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THE CALL OF THE CINEMA!

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete Tale of School Life at St. Jim's.

The GEM 1D LIBRARY No. 403 Vol. 9.

FROM CLASS-ROOM TO CINEMA!

(A dramatic scene in our magnificent, long complete school tale.)

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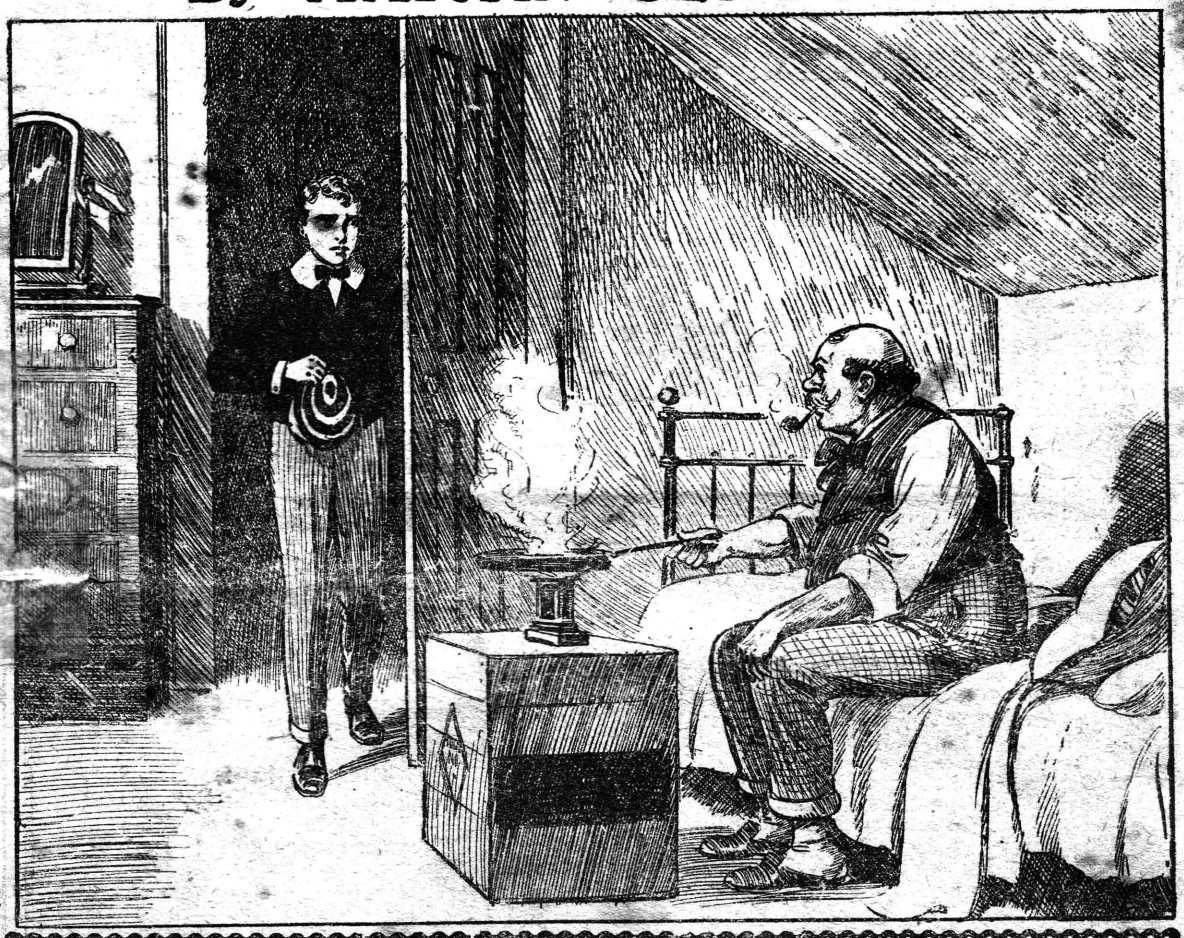
THE GEM LIBRARY 1D

COMPLETE STORIES FOR ALL, AND EVERY STORY A GEM!

THE CALL OF THE CINEMA!

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Story of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.



Mr. Curll was in his shirtsleeves and slippers, and his hair was very untidy. A pipe was stuck in the corner of his mouth, but he was not smoking. His smile became expansive as he beheld the St. Jim's junior. "Welcome, my young friend," he said. "Sit down." (See Chapter 8.)

CHAPTER 1.

Arthur Augustus to the Rescue!

"GWEAT SCOTT!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, jumped almost clear of the ground as he uttered that exclamation.

He was astounded.

His eyeglass dropped from his eye, and his eyes almost bulged from his head.

D'Arcy of the Fourth was sauntering along Rylcombe Lane, in his usual elegant manner. He had nearly reached the old stile, upon which the three juniors were seated, chatting—Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther of the Shell. The Terrible Three were regarding with interested glances something that was going on in the field behind the high hedge, and Arthur Augustus, observing it, glanced through a gap in the hedge to see what it was.

