal of a cracksmen. How will that suit you?"

"Get out!"

"It's you that will have to get out when that time comes," said Crooke venomously. "And it's coming! Inspector Skeat's on the watch, and the next time John Rivers comes near St. Jim's—"

"That's more than enough," said Talbot, advancing upon him. "Do you want me to throw you into the passage?"

Crooke backed away.

"Perhaps he isn't gone yet," he sneered. "Perhaps he's still hanging about for a chance to see Miss Marie. If he is, the inspector will have him as safe as houses, for they're going to watch the school."

Talbot felt a chill at his heart. His hands dropped to his sides.

Crooke burst into a jeering laugh.

"The inspector half believes it, that's all. But you can bet he won't lose half a chance. If your burglar pal is still hanging about—"

Talbot sprang towards him, his eyes blazing.

Crooke swung out of the doorway, and went hurriedly down the passage. The Toff turned back into the study.

"If they are watching the school!" The thought hammered in his brain. "The inspector wouldn't lose a chance—half a chance—even if he doesn't quite believe Crooke; he wouldn't leave a stone unturned." The quarter chiming from the clock-tower struck upon

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Talbot's ears, and he started. "In a quarter of an hour John Rivers will be here."

He looked from his study window into the darkness of the quadrangle.

John Rivers was coming; even then the Professor must be close to the school. What if the police were watching for him?

There was no help. This time it was impossible to convey a warning. The corporal had taken the risk, and he must pace it through. How could Talbot help him now?

He must help him if he could. His handsome face was paler than usual as he quitted the study. He had hoped to pass out into the quad unobserved, but in the doorway several juniors were gathered. They were the chums of Study No. 6, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was speaking.

"Bettah get it ovah, I suppose, though I am weally watah fatigued. Pewwaps you fellahs would like to bowwow a watah-can fwom Taggles!"

"Perhaps we wouldn't," yawned Blake. "Pile in, Gussy! We'll roast the chestnuts ready for you in the study."

"Wight! Heah goes!"

Arthur Augustus stepped out into the quad.

"Going to help water the giddy garden?" asked Blake, with a grin, as Talbot of the Shell passed out after Arthur Augustus.

Talbot shook his head, and forced a smile. Arthur Augustus was making for the woodshed, where he kept his famous water-can. Talbot walked towards the Head's garden, more deeply troubled than before. D'Arcy was going to water his garden, and the cabbage-patch adjoined the Head's garden, within a few yards of where Marie and her father were to meet. If D'Arcy should see or hear the corporal as he scaled the school wall! He would not know that it was Marie's father; he did not know the Little Sister's secret. The possibility of an alarm chilled Talbot's heart.

He set his teeth, and hurried on through the dark quad. He vaulted lightly over the gate into the Head's garden, and hurried down the path to the clump of trees under the school wall. Here only a wooden fence separated the garden from D'Arcy's cabbage-patch.

A moving shadow under the trees caught his keen eyes.

"Marie!" he whispered.

The girl moved towards him; her face showed pale and set in the gloom. There were few stars in the sky over St. Jim's.

"He will be here soon, Toff."

"Yea."

Talbot moved on to the high stone wall, and with the help of a tree-trunk climbed it, and peered over into the road.

The dusty high-road was silent and deserted.

Was it watched?

He could not tell. And he did not know from what direction the corporal would come. He could not meet him and warn him. He could only wait with throbbing heart. There was a sound of running water in the quad. Arthur Augustus was filling his water-can at the tap. Little did the swell of St. Jim's, in the innocence of his heart, dream of the doubt and anguish within so short a distance of him.

There was a step on the hard road. Talbot started; a dim figure loomed up in the gloom—a figure in khaki. It was the corporal. He stopped under the wall, and his eyes met Talbot's as the Toff looked down.

"Quick!" muttered Talbot.

He stretched down his hand; the soldier caught it, and clambered actively. In a few seconds he was over the wall. Talbot leaped down after him into the garden.

"Only a few minutes," he whispered. "The school may be watched. Professor, for Marie's sake, you must take care!"

"Father!"

Marie's arms were round the corporal's neck; her trembling lips were pressed to his hard, bronzed cheek.

"I will keep watch," muttered Talbot. "Go up the garden, and not a sound. If there is danger, listen for

the hoot of an owl. You remember the old signal, Professor," he added bitterly.

The corporal and his daughter moved up the garden path, Marie speaking in low, tremulous tones. Talbot mounted the wall again, and watched the road. Was there danger? Did the dim shadows of the night hide lurking foes? The minutes passed, and he breathed more freely. Crooke had been mistaken, then, or he had spoken only out of the malice of his heart.

A faint sound in the road came to the Toff's ears; he started, and listened. It was a cautious footfall.

He strained his ears to listen.

From the garden came a low murmur of voices; the corporal and his daughter were speaking in whispering tones. From the cabbage-patch on the other side of the fence Talbot could hear the movements of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and the clink of the water-can. And from the road?

From the road two dim figures came through the dark—dim. But Talbot knew them. The burly form of the inspector—the fat figure of Constable Crump. The constable had his truncheon in his hand.

"Bagged, if he's the man!" The inspector's muttering voice reached Talbot's strained ears. "But we must be sure. Keep watch here, Crump, while I get in. If anyone passes the wall, collar him; brain him if necessary!"

"Yes, sir."

The inspector placed his grasp on the wall, and swung himself up. From the silence rose suddenly the hoot of an owl.

CHAPTER 14.

A Night of Fear.

"FATHER! Listen!"

Marie's hand closed convulsively on her father's arm. Through the night silence the owl's hoot came softly, and it was repeated.

The soldier clenched his hands. He peered through the trees in the direction of the wall.

"Father, it is danger; the signal! Go!"

For a moment the man in khaki stiffened up, and his eyes gleamed. For he was now Kitchener's soldier—he was not the Professor of old—and Kitchener's soldiers were not wont to flee from danger. The man who had never turned his back upon the Prussians, who had faced without flinching the storm of shot and shell, who had never faltered before the deadly vapours of the poison gas—was he to fly like a thief in the night? His hands clenched hard and his eyes gleamed, and then he remembered.

There, he was no longer a soldier of the King; there he was what the past had made him; there, he was to be called to a hard account for an ill-spent life. He must fly; fortunate if he were yet in time.

"Father, good-bye! Good-bye, dearest father!"

"Good-bye, my little girl!"

The rough, bronzed cheeks brushed for a moment the soft rounded one, and they parted.

There was a sound from the direction of the wall of a man lightly dropping within. The corporal disappeared. He did not go towards the wall; that would have been to run into the arms of his enemies. He could not go towards the house. He paused for a moment in the gloom, gazing about him desperately, and then clambered over the wooden fence on his left.

Marie stood with throbbing heart, hardly able to restrain the cry of fear that rose to her lips.

A rustle in the shrubs, and Talbot joined her.

"He is gone?" The Toff's whisper was faint, barely audible.

"Yes," breathed Marie.

"Come!"

"My father—"

ANSWERS

"Come! You must not be seen here," breathed Talbot.

He half-led, half-dragged the girl away. He hurried her towards the house, and Marie, half-fainting with fear for her father, entered by the door she had left open.

"Go to your room!" whispered Talbot. "If there is bad news I will tell you; if your father is safe I will not come. A few minutes will decide. Go, my dear. You must not be seen and questioned; it would add to his danger."

The girl understood. She disappeared into the house, the door closed, and a key turned.

Talbot hurried away; a minute later he was in the quadrangle. But where was the corporal? He listened in the darkness, with beating heart.

From the direction of the cabbage-patch came a strange uproar.

He remembered D'Arcy.

The corporal had taken that direction, then? He had taken it. The desperate man, clambering over the fence, had rolled down on the cabbage-bed, almost at the feet of the swell of St. Jim's.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy jumped back with an exclamation of alarm.

"Bai Jove—what—who—"

He had no time for more. The dim figure leaped up, brushed past the astounded junior, and fled, bursting through the trees towards the quad.

"Gweat Scott!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "Heah's another of them!"

Another figure was clambering over the wooden fence—the inspector had heard the fugitive, and was in close pursuit. The burly form came crashing down on the cabbage-bed.

Inspector Skeat picked himself up, breathless.

"Look heah—"

Arthur Augustus got no further. A grasp of iron was laid upon him, and he was borne to the ground. Before he knew what was happening, his wrists were dragged together, and he felt the cold contact of steel.

Click!

He was handcuffed.

"Caught at last!" panted the inspector.

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus feebly. "I must be dweamin'! Yaas; this is weally a feahful dream!"

Inspector Skeat rose from his prisoner, grinning now with satisfaction.

"Got you, my man."

"Ow!"

"I arrest you, John Rivers. The warrant's been out long enough," chuckled the inspector.

"Gweat Scott!"

The inspector started.

Certainly that was not the voice of the man he sought.

A flash of light gleamed upon D'Arcy's startled face, and the inspector uttered a yell of wrath.

"You—you—what! Where is he?"

"I weally do not know what you are talkin' about, Inspectah Skeat. If you do not wemove these beastly things fwom my wists at once, you uttah idiot, I shall complain to the Head!"

The inspector gritted his teeth. He dragged the handcuffs from D'Arcy's wrists. Talbot, a few yards away in the darkness, smiled.

Every second that the inspector wasted upon Arthur Augustus was a fresh chance of safety for the Professor.

Already the fugitive had circled round the School House,

making for the fir plantation behind the walls of St. Jim's.

The inspector grasped D'Arcy by the shoulder and dragged him to his feet.

"What are you doing here!" he shouted.

"Pway welease my shouldah, sir," said Arthur Augustus, with dignity. "I wefuse to be handled."

"Have you seen him?"

"I decline to speak to you unless you welease my shouldah."

The inspector muttered something between his teeth, and released the swell of St. Jim's.

"I am after a criminal, Master D'Arcy," he said, as patiently as he could. "Did he pass this way?"

"Bai Jove! Why didn't you say that at first!" said Arthur Augustus, more amicably. "You should have gone aftah him instead of collahin' me."

"Have you seen him?" shrieked the inspector.

"You had no wight to put those howwid things on me!"

"Boy, have you seen anybody pass this way?"

"Yaas; somebody came tumblin' ovah the wall just befoah you made that uttably widiculous mistake."

"Where did he go?"

"I weally do not know. I cannot see in the dark. I am sowwy, but it is quite impos. Howevah—"

The inspector rushed away.

He had still a faint hope of finding his man, but this hope was very faint, and it vanished soon. The Professor was far away.

Marie, in her room, trembling, with clasped hands, waited in fear for the bad news she dreaded would come.

But it did not come. The minutes passed—an hour—and her heart beat more freely. Her father had not been taken, or Talbot would have kept his word. Her father was safe. Once more John Rivers had escaped the perils that beset his path; and his daughter wept tears of thankfulness and relief.

Corporal Brown was gone.

He had vanished into the countless ranks of khaki, and the inspector was left without a cine. Inspector Skeat kept his own counsel. He had not wholly believed Crooke's story—the spite and malice of the cad of the Shell were only too evident to him—but he had not been willing to lose a chance of securing his old prisoner. He was left in doubt, but watchful and alert. If Crooke's story was true, if Miss Marie's father was John Rivers, the crackman, masquerading as a soldier in Kitchener's Army, his time would yet come. The inspector kept grimly silent as to what he knew and what he suspected, and bided his time.

Marie's father was safe, for the time; but it was not till she learned that the corporal was back in Flanders with his unit that the girl breathed freely. There he shared the terrible perils of Britain's heroes; but it was peril with honour, and not the peril of black shame that awaited the Professor in his native land. There he was working out his redemption; and the sun might yet shine upon his shadowed life—by courage and conduct he might even win pardon and oblivion for the past.

It was Arthur Augustus who, all unknowingly, had saved Marie's father, and the girl knew it, and her kindest smiles were for the swell of St. Jim's. And Arthur Augustus was surprised and pleased by the kind interest that Miss Marie unflinchingly took in his celebrated cabbage-patch. But he did not know that it was due to him that Marie's father was still a soldier of the King.

THE END.

NEXT WEDNESDAY:—

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The First Prize,

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who submitted a list of 8,634 names and addresses.

Not quite 5,000 readers entered the competition, and, therefore, everyone who took part will receive a prize. We have not space to give the names and addresses of all prizewinners, but below will be found those of the fifty competitors who submitted lists next in order of merit:

- R. Fallows, Dungiven House, Londonderry.
 F. Bennett, 16, Davey Road, Handsworth.
 C. Morgan, 156, Monks Road, Lincoln.
 J. H. Williams, 30, Eastbourne Grove, S. Shields.
 G. Lennon, 25, Station Street, Penmaur, Newbridge, Mon.
 J. E. Morgan, 453, Warrington Road, Goose Green, near Wigan, Lancs.
 W. Paton, 2, Melville Crescent, Motherwell, Scotland.
 P. Ellman, 400, Cheetham Hill Road, Manchester.
 G. Proctor, 107, South Frederick Street, S. Shields.
 J. Kay, 113, James's Street, Laurieston-by-Falkirk, Scotland.
 T. Soakell, 6, South View, Billingham, near Stockton-on-Tees.
 D. Jackson, 81, Herbert St., Hightown, Manchester.
 W. Harland, 48, North Street, Scarborough.
 S. R. Burley, 17, Bradiston Road, Maida Hill, W.
 L. W. Taylor, 97, Fernhead Road, Paddington, W.
 C. Lester, 40, Gratton Terrace, Cricklewood, N.W.
 W. C. Austin, 64, Brayards Road, Peckham, S.E.
 B. Wall, 148, Walmersley Road, Bury, Lancs.
 E. Ford, 18, Crispin Street, Newcastle-on-Tyne.
 I. Jaffe, 331, Govan Street, Glasgow.
 R. Hogarth, 33, Hardwicke Street, Monkwearmouth, Sunderland.
 E. D. Stedmond, 23, Wallace St., Stirling, Scotland.
 H. C. Williams, 1, Colum Place, Cardiff.
 R. Wilkins, 62, Hayward Road, Barton Hill, Bristol.
 R. Hayes, 43, Harper Street, Brook's Bar, Old Trafford, Manchester.
 M. Jones, 10, Poplar Street, Everton, Liverpool.
 J. Bendle, 6, Princes Road, Aylesbury, Bucks.
 T. G. Davies, 3, Hill Terrace, Penllergare, near Gorseinon.
 J. Greenhalgh, 39, Cornwall Street, West Hartlepool.
 H. Smith, 50, Manchester Street, Grimsby.
 S. Trasler, 78, Seagrave Road, Sileby, near Loughborough, Leicester.
 C. H. Barfoot, 31, Blackwell Road, Huthwaite, Notts.
 W. Evans, 51, School Lane, Didsbury, Manchester.
 G. F. Pardy, 1, Station Rd., Masboro', Rotherham.
 A. Grundy, 17, High Street, Bolsover, near Chesterfield, Derbyshire.
 H. Hebblethwaite, 21, Albert Street, Newark, Notts.
 E. L. Higgins, 79, Colum Road, Cardiff.
 G. Day, 31, Hawarden Grove, Herne Hill, S.E.
 G. Lynch, 95, Henry Street, Limerick.
 R. Buffrey, 2, Windsor Road, Six Bells, Abertillery, Mon.
 A. E. Hancock, Infant Orphanage Asylum, Wanstead, Essex.
 J. J. McGurgan, 20, Campbell St., Bootle, Liverpool.
 B. Evans, 48, Llwydarth Rd., Maesteg, near Bridgend, Glam.
 J. McDiarmid, 9, Primrose Terrace, Middlesborough.
 L. S. Chard, Thorneycroft, Pymore Road, Bridport, Dorset.
 A. A. Mercer, 60, Evering Road, Stoke Newington, N.
 P. Ahern, Maryville Cottage, Courtown, Govey, co. Wexford.
 W. C. Doyle, 8, Pellett Street, Cardiff.
 J. Jackson, 9, James Street, Harris Villa, Frizington, Cumb.
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TOM MERRY'S STIRRING APPEAL TO "GEM" READERS!

"St. James's School,

"Rylcombe,

"Sussex.

"My dear Chums,—You will have seen by this time that it has now been definitely decided to publish the amateur magazine edited by myself every Wednesday at the cost of a halfpenny.

"The 'Weekly' will contain twenty-four pages, and you will readily understand that the editorial staff is confronted with a gigantic task. Those twenty-four pages have got to be filled every week, or there will be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth; and we should certainly be the laughing-stock of the school if we failed to carry out what we have cheerfully undertaken.

"Your Editor wrote to me this morning, and in his letter he tells me that a good many Gemites are decidedly clever. Budding authors and aspiring poets pour in their effusions daily, and as there is so much talent as this at large, it would be a sin and a shame to waste it on the desert air.

"I therefore pen this appeal to all readers of the GEM LIBRARY. Will you send in any ideas, suggestions, or contributions likely to be of value to the 'Weekly,' to

"The Editor,

"Tom Merry's Weekly,"

"The Fleetway House,

"Farringdon Street,

"London, E.C.

"The editorial staff of THE GEM will overhaul them, and send those features which are considered suitable to me, so that I may insert them. This will save our fellows a great deal of time, for we are booked up with so many footer matches for the forthcoming season, and have to dabble in amateur dramatics, and goodness knows what, that the contributions of GEM readers will be a boon and a blessing to our editorial staff. have arranged with the Amalgamated Press that suitable payment will be made for everything which is published.

"Do not infer from this letter that we St. Jim's fellows intend to slack while somebody else does the donkey-work. Nothing of the kind. Most of us are already engaged on stories and articles, and—whisper it gently!—Number One is going to surpass anything which has yet appeared. Without wishing to brag, I think I may say that we have at St. Jim's fellows who can write verse and execute pen-and-ink sketches as cleverly as they can bag goals or get in doughty blows with the gloves; and, realising that we are writing for a large and brainy public, we mean to put our very best into the work.