Then he ejaculated "Gweat Scott!" and jumped.

What he saw was really enough to make him jump—or anybody jump.

From the barn in the field a young lady was rushing, with her hair streaming wildly down her back. Two powerful-looking fellows, with black masks on their faces and pistols in their hands, were pursuing her, with ferocious gestures.

Even as D'Arcy gazed in horror at the scene they overtook their victim, and the young lady struggled wildly in their grasp.

Arthur Augustus could scarcely believe his eyes.

Such a scene in the Rocky Mountains might not have been surprising, but in the quiet, green meadows near

Next Wednesday:
"GUSSY AND THE GIRL!" AND "UNDER THE DRAGON!"

St. Jim's it was simply astounding. Beauty in distress and masked ruffians in broad daylight fairly took the biscuit, so to speak.

The three juniors, seated in a row on the stile, were taking it quite calmly. They did not seem surprised, and they made no movement whatever to go to the rescue of beauty in distress. They watched the heartrending scene with what appeared to be the most heartless indifference.

Arthur Augustus could not understand it.

But whatever Tom Merry & Co. might do Arthur Augustus' duty was clear, and that was to rush to the aid of the distressed young lady struggling in the grasp of the masked ruffians.

With a bound Arthur Augustus was through the gap in the hedge, and he landed in the meadow. He paused one second to shout to the Shell fellows.

"Tom Mewwy! Lowthah! Mannahs! Come on, deah boys!"

"Gussy! Hold on——"

"To the wescue!" yelled Arthur Augustus.

And he sprinted at a furious rate across the field.

"Stop!" yelled Tom Merry.

"Come back!" shrieked Monty Lowther.

"You'll get into trouble!" howled Manners.

Arthur Augustus did not even reply—he hardly heard, in fact. He sprinted across the field with a speed that would have done him great credit on the cinder-path.

The two masked ruffians had seized the young lady and were dragging her back to the barn. It was surprising that she did not cry for help; perhaps she was too terrified. But certainly she was resisting. Her resistance was of no avail, however; she was dragged back to the barn.

Just as the masked ruffians reached the barn with their helpless victim Arthur Augustus D'Arcy arrived upon the scene.

He did not stop to speak.

He rushed into the fray, hitting out furiously.

Hitherto the masked ruffians had not uttered a word. But they uttered some words now—loudly.

"My eye! What the thunder——"

"Clear off, you young fool!"

"Buck up, deah gal!" shouted Arthur Augustus encouragingly. "Come on, you wottahs! Take that, you disgustin' wuffian! Tom Mewwy, you wottah, come and back me up! Wescue!"

Arthur Augustus' whirlwind attack carried all before it. Slim and elegant as he was, the swell of St. Jim's was a hard hitter, and he had the advantage of taking the masked ruffians by surprise.

One of them rolled in the grass from a terrific drive on the side of the jaw, and the other, as he turned on D'Arcy, received a right-hander on the chin that fairly knocked him flying.

The young lady, thus suddenly rescued, plumped down on the grass, gasping.

"Oh, dear! Whatever is that? Oh, goodness gracious!" ejaculated the young lady.

She sat up in the grass.

The two masked ruffians sat up, too, one nursing his chin and the other his head, and both yelping furiously.

"Oh, my jaw! Ow!"

"Gurroooh! Wooop!"

"You howwid wottahs!" roared Arthur Augustus, brandishing his fists at the astounded ruffians. "Pway don't be fwightened, miss. I am heah!"

"Goodness gracious!"

"Pway allow me to assist you to wise."

"You foolish boy!" gasped the young lady.

"Eh?"

"Oh, dear—oh, dear!"

Arthus Augustus spun round as a heavy grasp fell upon his shoulder. A fat gentleman in a silk hat had rushed from the barn. He seized D'Arcy by the shoulder and shook him savagely.

"You young idiot!"

"Hands off, you wottah!"

"You've spoiled the picture!" shrieked the fat gentleman. "You've spoiled the whole thing! Are you mad?"

"What?"

"You've wasted the films!" raved the fat gentleman, shaking Arthur Augustus as if for a wager. "Oh, you young idiot!"

"Gweat Scott!"

The young lady had risen to her feet without Arthur Augustus' assistance. Arthur Augustus could scarcely believe his eyes when he saw that she was laughing. The two masked ruffians staggered up and set their masks straight.

"Oh, dear—oh, dear!" gasped the young lady. "The picture is spoiled now!"

"The—the picture?" stuttered Arthur Augustus.

"Yes, you foolish boy. Don't hurt him, papa!"

"He has spoiled the whole thing!" roared the fat gentleman. "You utter young idiot! What did you interfere for?"

"I—I came to the wescue."

"Ha, ha, ha!" came from the rescued lady.