"If the 'Weekly' is talked about in every town and village, and if every Gemite puts his or her shoulder to the wheel, then I feel confident that the estimate of a circulation of 100,000 will be woefully underestimated. So come along, you fellows! If you can't write, you can help in other directions, and see that the paper of which I am proud to be Editor gains the unanimous support of the large-hearted public of British boys. Long live the 'Weekly'!

"Believe me,

"Your sincere and affectionate chum.

"TOM MERRY."

The first Chapters 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 previous instalments told how:—

NORRIS BRENT, a young Englishman, agrees to accompany his unworthy cousin, GUY MELVILLE, on an exploration tour in China for a rare plant only to be found in that part of the world. Misfortune dogs their footsteps, and a crisis is reached when the Chinese pack-carriers, who are with them, mutiny. Stranded in a wild, inhospitable land, there is nothing for it but to return to civilisation, and the cousins, together with YEN HOW, Norris Brent's faithful servant, set out on the weary journey.

The little band is overcome by thirst, and Melville, refusing to share his water with the others, pushes onward through the desert, leaving his companions to their fate. Fortunately, however, Yen How lights upon an oasis, and the danger is averted.

Norris Brent returns to England with Yen How, and Guy Melville pretends to be pleased at seeing his cousin again. He informs him that, owing to the death of an uncle, he is owner of the estate, Eagle's Cliff, and offers Brent a position thereon, which he accepts.

One day Yen How surprises his master by informing him that MING YUNG, a Chinese mandarin, and his ward, SILVER PEARL, whose acquaintance Brent had previously made in China, are staying at Eagle's Nest.

Brent discovers that Ming Yung has come to Eagle's Nest in order to experiment with an invention with which he hopes to gain world-wide power.

Guy Melville, for some sinister reason, still desires his cousin's death, and secures the assistance of a gipsy, KARL MARROK, to assist him in his foul purpose.

Brent discovers a ruby of great value in a pit on the estate. Guy Melville steals the ruby from his cousin; but is then drugged by Ming Yung, who takes possession of the valuable stone.

Karl Marrok, thinking that Brent has regained possession of the ruby, goes to his room in search of it; but, much to Brent's surprise, as he was not previously aware of his loss, the gipsy fails to discover it.

(Now go on with the story.)

Marrok Shows His Hand—Vain Cunning—Ming Yung is Warned.

Angered and disappointed by the fruitless result of his nocturnal visit to Eagle's Nest in search of the red ruby, Karl Marrok returned to the Smugglers' Tavern in a gloomily thoughtful mood.

He was sure that Guy Melville had been before him to the oak chest wherein Norris Brent had hidden the precious stone, which he was now more avariciously eager to make himself the possessor of than before.

Knowing himself to be more than a match for Melville in boldness and cunning, he set his wits to work devising a plan for the accomplishment of his cherished design.

The way to do this, however, came more by chance than as the outcome of a settled purpose. Three or four days later Guy Melville called to see him. He was smoking in the old bar-parlour of the Smugglers' Tavern at the time, and

as soon as ever he looked up and saw the other in the doorway, he knew, in a flash of understanding, what his plan of action must be.

"I've been expecting to see you before," he remarked, with an insolent smile. "It's a wonder to me how you've been able to keep away so long, believing, as you do, that I stole the red ruby you set so much store by."

The words took Melville by surprise. He was visibly startled and embarrassed by such uncompromising directness of speech.

"The red ruby!" he exclaimed, feigning astonished perplexity. "What the dickens do you mean?"

"You know well enough what I mean," Marrok replied, a mocking light in his dark eyes. "But I'll tell you all the same. Not many nights ago you came rushing in here like a madman, and declared to Dan Morgan that I'd stolen a wonderful ruby from you, and had made off with it. Isn't that so?"

Melville silently cursed himself with savage fervour for having taken Morgan into his confidence.

"Well, and what if it is?" he countered angrily. "There was every reason for me to be suspicious of you. Only an hour or two before the ruby was stolen you saw me with it in the library at Eagle's Nest. You stood outside on the terrace, and watched me through the window."

Marrok shook his head with a gesture of scornfully amused denial.

"I didn't see the ruby," he remarked. "If I had, I might have come back for it, or taken it there and then, and in that case you'd never have seen me again. I should have cleared out of the country. There'd have been no reason for me to stay in such a forsaken hole as this. What d'you think?"

"I suppose not," Melville admitted. "Still, it puzzles me to know who could have robbed me, unless it was you."

He went on to tell the other of the circumstances attending the theft, for he reasoned to himself that, seeing the gipsy knew so much he might as well know all.

"It seems to me," said Marrok, when Melville had spoken, "that you needn't look very far to find the man who has your ruby. That Chinaman staying with you has it, I'll guarantee, for no one else could have played such a clever trick on you to get it."

"By George!" Melville exclaimed, recognising for the first time the possibility of Ming Yung having dispossessed him of the ruby. "I hadn't thought of him. Yet he's the very sort to do it."

"No doubt of it," said Marrok, "and, judging from what you've told me about the fellow, now he has it he'll stick to it."

Melville's eyes glittered with vindictive fury. "He'll discover that it's a dangerous thing to play tricks with me," he declared. "I'm not afraid of him, clever as he may be, and he shall pay me back with interest."

"Steady on!" said Marrok, with a sneering little laugh. "You don't know for certain that Ming Yung is the person you're looking for. And how are you going to find out that he is? It'll be a far more difficult thing than you imagine to do so. The old chap is as sly and crafty as a fox, and

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would deny all knowledge of the ruby if you taxed him with having it. And you can regard it as a sure thing that he's hidden the gem so closely that neither you nor anyone else would ever discover it, though you searched for a month."

There was more truth in these words than Guy Melville cared to admit. With frowning brows he pondered over the matter for some moments, and then an illuminating thought darted across his mind, and the gloomy look that was there lifted from his face.

"Oh, well!" he said carelessly. "No doubt I'll think of something before long. Ming Yung can be trapped as well as anyone else."

His sudden change of expression had made the other suspicious.

"Look here," said Marrok, leaning forward and looking straight into the other's eyes, "before going any further it may be as well for you to understand that Dan Morgan and I have an equal interest with you in that ruby!"

Melville looked astounded.

"How d'you make that out?" he inquired sharply. "The ruby is for the one who found it."

"You didn't do that," Marrok replied, smiling maliciously. "It was your cousin, Norris Brent, who discovered it in the subterranean passage leading out from under the Smugglers' Tavern here. You see," he added, vastly enjoying Melville's angry discomfiture, "I know a good deal, and so does Morgan, and it'll pay you to act straight with us. An equal share with you in the money that the ruby is sold for is what we ask for and mean to have!"

Had he given vent to his real feelings, Guy Melville would have burst out into a torrent of furious abuse, but he had sense enough to realise that to do so would only put him still farther into the power of his unscrupulous associate. With a scarcely perceptible effort he controlled himself, and forced a mirthless smile to his lips.

"That'll be all serene," he said. "You and Morgan shall have no cause to complain of how I treat you. Still, it surprises me to hear that you know so much about the matter. Are you sure that you're not mistaken in believing that my cousin found the ruby where you say he did?"

"Quite sure!" Marrok rejoined. "Directly you mentioned the ruby to him, Morgan guessed where it had come from. He had some old papers once containing an account of its history, and relating how two smugglers, into whose possession it had come, had engaged in a fierce and bitter quarrel over it one night in this very house. They disappeared, taking the ruby with them, and were never seen nor heard of again. The mystery of their fate was never cleared up, but the man from whom Morgan had the papers always thought that they went into the cave, and there perished. Now he's certain of it. Your cousin, by a stroke of luck, must have stumbled on the spot where one of them dropped the ruby and found it."

Melville, drinking from the glass on the table before him, pushed back his chair, and rose to his feet.

"Morgan may be right in thinking as he does," he said, impressed by what he had heard, "for it's a sure thing that the ruby could never have come into Norris Brent's possession in an ordinary way. However that may be, the thing for us to do now is to discover its present whereabouts and secure it. Then we can settle on the division of the spoil."

The gipsy followed his associate out of the room.

"Remember that Dan Morgan and I share equally with you," he said, as they were parting at the tavern door. "We're partners in this business, and it won't pay either one of us to forget it."

Melville gave a reassuring laugh in response to this thinly-veiled threat, but as soon as his back was turned on the other, a dark and evil look clouded his face.

"The insolent hound!" he muttered. "He fancies that he has me under his thumb. Well, let him think so. When I've no further use for him, I'll know how to repay him for his cursed cheek and impertinence. An equal share with me in the ruby, indeed! The fellow must be a drivelling fool to imagine that, once it's back in my hands, he will have any chance of claiming the least right to it!"

That same day Melville, acting on the inspiration that had come to him while he was with Karl Marrok, sought out Silver Pearl. He found her on the terrace, engaged in painting a lovely piece of Chinese embroidery. When he asked her to spare him a few minutes she put aside her work.