"I did not wegard it as a laughing mattah, miss," said Arthur Augustus reproachfully. "I thought you were in dangah——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Mad as a 'atter!" said one of the masked ruffians. "Shall we kick him outer the field, guv'nor?"

"You young idiot!" raved the fat gentleman. "Haven't you ever seen a cinema picture taken before?"

"A—a—a cinema picture?" gasped D'Arcy.

"Yes, you dolt!"

"Oh, bai Jove!"

"For the first time Arthur Augustus observed a man with a cinematograph machine close at hand. The man was doubled up with merriment. It dawned upon Arthur Augustus that he had interrupted a "scena" for the cinema. That heartrending scene had not been in deadly earnest at all. He understood now why the Shell fellows on the stile had taken it calmly.

Arthur Augustus' face was crimson.

"Oh, deah!" he gasped. "I—I weally beg your pardon! I was actin' undah a misappwehension."

"Get out!" roared the fat gentleman.

"I weally apologise, sir. I beg your pardon, miss."

"Please run away!" said the young lady, wiping her tears.

Arthur Augustus was only too glad to run away. He wished that the earth would open and swallow him. As the earth was not likely to oblige him in that way, he retired hastily from the scene, leaving the young lady laughing, the two masked ruffians scowling, and the fat gentleman fuming.

CHAPTER 2.
An Old Acquaintance.

"HAIL to the giddy victor!"

"See the conquering hero comes!"

"Bravo, Don Quixote!"

With these cheery remarks the Terrible Three greeted the crimson and breathless swell of St. Jim's as he arrived at the stile.

Arthur Augustus leaned on the stile and panted.

"I was actin' undah a misappwehension!" he gasped.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There is nothin' whatevah to cackle at, you wottahs!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the chums of the Shell.

"How was I to know that it was a wotten cinema play?"

"Oh, dear!" gasped Tom Merry. "You might have guessed. Didn't you see the machine-man?"

"Yaas; but not befoah I——"

"Rushed to the rescue!" grinned Lowther. "Oh, Gussy, you'll be the death of us! You'll come out in the picture now, rushing to the rescue!"

"Gweat Scott!"

"It will be worth seeing!" chuckled Lowther. "That picture is being taken for the new cinema at Wayland. All St. Jim's will go over to see Gussy on the screen!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! I shall wefuse to be put on the scween!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "I will not be made to look widiculous. I shall insist upon that film being destwoyed!"

"Where are you going?" shrieked Tom Merry, as the swell of St. Jim's turned back across the field.

"I am goin' to wequest that fat old chap to destwoy that film," said Arthur Augustus firmly. "I wefuse to appeah on the scween!"

Tom Merry grasped him by the shoulder and jerked him back.

"You ass! They'll slaughter you if you interrupt the picture again! You've wasted a dozen yards of film already, I should say."

"I wefuse to appeah on the scween!"

"Duffer!" said Lowther. "They'll cut that part. I was only pulling your leg, you burbling ass!"

"I wefuse to be called a burblin' ass, Lowthah! Howevah, I suppose they will cut that part, now I come to think of it," assented Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I wegard you as a sillay ass, Lowthah!"

And Arthur Augustus rested on the stile, breathing hard. The gallant rescue of the young lady who was not in peril had winded him.

The Terrible Three chuckled, and watched the proceedings of the cinema party. The "scena" was going on. The machine-man had shifted his position. Another actor had appeared—a somewhat plump gentleman, clad as a trapper of the Rocky Mountains. The young lady had appeared at the window of the barn, high over his head, and the plump trapper was slinging up his lasso, evidently to provide beauty in distress with a means of escape.

"My hat!" ejaculated Monty Lowther, who was watching the fat trapper curiously. "I know that chap! That's old Curll."

"Mr. Curll!" said Tom Merry.

"Yes, rather! I know his chivvy anywhere."

"Bai Jove, I know him now!" said Arthur Augustus, turning his eyeglass upon the cinema actor. "Curll, bai Jove!"

The juniors gazed at the scene with renewed interest. They remembered Mr. Curll well, especially Lowther. Mr. Curll was a theatrical gentleman who had seen better days, and seen the last of them. The juniors had made his acquaintance at the Wayland Theatre, and they had liked him, though his weakness for potent liquors made him a somewhat undesirable acquaintance.

Monty Lowther, who was keen on the stage and all that appertained thereto, had cultivated Mr. Curll sedulously, and upon one never-to-be-forgotten occasion the stage-struck youth had quitted St. Jim's and gone with Mr. Curll's company on tour. Monty Lowther had found himself in trouble over that escapade, as was only to be expected, and since then he had kept his predilection for the stage in check.

But it was easy to see that all the old keenness was rising in Monty Lowther's breast as he looked upon the cinema actors.