"I'm gravely concerned about my cousin," he said, "and it's about him that I wish to speak to you."

Silver Pearl met his gaze with an interrogating look in her eyes.

"Your cousin!" she said coldly. "His business is no concern of mine. You should go to him, and not come to me."

Melville's lips parted in an amiably deprecating smile.

"In this matter," he replied, "I am sure that you can

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OUR COMPANION "THE BOYS' FRIEND," "THE MAGNET,"

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help me, for Norris, if I'm not greatly mistaken, is your friend and you have considerable influence over him."

He paused for the girl to say something, but she did not speak.

"The fact is," he continued, carefully choosing his words, "I'm very much distressed by something that has happened in this house during the last few days. An extremely valuable jewel, a family heirloom that has been here for generations past, has disappeared, and I am reluctantly led to believe that my cousin has had something to do with its disappearance."

A crimson flush mounted to Silver Pearl's very brow, and then slowly receded, leaving her beautiful face strangely pale and drawn. For some reason or other she was greatly moved, and a look of nervous fear and distress gathered in her dark eyes.

"Do you mean to suggest that he has taken it?" she asked, in a low and trembling tone of voice.

"That is my belief," Melville answered, "for, to the best of my knowledge, he is the only other person here besides myself who is aware of the jewel's existence."

"Then if you suspect him, why don't you tell him so? Surely that would be the only right and fair thing to do."

"Perhaps I may be obliged to do so," said Melville, keenly conscious of Silver Pearl's agitation and not a little elated by it, "but I'm naturally desirous of sparing him such bitter humiliation as to openly tax him with his guilt if I can possibly avoid it. What I should like to happen would be for the jewel—a red ruby of unusual size and beauty—to be restored to me before anything unpleasant is done, and I imagine that if you spoke to Norris about it he would act in such a way as to obviate any inquiry that could only be attended by the most distressing results."

Silver Pearl shook her head.

"I cannot speak to him," she said quickly and proudly.

"Never would I insult him in such a manner. For all I know to the contrary you may not be telling me the truth. And I do not believe that your cousin has the ruby. It would be utterly unlike him to take it unless it was really his. You must know that yourself."

"Norris has found a fair champion in you," sneeringly answered Melville, "but it will avail him nothing should the missing ruby not be soon restored to me. I look to you to use your influence with him to save him from consequences that would make a wreck of his whole future."

Raising his hat, Melville turned and walked away. He was perfectly satisfied in his own mind that Silver Pearl knew that her guardian had the red ruby, and that, fearing for Norris Brent, she would act speedily and find a way of securing and returning the jewel to him.

In thinking thus Melville was even more right than he imagined himself to be. What he had told Silver Pearl affected the girl to a surprising degree. She had seen Ming Yung inspecting the ruby, and it had puzzled and astonished her to find her guardian in possession of such a magnificent gem, although it was not long before she ceased to think about it.

Now she realised that Ming Yung had no true claim on it, and that unless it was restored to Guy Melville disgrace and ruin would in all probability be Norris Brent's lot. Hating his young cousin as he did, Melville would show the other no mercy.

Not for a moment did Silver Pearl believe that Brent was guilty, but she feared what Melville might do now that an opportunity of venting his spite and rage on the lad had presented itself. Was she to make no effort to save from injury him for whose sake she had already suffered over and over again? She knew that she must make an effort, whatever the cost to herself might be.

Leaving the terrace, she went into the house and made her way to Ming Yung's study. Her guardian was not in the room. Hesitating but for a moment or two, Silver Pearl crossed from the doorway to an oak desk, and opened the flap. There were a few papers in the well of the desk, and these she pushed aside with feverishly eager fingers, which searched swiftly for a secret spring that she knew opened a hidden compartment wherein she had herself seen Ming Yung place the red ruby.

Suddenly a hand fell on her shoulder. Shuddering in every limb, she turned her head, to look into her guardian's face. Unseen by her, the other had silently entered the study some moments before.

"What are you doing here?" inquired Ming Yung. "I'm looking for the red ruby." Silver Pearl answered, speaking with a terrible effort. "It belongs to Mr. Melville. He has told me about it, but he believes that it was stolen by his cousin, who will be hardly dealt by unless it is restored to its rightful owner."

A fierce look darted from Ming Yung's eyes.

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"The violet ray!" Brent cried hoarsely. "What can it mean?" Swift as a flash of lightning the violet ray streamed out over the cliffs and across the sea. Then it swooped down on the yacht, and a dreadful, marvellous thing happened. The splendid ship was crumpled up and turned into a cloud of dust. (See page 22.)

"Did you tell Melville that I had the ruby?"

"No," Silver Pearl answered, a flush of pride rising to her cheeks, "I did not; but I came here for it, meaning to give it back to him and so save his cousin from a cruel accusation. He promised that if the ruby was returned to him he would ask no questions further regarding it."

A frosty smile showed on Ming Yung's thin lips. "This man Melville is cunning," he remarked, "and seeks to impose his will upon you. But in striving to trick me he has set himself a hopeless task. You are wrong and foolish," he added sternly; "but as you have acted in ignorance of the real truth I shall not punish you for what I should have otherwise regarded as an unpardonable offence."

He pointed to the door with a gesture of dismissal, but Silver Pearl lingered, and a frown of haughty surprise showed in his face.

"Go!" he commanded. "Why do you stay?"

"I'm concerned for Norris Brent," said Silver Pearl, beating down her fear of the other. "He is innocent, but his cousin deems him to be guilty of taking the ruby, and has declared that he will ruin him."

"A vain and childish threat," replied Ming Yung, "and one that he could only impose upon a woman. Go, and do not fear that any harm will fall upon Norris Brent in this matter, for I will protect him."

A moment later he was alone. He stood lost in thought for some time. The ordinary rules of right and wrong that govern the actions of most men had no meaning for Ming Yung, who was a law unto himself. He had taken the red ruby because he desired it, and he meant to keep it, whatever trouble and danger he might be put to in doing so.

"To be forewarned," he murmured, "is to be forearmed. Guy Melville must look to himself! Let him look to himself!"

she makes. Never saw a smarter ship of her class, and I've been at Cowes for the regattas."

"Yes," agreed Yen How, "she velly pretty. My like her to go back to China on some day. To lie on deck and sleep all day in the sunshine would be fine."

"I reckon it would be," laughed Brent; "but I'm afraid your little dream isn't likely to come true, for the Gloria is one of the most expensive yachts to run afloat, and a voyage to China would eat up a large fortune."

The comrades, who were lying on the edge of the cliff after coming up from the beach, where they had been bathing in the sea, admiringly watched the Gloria, a large and magnificent steam-yacht that had come to her anchorage off Rocksby about an hour before.

She was a splendid vessel, of a kind very seldom seen along that part of the coast, and almost everyone in the little fishing town was down on the wharf, gazing at her with the deepest interest.

A boat had taken Guy Melville to the yacht. He knew the millionaire owner of the Gloria, a young man of about his own age named Kenneth Grame, who had on board with him a large party of friends.

When he was informed that the yacht would be staying off Rocksby for a few days Melville invited Grame and the other members of the party to Eagle's Nest for the following day, an invitation that was readily accepted. The historical associations of the noble old mansion were known to everyone, and all looked forward to spending an enjoyable time.

The prospect of entertaining so many persons of wealth and social distinction excessively pleased Melville, who was something of a parvenu, and never happier than when he was the object of attention and flattery.

On landing from the yacht he overtook his cousin and Yen How at the top of the cliff, and, his enmity forgotten for the time being, he told Brent of the invitation he had given to the Gloria's party.

"It ought to be a very merry gathering," he remarked. "At any rate, we'll do our best to make it so. Visitors to THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 399.

The Gloria—The Interrupted Banquet—A Miracle of Science.

"It's the Gloria," said Norris Brent—"and a fine picture

NEXT WEDNESDAY:

"WHEN DUTY CALLS!"

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

Eagle's Nest are so few and far between that it's a privilege to have them."

"Shall you ask Ming Yung to be there?"

"I hadn't thought of doing so," Melville said, in answer to Brent's question; "but now you mention it, I think I will. Ming Yung is a queer card, and he'll amuse the rest. Perhaps we can induce him to do a few conjuring tricks. I should say that he's up to lots of them. But I'm doubtful whether he'll come. He's as proud as Lucifer."

To Melville's surprise, Ming Yung accepted the invitation without demur. He also promised that Silver Pearl should accompany him, and Melville flattered himself that the mysterious Chinaman, of whom he stood in such fear and dread, was relenting in his attitude of cold hostility towards him.

"He may have changed his mind over my proposal regarding Silver Pearl," he thought. "The omen is certainly an encouraging one. I must begin to play up to him again."

The next day the guests arrived in the afternoon. The Gloria's band played on the lawn while the visitors roamed in the lovely grounds and went over the house, whose dark, winding corridors, ancient rooms, and their contents provoked the liveliest interest and curiosity.