The scene closed. The next act, apparently, was to be taken in another spot. The cinema party moved away to a motor-car that was waiting in the lane. But Mr. Curll had observed the juniors on the stile, and he came over to speak to them. He had thrown on a coat over his picturesque attire.

"Do my aged eyes deceive me?" exclaimed Mr. Curll, in the old theatrical way the juniors remembered so well. "Are these my young friends?"

"They are—they is," said Tom Merry, shaking hands with Mr. Curll. "How have you been getting on?"

Mr. Curll shook his head sadly.

"Alas!" he said. "What do you expect? Public taste is at a low ebb. The one-time star of the Roser-Moser Company, the tenor whom crowds came breathlessly to hear, came down to the halls—the music-halls, sir—and since the war there is yet a further fall. The war has knocked us all out, sir. Behold me now a cinema actor!"

"That's a jolly good thing, isn't it?" asked Lowther.

"Sometimes," said Mr. Curll, with a slight sniff. "But, alas! I am not a Charlie Chaplin. Comic business, sir, is not in my line. The heavy drama is mine. But the public, sir, prefer the funny man to the genius. It was ever thus."

"Well, a chap wants to laugh when he goes to a cinema," said Tom Merry. "The blood-curdling dramas are rather a bore, you know."

"'Twas ever thus," said Mr. Curll, with a sigh. "Young gentlemen, you will probably never see me on the legitimate stage again; but if you want to see the best acting that was ever put on a film, come over to the Wayland Picture Palace next week. This film will be on then."

The juniors grinned. Mr. Curll's opinion of his own performances was of the very highest. His "swank" on the subject had an almost child-like simplicity about it. Like most gentlemen of his profession, he was hungry for flattery, and when others did not praise him he was content to praise himself.

"We'll come. Rather!" said Monty Lowther at once.

"You will also be able to hear some decent music," remarked Mr. Curll.

"Good orchestra?" asked Manners.

Manners was rather keen on music.

"Really, I have never listened to the orchestra," said Mr. Curll. "Only so-so—very so-so. But you may be aware that the orchestra does not keep going all the time, and while it is resting there is a pianist—the relief pianist. I, sir, am the relief pianist."

"Oh!"

"A sorry job, perhaps," said Mr. Curll. "But what would you? Genius is never recognised, and a man must subsist. And even a relief pianist may do his work well. It is necessary to change the music to suit the pictures, and that requires a quick brain and a thorough knowledge. The former relief pianist was a German. He has been kicked out. I secured the post—I should rather say that Mr. Tatlow, the manager, has secured me. Come at six o'clock. That is when I am playing the relief."

"You bet!" said Lowther.

"Master D'Arcy"—Mr. Curll turned to the swell of St. Jim's—"the last time I had the honour of seeing you you did me a great favour."

"Bai Jove! Did I?" said Arthur Augustus.

"Yes. You lent me half-a-sovereign. I happened to be short of money."

"Pway don't bothah about that, deah boy."

"I have not forgotten it," said Mr. Curll. "I have intended to mention it at our next meeting, Master D'Arcy. I owe you half-a-sovereign. But a curious circumstance is this that, now I have the pleasure of meeting you, I happen to be short of money again—a very rare thing with me, but it happens sometimes. I am not able to repay that small loan at the present moment."

"Pway don't mench!"

"The fact is," said Mr. Curll confidentially, "I was thinkin' that, under the circumstances, you might regard it as feasible to lend me another half-sovereign, and next week—ahem!—I will return the two together."

Arthur Augustus, with a somewhat peculiar expression upon his face, extracted a ten-shilling note from his purse, and passed it to Mr. Curll. Then that gentleman took his leave, and hurried to join the party in the motor-car.

CHAPTER 3.

Monty Lowther is Fed-up.

"WHERE'S the fire?" demanded Tom Merry indignantly.

It was tea-time.

Tom Merry and Manners had just come into the study in the School House, each of them with a parcel under his arm.

Monty Lowther was in the study. Lowther ought to have had the fire going, all ready to cook the succulent rashers his chums had provided.

But the fire was not going. The grate was empty and cold. The table was not laid. Monty Lowther was seated in the armchair, with his hands in his pockets, his long legs stretched out, and a far-away expression upon his face. He was buried in thought.

He did not seem to hear Tom Merry's question. Tom and Manners stared at him. It was not usual for Monty Lowther of the Shell to be sunk in deep thought like this.

"Why haven't you lighted the fire?" roared Manners, swinging his parcel against Monty Lowther's head by way of waking him up.

Lowther started.

"Ow! What's that? Why, you ass, what are you bunging your silly parcel on my napper for?" he demanded.

"Where's the fire?"

"The fire! Blow the fire!" said Lowther peevishly.

"Don't you want any tea?" bawled Tom Merry.

"Tea! Blow tea!"

"Well, we do, anyway," said Manners. "What on earth are you mooning about? Where's the coal?"

"Hang the coal!"

"Where's the sticks?"

"Bother the sticks!"