Not until the evening did Ming Yung and his beautiful ward put in an appearance. They created an immediate sensation. Wearing his long, purple gown, bearing the design in jewelled gold of the Imperial Dragon, the remarkable Chinaman was a strangely imposing figure.

As she moved gracefully along by the side of her guardian Silver Pearl was followed by a host of admiring glances. She was splendidly dressed in a Chinese costume that must have cost a fortune, and her rare charm and beauty were enthusiastically commented upon by everyone.

"What a peerless creature!" said Gramme to his host, as Silver Pearl passed on after being introduced to him. "But how is it that you never mentioned her to me?"

Melville, who was flushed and excited, gave vent to a ringing laugh.

"I wanted to surprise you," he said. "Knew you'd think her the most beautiful charmer you'd ever seen. Different to her guardian—eh? He's a regular walking mystery—a man to be watched, I can tell you. Sometimes I don't feel it safe to be in the same house with him."

Gramme stared at the speaker in amused surprise.

"Then why do you have him here?" he inquired. "Surely it would be an easy thing to let him understand that his absence would be more desirable than his company."

"This old pile takes some keeping up," Melville explained; "and as Ming Yung pays me a big sum for the use of the left wing I'm content to have him at the price."

"What's his object in being down here?"

"Oh, he's a scientist, or something of the sort," said Melville; "and he's experimenting all day long, and most of the night, too. You see, it's a lonely, out-of-the-way place, and he's not liable to unwelcome interruption."

Gramme looked thoughtful.

"To be quite candid," he said, "your Chinese friend is not the sort of man I should like to have very much to do with. As I was looking at him just now I had the queerest feeling I've ever known. It was as if I knew positively that he was going to do me some irreparable injury, which I was absolutely incapable of averting."

"I've had the same sensation," Melville rejoined, shrugging his shoulders; "and can only account for it by presuming that he has extraordinary strong will-power, with which he can influence people by merely looking at them."

"He's a hypnotist, then?"

"Very likely, or a wizard—which is about the same thing."

Laughing at the remark, they moved on. Behind an ornamental palm close by, Ming Yung, who had accidentally overheard their conversation, smiled grimly. Had they been able to read his thoughts they would have trembled and turned pale.

Time wore on. Lights gleamed in the oak-panelled rooms of the ancient mansion, and in the great hall a gay company assembled for dinner.

The pictured faces of bygone owners of Eagle's Nest looked down on the festive throng, whose surroundings conjured up memories of a past full of noble names and stirring deeds.

Among those present was Norris Brent. He was enjoying his novel experiences, but not so much as he had expected, and the reason for this was a very simple one.

Try how he would, he had not been able to exchange more than a passing word with Silver Pearl, over whom Ming Yung kept a close and vigilant watch. It seemed that the Chinaman went deliberately out of his way to keep the two apart.

Now, as he covertly watched her, as she sat at the head of the great banqueting-table between Guy Melville and her

guardian, he noticed that a deeply-troubled look stole from time to time over her face.

"Wonder what has happened to upset her?" he thought. "Perhaps she's in disgrace with Ming Yung. He looks unusually stern to-night. Come to think of it, I've never seen him with such an expression before. It makes one feel uneasy."

The same feeling of uneasiness that Brent was vaguely conscious of as he glanced at the mask-like features of the yellow wizard was also shared by many more of those seated round the table.

A mysterious emanation, as of electricity, seemed to dart from the eyes of the Chinaman. This weird impression was heightened by his strange dress and his general appearance. He made one think of a visitant from some unknown world.

Soft music came from the orchestra stationed in the gallery looking down into the hall. Gay talk and happy laughter sounded on every hand. Toasts were given and acclaimed.

Rising to his feet, brimming glass in hand, Guy Melville looked round at the men and women seated at his hospitable board.

"I rise to propose a health that I am sure you will all join with me in drinking!" he cried. "It is to our Queen of Hearts—she who is sitting at my side!"

There was a general burst of acclamation, and Melville raised his glass to his lips, but before he could so much as moisten them his arm was caught and held. Looking round in angry amazement, he found that it was Ming Yung whose hand was holding him.

"Sit down!" said Ming Yung harshly. "I did not bring my ward here to be pledged by strangers! It may be the custom to do so in your country, but it is not in mine, and I resent your behaviour!"

A deep hush fell upon the startled company. Rage and humiliation held sway over Guy Melville. He was incensed beyond measure. All thought of caution or restraint was swept away from his mind.

"You are ill-mannered, sir!" he exclaimed violently. "You insult me before my guests! I regret, now, that I ever asked you to meet those of better breeding than yourself. I had omitted to remember that you, a Chinaman, were not accustomed to the usages of civilised society."

The dark, unfathomable eyes of Ming Yung burned with a cold and menacing light as they met those of his infuriated host. Then he rose to his feet with a superbly disdainful gesture.

"Come!" he said to Silver Pearl, the strangely metallic tones of his voice carrying to every part of the hall. "We will leave these civilised persons to the enjoyment of their own company."

His hand gripping her arm in a vicelike clutch, he led Silver Pearl from the hall. The silence of stupefied amazement that had fallen upon Guy Melville's guests now gave way to loud and excited conversation concerning the remarkable incident that had just taken place.

Availing himself of the opportunity thus given him, Norris Brent slipped away unnoticed from the table. The affair that Ming Yung had put upon Melville, or that which his cousin had placed on Ming Yung, did not worry him.

He was profoundly sorry for Silver Pearl, whose looks as she was led away by her guardian showed how keenly she felt the humiliating nature of her position.

"Now I know why I felt so uneasy," he said. "Ming Yung, I believe, came to dinner meaning to upset the harmony of it. Yet Guy was an ass to behave as he did, whatever the provocation he received, and he'd no right to propose Silver Pearl's health in such a way. It was bound to cause trouble."

He could see no sign of Silver Pearl and her guardian, search in what direction he might. No doubt, he told himself, they had gone straight to that part of Eagle's Nest which was private to their use.

It was folly to contemplate following them there, though he would have liked to see Silver Pearl, if only to offer her his sympathy.

Having no desire to return to the banqueting-hall, Brent sauntered out into the open. After listening to the band, that had started to play again, he went on along the drive to the top of the cliffs, where he found Yen How lying on the grass and smoking a cheap cigar.

"This velly nice here," said his Chinese comrade. "But my no expect to see you. My thought you more happy listening to the music inside."

"Not a bit of it!" Brent responded, as he flung himself down by the other's side. "It's a shame to be indoors on such a gorgeous night as this is."

He looked out across the darkly shimmering surface of the sea to where the Gloria, a blaze of light shining on her deck and from her open ports, swung at anchor with the tide.

Somehow this vessel, quite apart from the fact that she was such a magnificent specimen of her class, had a strange fascination for him. He could not account for it. More and more it grew upon him.

"You see that light up there?" suddenly queried Yen How. "My thought Ming Yung go to banquet same as you?"

Glancing round, Brent perceived a bright light shining high above the tower that surmounted the left wing of Eagle's Nest, where Ming Yung pursued his scientific quests in lonely solitude. It shone from the curved bracket of a lofty pole that the Chinaman had had erected on the tower soon after his arrival at the old mansion.

A steel ladder led to the top of the pole, where was a small platform, and Brent had often wondered what conceivable purpose Ming Yung could put the edifice to.

"Ming Yung was at the dinner," he said, "but left early. I suppose he wanted to carry out some kind of experiment or other. It must be him up there."

They watched the light for some time. It shone clear and steady, and then suddenly went out. Again it appeared, but this time it was not white, but of a colour the significance of which Norris Brent realised with a quickening beat of the heart and a catch of his breath.

"The violet ray!" he cried hoarsely. "What can it mean?"

Ming Yung Vanishes.

Swift as a flash of lightning, the violet ray streamed out over the cliffs and across the sea.

It hovered for a moment over the Gloria like a flaming sword. Then it swooped down on the yacht, and a dreadful, marvellous thing happened.

The splendid ship, the pride of every mariner, was crumpled up and turned into a cloud of dust that showered down into the sea.

Both Brent and Yen How witnessed the amazing spectacle with blanched cheeks and staring eyes that were ever to retain the visual impression they had received in a bare moment of time.

The awe-inspiring picture flashed across their vision, and was dissolved in darkness. The violet ray had disappeared. No light now shone from the ancient tower of Eagle's Nest.

Yen How, shaking like a leaf, clutched hold of his companion, but Brent shook him off. Following the horrified amazement that had descended upon him, there had come to the lad a consuming fire of passionate anger and indignation.

"The fiend!" he exclaimed, his face white and drawn, his eyes blazing. "He has destroyed the Gloria with his infernal magic! There were people on board. They have all perished with the ship!"

Turning away, he ran swiftly in the direction of Eagle's Nest. Vengeance, at any rate, should fall on Ming Yung. In the swift, boiling tide of his anger, Brent forgot the very existence of Silver Pearl. He only thought of Ming Yung and the terrible deed of destruction of which he had been a horrified witness.

Reaching the mansion, he dashed like a madman into the banquet-hall. The band was discoursing the strains of an enchanting waltz tune. The guests were merry and bright. Into the midst of this scene of gaiety Brent came as a messenger of woe.

He shouted and waved his arms to the conductor of the orchestra, who at once signed to the musicians to cease playing.

Then Guy Melville hurried up to his cousin, anger and annoyed surprise in his face.

"What the dickens is the meaning of this mad interruption?" he demanded roughly. "Have you taken leave of your senses? You look as though you'd seen a thousand ghosts! What is it?"

Brent drew the back of his hand across his fevered brow.

"The Gloria's sunk—destroyed—smashed into dust!" he answered. "I tell you she is!" he added passionately, as a loud burst of incredulous laughter came from those who had heard him. "Ming Yung turned the violet ray on her from the tower. I was on the cliffs with Yen How. We both saw what took place."

Kenneth Grame pushed a way forward, and laid his hand on Brent's shoulder. There was a look of mingled pity and amusement in his face.

"I say, you know," he remarked, "it's a tall yarn you're pitching us. The Gloria turned into dust! Why, my dear chap, how in the name of all that's sensible do you expect us to believe such a story?"

"It's true!" Brent declared. "Come outside and see for yourself. But make haste, or the inhuman fiend who did it will escape!"

Shrugging his shoulders, and smiling round at his friends as

though to indicate that while not believing a word that Brent had uttered, he would humour the other, Grame followed the lad out of the hall into the drive, a whispering, laughing little crowd at his heels.

"Now," said Brent, "can you see the Gloria?"

A sharp cry came from Kenneth Grame's lips. Eagerly he thrust his head forward and stared out to sea.

"The yacht's not there!" he exclaimed. "Good heavens! Can there be anything in this wild tale we've heard, after all?"

Before anyone else could speak, the tramp of hurrying feet was heard along the drive. An excited crowd of men and boys appeared in sight. Upon seeing Grame and his companions, they all began speaking at once.

What they declared went to confirm the truth of Norris Brent's statements. A violet ray had been seen shooting down from the tower of Eagle's Nest across the sea. It had alighted on the Gloria, and the yacht had vanished like smoke before the wind.

"Then it is true!" gasped Grame, reeling like a drunken man. "It is true!"

Someone stepped quickly up to Melville. "Where is Ming Yung?" he cried. "Lead the way to him! He must be taken!"

Without speaking, Melville hurried from the hall, closely followed by an excited crowd of men who could not as yet even begin to understand the full meaning of the destruction of Kenneth Grame's yacht.

Ascending the broad staircase, they hastened along the picture gallery to Ming Yung's apartments. But Norris Brent was before them.

As Melville and Grame reached the open doorway of the Magician's Room, the lad ran out and met them.

"He's taken flight!" he said. "I've been all over the place, up the tower, and everywhere where he could be, and I can't find him!"

"What about Silver Pearl?" asked Melville sharply. "She must be somewhere here."

Brent shook his head. "No, she's not!" he replied. "It's no use searching for either of them," he added, as Melville pushed roughly past him. "They've vanished!"

But Guy Melville would not listen to his cousin. Uppermost in his thoughts was the red ruby. Ming Yung might not have had time to secure the gem in the hurry of his flight.

In every likely place he hunted for the treasure that he had come to cherish with a fiercer, stronger affection than he had ever felt for anyone, or anything in the whole course of his life.

Nowhere could he discover it. He would have continued his quest indefinitely had not Kenneth Grame come to look for him.

"We want you," said Grame. "They've got on Ming Yung's track. Someone has seen him making for the woods on the cliff."

Disguising his reluctance to abandon the search for the ruby, Melville went away with the other, and they came out into the drive to hear that there was a hot pursuit of the missing Chinaman proceeding.

This was due to Yen How, who had spread the report that he had seen Ming Yung and Silver Pearl hastening away from Eagle's Nest in a certain direction.

He and Norris Brent immediately set off on the chase, followed by several men, who, knowing nothing of Ming Yung, imagined that it would be an easy matter to hunt the Chinaman down. When Yen How brought them to the entrance of a cave, half-way down the face of the cliff, however, most of them drew back and decided to look elsewhere for the fugitives.

"You'd never get a chink to venture in that hole," declared one of them. "I know the breed. They're as timid as rabbits. It's waste of time looking in there for them. The woods are where they have taken shelter. And remember that Ming Yung has a girl with him. Even if he wanted to take to the cave he'd think of her and go somewhere else."

Brent looked inquiringly at his comrade. "There's something in that," he said. "What makes you so sure that Ming Yung is in the cave?"

Yen How's wrinkled, crab-apple face expressed dignified remonstrance at the doubts cast upon his statements respecting Ming Yung's whereabouts.

"My no think anything!" he declared. "My know!"

Brent laughed, although he was in far from a laughing mood.

"That's good enough for me," he said. "Lead on, Yen How!"

(Another thrilling, long instalment of this splendid serial story next Wednesday. Order your copy early.)



THIS WEEK'S CHAT



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For Next Wednesday:

"WHEN DUTY CALLS!"

By Martin Clifford.

In next week's grand, long, complete story of St. Jim's we are introduced to Jack Blake's cousin, a "knut" of the most aggressive type. Although of military age, and with no ties to speak of, this amiable young gentleman shudders at the very thought of enlistment, since he considers that khaki does not match his complexion! The juniors of St. Jim's, when they have recovered from their astonishment, take Jack Blake's cousin in hand, and there are very exciting times indeed at the old school. Eventually the young swell, who has out-Gussied Gussy in point of sheer nuttiness, is brought to realise that

"WHEN DUTY CALLS"

he must discard gorgeous vests and brilliant socks, and don the more modest khaki.

"YOUR EDITOR EXPECTS——"

I have extreme pleasure, Gemites all, in announcing that it has now been definitely decided to publish

"TOM MERRY'S WEEKLY!"

every Wednesday as a separate halfpenny paper. It will contain twenty-four pages of bright, breezy stories and articles from all the best-known characters in the famous Sussex school; and the charm of the new venture is that readers of the "Gem" Library will be allowed to contribute!

Turn to page 22 and read the stirring letter which Tom Merry writes to all Gemites.

STAUNCH SUPPORT FROM SOUTHSEA.

It is quite refreshing, after all the petty abuse which Messrs. Malpas, Stephens & Co. have been heaping upon the "Gem" Library lately, to be able to publish a letter of the loyal and straightforward type. The comments of my Southsea chum will, I feel sure, be of interest to every Gemite who reads them:

"45, Eslemond Road.

Southsea.

"Dear Editor,—My brother and I, having been constant readers of the 'Gem,' 'Magnet,' and 'Penny Pop,' since they first appeared in print, have arrived at the conclusion that it is 'up to us' to write and let you know how highly we appreciate the really first-class tales they contain. Although it is very difficult, and scarcely fair, to say that one is better than the other, I think of the three named I prefer the 'Gem.' The characters are all so good, and there are such a variety, that one never fears getting an uninteresting tale. I have grown so used to reading about them, that I regard them all as friends, from Wally, the inky, to Gussy, the immaculate. When I first read the 'Gem,' Tom Merry was, of course, my favourite, but as I read more, I liked Kerr better. He's so cute and so loyal. But when Talbot arrived, I liked him best of all. He had such a struggle to run straight, didn't he, and so many drawbacks? Then he's so accomplished. He seems able to do everything, from playing footer to rescuing Ratty.

"My mother always believes in giving everything a fair chance, so when she saw the interest Will and I took in your books, she read some of them herself, and I am pleased to

say she quite approves of them. My grandad, too, is always interested when I read the tales to him. Fatty Wynn and Billy Bunter amuse him tremendously, especially the latter with his never-failing postal-order.

"Now, dear Editor, I expect you have heaps more letters to read and write, so I will conclude, wishing you and your grand books every success.—Believe me to remain, Affectionately,
 A grateful supporter of your books,
 LILIAN.

"P.S.—By the way, would it interest you to know that one of my brothers has the D.C.M., another one is training to go to the front, seven first cousins have joined (six in one family), and two more brothers of mine (one physically unfit) are on war work. Don't you think I ought to feel proud of them?"

Yes, Lilian, I do; for they are rendering yeoman service to their country in its hour of need. And I am proud of you, too, for your sincere and fearless statements, and for the splendid way in which you stand by the "Gem" Library. May the good work which you are doing on behalf of the companion papers never diminish!

I have had many letters lately from Sunny Southsea, a town which will always have a warm place in my affections, since part of my boyhood was spent there; and right glad am I to know that its boys and girls are bubbling over with enthusiasm for the good old "Gem" and its kindred journals. "Lilian" and her numerous relatives have my heartfelt wishes for their success, and I trust that those who are now in khaki will return from the ordeal strong and sound, and cheery as ever.

"CHUCKLES" MINIATURE COMPETITION.