"What the dickens is the matter with the silly ass?" said Manners, in wonder. "Get the frying-pan, fathead, and clean it, while I get the fire going!"

"Confound the frying-pan!"

"Look here, you slacker, why can't you lend a hand?" demanded the indignant Manners.

"Br-r-r-r!" said Lowther.

However, Lowther rose to his feet, and lent a hand in getting tea. Manners soon had the fire going, and Tom Merry proceeded to fry the rashers. Monty Lowther made toast, and a terrific smell of burning soon made it evident that his thoughts were elsewhere while he was making it.

"You fathead, you're burning it!" shouted Tom Merry.

"By Jove, so I am!" said Lowther, waking up to the evident fact.

"What the dooce do you mean by burning good bread in war-time?"

"Oh, bow-wow!"

Tom Merry and Manners regarded their chum curiously as they sat down to tea. There was something wrong with Monty Lowther. He seemed quite blind and deaf to his surroundings. Manners, taking advantage of his absentmindedness to put some jam on his bacon, was astounded to see Lowther eat it without even noticing the little joke.

"Well, my hat!" said Manners. "Are you off your rocker this afternoon, Monty?"

"Eh? Yes!" said Lowther absently.

"What?"

"I mean no. Don't be an ass!"

"Is anything the matter?" demanded Tom Merry.

"Yes! No! Rats!"

Monty Lowther finished his tea in silence, not seeming to hear the remarks that were addressed to him, though some of them were quite pointed and personal.

Tea being finished, Lowther stretched himself in the armchair, with a wrinkle in his brow, apparently with the intention of relapsing into a state of deep thought. But by this time Tom Merry and Manners were fed up with the mysterious conduct of their study-mate.

Tom Merry grasped the back of the chair, tilted it up, and hurled Lowther in a heap on the hearthrug.

Lowther sat up and roared.

"You silly ass! Wharrer you playing fag's tricks for? Yow-ow!"

"Fed up!" explained Tom Merry. "Tell us what it's all about. Have you taken a leaf out of Gussy's book, and fallen in love?"

"Fathead!"

"Well, if it isn't that, what is it?"

Lowther picked himself up and grunted.

"I've been thinking," he growled. "I'm fed up, too. What a life!"

"Eh! What's the matter with life?" asked Tom, perplexed. "Not tired of life at fifteen, are you?"

"Lessons in the morning, and lessons in the afternoon!" said Lowther morosely.

"Well, that's what we come to school for, isn't it?" asked Manners, in astonishment. "I've never heard of a school without lessons."

"Breakfast, dinner, and tea!" pursued Lowther. "Same old grind!"

"No law against missing your meals, if you want to," said Tom. "In fact, it's a patriotic thing to do in war-time."

"Bed at half-past nine, rising-bell at seven," continued Lowther. "Same old tale!"

"What on earth's biting him?" said Manners. "Do you want bed-time at seven, and rising-bell at half-past nine?"

"Footer practice, and sprinting, and Sunday walks!" said Lowther. "The giddy old grind!"

"What the dickens is the matter with footer, and sprinting, and Sunday walks? You can play marbles instead if you like."

"Or hop-scotch!" said Tom Merry.

"I'm fed up!"

"If it's indigestion, you'd better see the doctor," said Manners. "He'll give you a pill or something, and you'll be all right!"

"'Tain't indigestion, fathead!" roared Lowther.

"Then what is it?"

"Why can't a chap go on the stage when he's a born actor?" demanded Lowther warmly. "What's the good of mugging up Latin when a chap wants to be behind the footlights?"

Then Lowther's chums understood.

"This is what comes of watching cinema actors at work," said Tom Merry severely. "It's put that stage rot in your silly noddle again."

"'Tain't rot!" said Lowther moodily. "I can act, you know that. There's lots of chances for a cinema actor."

"A cinema actor! Ye gods!"

"Look at that fellow Curll—a boozy old bounder, with a face like a hay-rake!" said Lowther. "He's a cinema actor."

"Nice way to talk of an old pal!" said Tom. "I don't think Curlly makes a very good thing of it. He has to eke it out with piano-pounding."

"'Tain't the money I'm thinking of," said Lowther. "I could live on precious little. I can play the piano, too; you know that. I'd make quite as good a relief pianist as old Curll. You don't need to play—you only have to thump out a thundering row. I know the game, too—all the stock bits. Prelude to the third act of Lohengrin for the stormy pictures, Mendelssohn's march for the weddings, Solveig's song, or some rotten modern ballad tune for the love-bits—I could do it as easy as falling off a form."

"My only chapeau!" said Tom Merry. "So you want to be a relief pianist in a cinema now. What next?"

"That would be a beginning," said Lowther. "Cinema acting next. As I know old Curll, I could get fairly into the game, you know; he'd give me tips, especially if I took Gussy along to lend him money."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Monty Lowther looked at his watch.

"By Jove, it's time I was off!"

"You are off—off your silly rocker!" said Manners. "Where else do you want to get off?"

"I'm going to the cinema."

"Oh, blow the cinema!" said Tom. "We're going to do the 'Weekly' this evening."

"Blow the 'Weekly'!" said Lowther. "You fellows can stay in and do the 'Weekly' if you like. I dare say I shall find somebody to pal with at the cinema."

"I dare say you jolly well won't!" said Tom Merry warmly. "If you're going we're coming to keep an eye on you. You're not going to get yourself into trouble again."

"Oh, rats!"

"Sha'n't be back by locking-up," said Manners.

"Hang locking-up!"

"You can't hang the Housemaster," grinned Manners. "But I dare say Kildare will give us a pass out of gates till eight, anyway. We'll ask him."

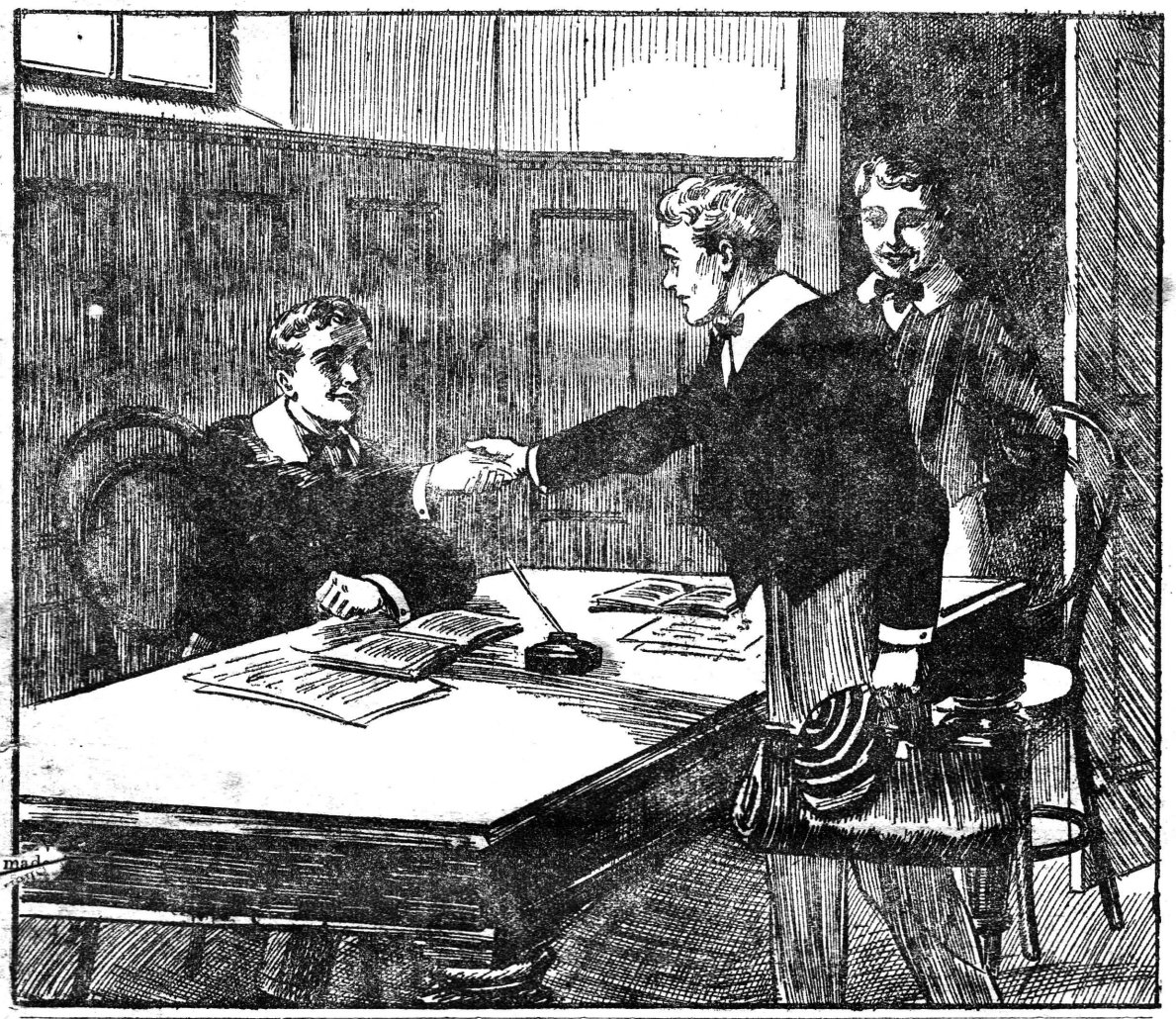
"I'm going whether he does or not," said Lowther obstinately. "Don't I keep on telling you I'm fed up?"