I am now in a position to announce the result of the above competition, in which, it will be remembered, readers had to bind up midget numbers of our popular Saturday companion paper, "Chuckles." The winning numbers were perfect marvels of neatness and ingenuity, and two hundred beautiful prize penknives have been awarded to the following competitors:

G. Nesbit, Manchester; L. Gander, Stratford; C. Lindley, Portsmouth; R. Adams, London, S.E.; J. Hay, Durham; J. E. Neale, Bedford; F. Wells, York; J. Higgins, Manchester; C. Finlay, Belfast; W. F. Heath, Brixton; L. Taylor, Reading; J. Remmett, King's Norton, Birmingham; H. Hopkinson, Worcester; A. R. Sovereign, Bristol; R. Figgins, Walworth, S.E.; C. Nunn, Kensington, W.; J. Bailey, Belfast; H. Brache, Guernsey; C. Coo, Balham, S.W.; F. G. Cripps, Balham, S.W.; W. Pitts, Cardiff; C. Hopping, Wellingboro'; D. Thompson, Southampton; E. King, Sunderland; F. G. Slater, Wolverhampton; J. S. Kirkham, Horsforth; C. Baker, Liverpool; L. G. Heasman, Thornton Heath; H. King, East Ham; F. Reed, Birmingham; P. A. Cope, Southfields; H. C. Aldridge, Hockney, N.E.; Scout Williamson, British Expeditionary Force; B. Pearson, Leeds; H. Myers, Low Fell; R. Jeffrey, Sunbury-on-Thames; A. R. James, Ramsbotham, Manchester; F. A. Rudd, Ipswich; A. Lloyd, Plaistow, E.; J. Davies, Levenshulme; H. Robinson, Harrogate; R. A. Bone, Southampton; G. Paddock, London, E.C.; M. Parry, Highbury, N.; R. Knowlton, Rushdon; F. L. Symonds, Alexandra Park, N.; A. Henderson, West Hartlepool; A. Darch, Mitcham; A. Bain, South Shields; J. W. Rundle, Devonport; H. Dyson, Bradford; F. Hudson, Kettering; E. A. Saunders, West Croydon; A. Garnett, Peckham, S.E.; J. Roberts, Birkenhead; A. Venables, Hull.

(Continued on page III of cover.)

COMPETITION RESULT—continued.

J. D. Westlake, Devonport; J. Wilson, South Shields; F. Peach, Chesterfield; D. Baker, Willesden; H. Potter, Leamington; R. Marshall, Coventry; A. Robb, Barrow-in-Furness; F. J. Logan, Glasgow; F. Irons, Kingsland, N.; H. Wilmore, Nelson; H. Schofield, Liverpool; C. H. Dent, Manchester; R. S. Park, Donegal; W. F. Fowden, Rusholme; K. Haugh, Dublin; H. Gardiner, Brockley, S.E.; Page R. Riguette, London, N.W.; A. Smith, Notting Hill, W.; W. Sully, Maryport; W. Bushby, Worthing; W. Curtis, Kirkdale; W. H. Mason, Glasgow; H. A. Craven, West Hampstead; G. W. Bennett, Derby; R. Gill, Liverpool; G. C. Roberts, Malvern; E. H. Hilton, Durham; E. Dalziel, Uddingston; R. C. Banks, Old Kent Road, S.E.; W. L. Catepole, Northampton; A. McLaig, Glasgow; R. Nash, Leagrove; I. Adams, London, N.; Dr. J. Dawes, F945, Kilworth; E. Osborne, Goole; G. Harries, Aldershot; I. Methven, Upper Dicker; S. L. George, Stockwell, S.W.; D. Jones, Burton-on-Trent; B. Maggs, Coventry; S. J. Webb, Plumstead; W. B. Ingram, Luton; A. E. Cox, Plymouth; W. J. Jones, London, S.E.; W. Storey, Little Berkhamsted; S. A. Howard, London, S.W.; D. McPhail, London, W.; A. Hurley, Wimbledon; L. W. Keeler, Ipswich; A. P. Francis, Enfield; J. Moule, London, S.E.; G. Belt, London, W.C.; D. Simpson, Royston; A. Taylor, Manchester; E. Leach, Salisbury; J. A. Scott, Bacup; C. Shield, Washington; W. Carter, Coventry; B. Westcott, Newton Abbot; W. J. Rutter, Penzance; A. E. Isaac, Liverpool; C. Crammer, West Ham; B. Segeal, Birmingham; H. Mason, Manchester; H. Whitaker, Rock Ferry; S. R. Ebbutt, Edinburgh; C. R. Deakin, Leicester; H. Reeve, Aintree; E. P. Owen, Liverpool; E. Bryan, Glasgow; A. E. Daly, Putney; J. F. Choularton, Manchester; B. E. Knight, Guildford; P. Organ, Anfield; R. T. Wynn, Liverpool; J. R. Gibson, Wisbech; G. Cotterill, Matlock; W. Holland, Stockport; J. Pressdee, Birmingham; E. R. Matthews, London, E.C.; C. Grindell, Bristol; C. J. Miller, London, S.E.; W. Harris, Coventry; L. Hewitt, London, N.; E. C. Sugdon, Beverley; H. Orton, Manchester; M. Berman, Bath; B. Rowland, Manchester; A. Powis, Manchester; J. E. W. Norris, Bristol; A. C. Collins, Worthing; G. Wing, Edmouton; H. Croucher, Dorking; A. C. Steele, Hillsborough; D. Whaley, London, N.; R. Harvey, London, E.; C. Gage, Eltham; E. N. Piper, Shoreham-by-Sea; E. Pell, Stamford; T. F. J. Hemming, Smethwick; A. M. Whiteman, Leith; P. Fittington, Liverpool; H. Elias, Pwllheli; H. W. Heslop, Port St. Mary; F. R. Dixon, Blythe Bridge; H. Holdsworth, Hull; H. Ashcroft, Fleur-de-Lis; H. Cowley, Chesterfield; H. Smith, London, W.; R. Burton, York; N. Richmond, Liverpool; S. Wade, Norwich; F. W. Reeves, Wellingboro'; G. H. M. Gale, Guildford; W. Seal, London, S.E.; M. Caldwell, Birmingham; T. E. Culley, Bourne-mouth; I. Risnick, Cranbrook; F. H. Briggs, Hove; L. Pothergill, Ossett; W. C. Fredericks, Tottenham; S. Stafford, Coventry; G. W. Atkinson, Gateshead; H. Haigh, Hedden Bridge; A. Easthope, Birmingham; N. Walker, Liverpool; A. Targett, Wolverhampton; W. Woolley, London, S.E.; B. Bedford, Chelmsford; F. J. Bussan, London, N.; R. Barker, Sowerby Bridge; F. Leah, Manchester; C. Martin, Bexley; A. J. King, London, N.E.; R. Holt, Leigh; R. H. Marks, London, N.; J. Smith, Portsmouth; E. J. Thornton, Crawley; E. C. Bolingbroke, Croydon; A. W. Blake, London, N.; G. S. Starbrook, Nottingham; C. F. Rayson, London, W.; M. Bowring, Millwall, E.; H. Angier, Colchester.

REPLIES IN BRIEF.

Stephanie B. (Victoria, Australia).—Mr. Clifford is going to write another threepenny book story when he has time. But give the poor man breathing-space! The "Gem" story every week is a host in itself.

J. S. P. and S. McL.—You're funny chaps, aren't you? Your feeble attempt to emulate the unworthy Malpas was rotten! Why not try your united hands at something else—being decent, for instance?

J. V. W. (Preston).—There are no Prestonians at St. Jim's. The school is in Sussex.

W. B. R. (West Kilbride).—What a ripping place West Kilbride looks from the view you sent me! Hope you enjoyed your holidays there.

A. A. P. (Scotland).—The replies to your questions are as follows: (1) Kerr hails from Glasgow. (2) Redfern and Wally D'Arcy are fifteen and twelve years of age respectively. (3) There are two Americans at St. Jim's—Buck Finn and Lumley-Lumley. (4) There are no Germans! (5) Most certainly Gore is a bully. I will bear your suggestion in mind.

Ursula K.—The school colours of St. Jim's are red and white.

Miss E. Cameron (Inverness).—How ripping of you to write me such a jolly letter! You are quite boyish in your tastes—what?

C. F. D. Smith (Hammersmith).—No, there are no such places. Glad you entertained such a high opinion of our Double Number.

W. Spencer (Stratford).—Thanks very much for your letter. I think Malpas has been knocked completely out of time, so we needn't worry our heads about him. Best wishes to your wife and self.

W. A. Dann (New Cross).—"Through Thick and Thin" has long been out of print. Can you expect otherwise when a threepenny book story of Tom Merry & Co. appears? The answers to your questions are as follows: (1) The stories in the "Gem" do not deal with the same period as those in "The Penny Popular." (2) Binks has left St. Jim's. (3) If Gussy and his younger brother were to come to blows, I have no doubt that the issue would be in favour of the former.

A. E. Curtis (Plymouth).—Always glad to hear from you, old scout. You should send your Storyettes direct to Gough House. How's the "Gem" going in Plymouth? Like hot cakes, I trow.