"You're jolly well not going unless we get a pass out," said Tom Merry determinedly. "Keep an eye on the silly duffer, Manners, while I go and speak to Kildare."

"Leave him to me," said Manners.

Monty Lowther snorted as Tom left the study. The old stage-fever was strong upon Lowther, and he was reckless. However, he waited with what patience he could muster until the captain of the Shell came back.

"All serene," said Tom cheerily, as he entered the study. "Pass for three until eight. Those kids in No. 6 are going, too. We'll make up a party."



"I'm off!" said Lowther, a little awkwardly. "Sorry we can't see you off," said Tom Merry. "Best of luck, old chap. Remember me to your uncle." "Same here," said Manners. Lowther coloured. "I—I'm not going home," he said. "I'll tell you about it afterwards. Good-bye." (See Chapter 9.)

The Terrible Three went for their bicycles, and joined Blake and Herries and Digby and D'Arcy, who were also wheeling out their machines. The seven juniors started off in great spirits, chatting cheerily as they pedalled away, with the exception of Monty Lowther.

Lowther was thoughtful, and he uttered hardly a word during the ride to Wayland. Tom Merry and Manners glanced at him rather anxiously several times.

It was evident that the old desire for a stage life was burning in Monty Lowther's breast, and that he was in a mood to be reckless. In that mood he required looking after by his affectionate chums, and Tom Merry and Manners meant to look after him.

CHAPTER 4.
At the Cinema!

"HERE we are again!" said Jack Blake cheerily.

The seven juniors had put up their machines in Wayland, at the station, and walked down the High Street to the picture-palace. The picture-palace had once been a theatre, but the "movies" had ousted the legitimate drama. Where once the players had "strutted and fretted their hour upon the stage," the moving pictures now shone upon the screen. Seats at prices from sixpence to three-and-six accommodated every class of patron

Tom Merry & Co. parted with the humble "tanner," sliding their coins down a sort of iron funnel, at the end of which sat a young lady with a remarkable complexion. The young lady's features were forty-five years old at least, but her complexion was of sweet seventeen. They received metal discs in exchange for their cash, and passed on through the vestibule, which was adorned by pictures of a surprising-looking person in baggy trousers, evidently a cinema star of the first magnitude.

A gigantic porter in a gorgeous uniform waved them onward, with the precise amount of courtesy that was due to sixpenny patrons. A heavy curtain was drawn aside, and they entered the darkened hall.

The pictures were moving on the screen, and a sea of half-seen faces glimmered in the gloom. A lad in uniform, with an electric torch, guided them to their seats, right at the front.

The strains of the orchestra sounded through the hall. The orchestra was half-hidden from sight, but the juniors could see the 'cellist sawing away, and watched the motions of the two violins.

The music was not of the sweetest. One of the violins was certainly out of tune, and the gentleman with the violoncello did not always saw away in the right place at the right moment. Manners, whose ear was keen, made a wry face. But most of the patrons of the Doric Hall were more easily satisfied.

Besides, they had not come there for the music, but for the pictures.

A wild and thrilling Far West drama was being shown

on the screen. It was like a picture representation of the "penny horrible" of twenty years ago. Painted redskins and cowboys in wonderful leggings chased one another over wild prairies and terrific rocks and hillsides.

"Exciting, ain't it?" yawned Manners.

"Wathah a bore, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "But pewwaps there will be a funnay one next."

"Old Curll isn't on the job yet," remarked Lowther.

The Wild West drama ended at last, and the lights went up.

When the lights were lowered again, and the next picture came on, the orchestra was no longer heard. The 'cello had ceased from troubling, and the violins were at rest. The instrumentalists had departed for a well-earned spell of repose, and their place was taken by the pianist. It was necessary to keep the music going along with the pictures, and so the "relief" had come on.

The juniors being at the front could see a head with a bald spot bobbing over the piano, and they knew that their old friend Mr. Curll was at work.

Mr. Curll had probably not been specially brought up as a pianist.

Certainly his playing was not first-rate.

The playing of a cinema pianist seldom is. But in his work there was more than met the eye, so to speak.

As the pictures changed, the music was required to change its character to keep in conformity. In a tender scene, slow love music came from Mr. Curll's instrument—and, as a knockabout scene instantly succeeded, the slow music had to change immediately into a merry waltz or march. But Mr. Curll's repertoire was not extensive. For a merry scene, he generally relied upon the "Merry Widow" waltz; for a stirring scene, such as marching soldiers or galloping horses, he was content with a bald rendering of the prelude to the third act of Lohengrin. That fatal prelude was heard at least three times, in fragments, during half an hour.

Then there were fragments of the "Wedding March" and the Grand March from "Tannhauser," mixed up with little bits of Mozart and popular tunes and improvisations of Mr. Curll's very own.

The whole made a conglomeration that might have made a musician weep bitterly. But it seemed to satisfy the patrons of the Doric Hall.