E. O. M. A. (Stoke-on-Trent).—I was jolly pleased to hear from you, I can assure you. Another rap over the knuckles for Master Malpas! My word! That youth seems to be getting it "in the neck"—some!

M. J. C. (Morley).—The boy in question is Jack Blake. "Lulu."—Thank you very much for all the good work you are doing on behalf of the good old "Gem" Library.

"A Reader of the 'Gem'" (Falmouth).—I expect you are eager to know what happened in the case in question. However, it is, as Kipling would say, another story.

"The Fistical Four" (Norseman).—The best junior runner at St. Jim's is Figgins of the New House, with Redfern in close attendance.

Tom B. (Manchester).—So you like the yarns where Kildare gets some of the limelight, do you? What price "Mason's Last Match"?

G. A. (London, E.C.).—I am very sorry to hear that any reader of mine is intimidated because an Anti-Gem Society has sprung up in his district. Form a Pro-Gem Society at once, man, if you've got any backbone. Up, lads, and at 'em!

"A Loyal Reader" (Dulwich).—At present "The Greyfriars Herald" and "Tom Merry's Weekly" are unobtainable at newsagents'; but I anticipate a change soon.

"An Australian Girl" (Adelaide).—You say your education has been sadly neglected? Well, there's nothing wrong with your handwriting, at any rate. Quite a lot of so-called "educated" people write to me, and their spelling is a sight for gods and men and little fishes. I am awfully sorry I cannot get you a correspondent, but if you're still keen on the books after the war, I will do my best for you. Have made a note of your name on my books.

"A Follower of Talbot" (Aberdeen).—Very many thanks for your kind and cheery letter!

"Always Loyal" (Portsmouth).—If ever I were prompted to draw up a tremendous Scroll of Honour of loyal readers, you would head the list. I haven't read such a ripping letter as yours for a long time, and should like very much to shake you by the hand. Perhaps the opportunity will arise some day.

"Three Kingstown Readers."—In the case of the characters you mention, a little exaggeration is necessary, for the sake of effect. As to your statement that certain "Gem" stories are more interesting than others, that is only natural. If there were always a sameness about them, they would not be half so popular as they now are. The Christian name of Manners is Henry, and if I have ever said anything to the contrary, I humbly apologise. Your other criticisms are duly noted, but I have not the space to comment upon them.

"Wally D'Arcy" (Crewe).—More will be heard of the character you mention in due course. No, Lumley-Lumley is not dead.

E. E. O'Donoghue (Liverpool).—If you hand your spare copies over the counter at any post-office, they will be sent out to the fighting Tommies.

"Two Regular Girl Readers" (Surrey).—I am very sorry indeed if your previous letter has been unanswered. You must extend your pardon, however, for we are working at top pressure at this office, and if the amount of our correspondence increases I feel sure something will burst! The replies to your questions are as follows: (1) The characters mentioned have been at St. Jim's four years. (2) Neither of them has more than one Christian name. (3) The school colours are red-and-white.

R. W. G. (Wolverhampton).—I am afraid Malpas would be given a sorry time of it in your town. You'd make an example of him, eh? Well, that's what I understand they're going to do at Oxford.

D. G. B. S. (London, S.W.).—Thank you for your letter. Yes, I do believe in a boy being religious, without any absurd priggishness. A splendid story on this subject appears in "Magnet" No. 400. You should get a copy, and persuade all your chums to do likewise.

YOUR EDITOR.

A Cash Prize for Every Contributor to this Page.



Our Weekly Prize Page.

LOOK OUT FOR YOUR WINNING STORYETTE.

FORCE OF HABIT.

He had just added a motor-boat to his possessions. He already owned a motor-car, so he lost no time in making a trip in his new "toy." Oh, yes, he knew all about it, y'know!

But through the murky night he stole home like a half-drowned rat. When he entered his home he left great puddles all over the linoleum in the hall.

"Goodness, Charles!" gasped his wife. "What is the matter? Did you upset the boat?"

"Oh, no, my dear, not at all," he replied, wringing some of the water from his garments. "Motor went wrong, that's all."

"But you're simply soaked! How—"

"Well, when the motor went wrong, I—er—er—" He drew in a deep breath, and made a bold dash at it. "Before I knew what I was doing, I was trying to get underneath to put the beastly thing right."—Sent in by W. Smith, Northampton.

THE CAUSE OF HIS ALARM.

During the furnace cleaning at the steel works, the men had to walk over a plank suspended in the air.

Whenever one of the workmen had to cross, however, he did so on his hands and knees. The foreman, seeing this, asked:

"Are you afraid of walking on the plank?"

"No, sir," quickly retorted the man. "I'm afraid of walking off it."—Sent in by Frank Page, Shrewsbury.

A BRAINY NOTION.

John's father rarely gave advice; but on the occasion of his son's first start at work, he thought a little fatherly wisdom would be useful to him.

"Don't always do as you are told," he said, with an air of one who knows, "think for yourself."

"Yes, father," meekly replied his son.

"File these letters, boy!" was the order of John's boss, soon after he commenced his duties.

Armed with the letters, John remembered his father's advice, and started thinking hard. Ten minutes later he knocked at the door of the boss's private office, and said:

"Wouldn't it be quicker to trim these letters with the scissors than to file them, sir?"—Sent in by Robert Wright, Gateshead.

FORCED PHILOSOPHY.

As a special treat, little Leonard was promised that he should accompany his mother when she next went to pay an afternoon call.

Knowing much of the ways of small boys, Leonard's mother had granted this concession only on the distinct understanding that the subject of etables was not to be mentioned by her cake-loving son.

The great day came. Arrived at the house, Leonard was perched in a chair, and for a little while, at least, all was as it should be.

At length, however, in a moment of forgetfulness, Leonard blurted out:

"I expect there's an awful lot of cake and fruit in this house." Then, catching his mother's stern gaze upon him, he added, with a sigh: "But what's that to me?"—Sent in by Charles Griffis, Sale, Cheshire.

A SKILFUL DOCTOR.

Cheerful Patient: "Shall I be able to play the violin when my hand gets better?"

Doctor: "Yes; quite well."

Cheerful Patient: "Sure, doctor, that will be wonderful, because I couldn't play one before the accident!"—Sent in by Andrew Chisholm, Newcastle-on-Tyne.

A JUST COMPLAINT.

Mrs. Newlywed (entering grocer's shop): "Mr. Brown, am sorry to have to complain about the flour I had from you last week."

Grocer: "Why, madam, what ever was the matter with it?"

Mrs. Newlywed: "It was tough."

Grocer: "Tough, madam?"

Mrs. Newlywed: "I made a pie with it yesterday, and it was so hard my husband couldn't eat it."—Sent in by J. Irwin, Newcastle-on-Tyne.

HE TOOK NO RISKS.

The guard of the local goods train was ill, and there being no other person to take his place, it was at last decided that one of the porters of the country station should be given a trial.

All went well until the train came to a steep gradient. It was only after a great amount of puffing and snorting that the engine managed to ascend this. When the train had safely reached its destination, the driver came to the newly-appointed guard and said:

"In all my life I've never had so much trouble to get the train up that gradient."

Then the local porter, glowing with pride, replied:

"Ay, and it would have slipped back if I hadn't had the brakes on tight!"—Sent in by A. Cooper, York.

PLAIN ENGLISH.

Though he was only a page-boy at an hotel, he was given to studying the English language.

One pay-day recently he received his wages, and was surprised to find that a small amount had been deducted from them for some misdemeanour. Indignantly he sought out the manager.

"Pardon, me, sir," he said courteously, "but if you should ever find it within the scope of your jurisdiction to levy a small assessment on my wages for some trivial act, alleged to have been committed by myself at some inopportune moment in the stress of my vocation, I would suggest that you refrain from exercising that prerogative. The failure to do so on your part would force me reluctantly to tender my resignation."

The fainting manager gripped a chair to support himself, as he gasped out:

"W-w-what do you mean, boy?"

"To speak plainly," replied the lad, "if you fine me again, I'll chuck up the job."—Sent in by W. McDonald, Gillingham.

JUST SO.

"Who is he?" said an on-looker—a bank clerk—to the policeman who was endeavouring to raise a fallen victim to a banana-skin.

"Can't say, sir," replied the policeman. "He's stunned, and can't give an account of himself."

"Of course not; how can you expect an account from a man who has lost his balance!"—Sent in by Ernest Wreghitt, Sheffield.

As the "GEM" Storyette Competition has proved so popular, it has been decided to run this novel feature in conjunction with our new Companion Paper,

THE BOYS' FRIEND, 1d.,

Published every Monday,

in order to give more of our readers a chance of winning one of our useful Money Prizes.

If you know a really funny joke, or a short, interesting paragraph, send it along (on a post-card) before you forget it, and address it to: The Editor, THE BOYS' FRIEND and GEM, Gough House, Gough Square, Fleet Street, E.C.

Look out for YOUR Prize Storyette in next week's GEM or BOYS' FRIEND.