In a scene where a character in baggy trousers fell under a motor-car, and looked out between the wheels with a ludicrous expression on his face, there was loud clapping. At that moment Mr. Curll at the piano was thumping out "Here we are again!" The ripple of hand-clapping was entirely due to the comic picture on the screen. But the juniors observed Mr. Curll glance round towards the audience, peering at them through a little opening in the green baize curtain that shut him off from view. Mr. Curll evidently took the hand-clapping entirely for himself. The juniors could only see the top of his head—but the very bald spot there seemed to glow with gratified conceit.

Picture after picture was thrown on the screen, and at length the piano was heard no more, and the orchestra resumed charge of the music department. Tom Merry looked at his watch when the lights were on.

"Past seven," he said. "Time we were off, you chaps."

"Yaas! We've got to get in by eight," said Arthur Augustus.

"Come on, you fellows."

Study No. 6 rose and filed out as the lights were lowered. Tom Merry and Manners were following when they observed that Monty Lowther had not risen.

Tom turned back.

"Come on, Monty," he whispered.

Lowther shook his head.

"I'm staying a bit," he said. "Don't wait for me."

"You'll be late at the school."

"I'll chance it."

"Oh, rot! Come on!"

"Sit down in front!" came a gruff voice from behind.

Tom Merry and Manners dropped into their seats again. They did not feel inclined to go without Lowther. At the same time it meant trouble if they were not back at the school by eight o'clock.

"Look here, Monty, you'd better come," whispered Tom. "The other fellows have gone."

"You follow them," said Lowther. "No good you getting into a row."

"But what about you?"

"Oh, that's all right!"

"But it isn't all right. It was decent of Kildare to give us a pass out till eight, and he will be ratty if we're late."

"I can't stand it!"

"Oh, what rot!" said Manners. "What the deuce do you want to go on looking at the pictures for? You can see pictures any day!"

"'Tain't only that," said Lowther. "I've got something else to do. You fellows run along home."

"We're staying as long as you do," said Tom resolutely. "If it wasn't for making a scene here, we'd march you out by the scruff of your neck, you ass!"

Lowther did not reply. He sat with his eyes on the screen. But he was not really looking at the pictures. Tom Merry knew what he was waiting for. He was waiting for his chums to leave him.

"Ain't you chaps going?" asked Lowther at last.

"No."

Lowther grinned a little.

"Then we may as well get out of this," he said.

And they left the hall.

CHAPTER 5.

An Evening Out.

OUTSIDE the cinema the lights gleamed into the deep dusk. The lights were more subdued than of old on account of Zeppelins; but there was a radius of illumination in front of the Doric Hall. Tom Merry glanced round; Blake & Co. had long gone. They had waited a few minutes for the fellows, and then, concluding that the Terrible Three were staying for more pictures, they had departed.

"Turned half-past seven," said Manners. "We shall have to hustle to get back to St. Jim's by eight."

"Buck up, then," said Lowther.

"Well, come on."

"I'm not coming just yet."

"What are you staying for?" demanded Manners.

"Well, if you must know, I'm going round to speak to old Curll," said Lowther. "You fellows needn't stay. You're not interested in cinema actors and relief pianists."

"You're jolly well coming back!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Don't be an ass! You may get a licking!"

"I don't care!"

"Yank him along by his ears," said Manners.

"Jolly good mind to!" growled Tom Merry.

Indeed, if it had been possible to "yank" Monty Lowther back to St. Jim's by his ears, his exasperated chums would probably have done it. But though they could have "yanked" him to where the bikes had been left, they could certainly not have made him ride his bike if he did not choose.

And Lowther was looking very obstinate; and he could be as obstinate as a mule when he liked.

Tom Merry and Manners had the alternative of staying late with Lowther, or leaving him to his own devices.

The latter was not to be thought of. They were determined that Monty should not get into another scrape with his theatre proclivities.

The chums of the Shell stood in silence for some minutes looking at one another.

"Well?" said Lowther at last.

"Well?" growled Tom Merry.

"Ain't you going?"

"No!"

"You'll get into a row."

"All your fault!"

"Look here!" said Lowther earnestly. "I don't want you to get into trouble. I'm going to see Curll. But you may as well get off."

"Rats!"

"Well, I'm staying, anyway!"

"So are we!" growled Manners.

"Then we may as well get ahead," said Lowther; and he moved along the building with his two exasperated chums at his heels.

"Where are you going now?" demanded Tom.

"There must be a stage-door here somewhere. I suppose this is it. A chap can ask, anyway," said Lowther as he rang.

The door was opened by a man in shirtsleeves, who stared curiously at the three juniors.

"Is Mr. Curll still here?" asked Lowther.

"Hey! Who's that?"

"The pianist."

"Oh, the pianist!" said the gentleman in shirtsleeves, in a tone that implied that he did not think much of pianists, anyway. "I ain't seed him go out, so I dessay he's still on the premises. No, he ain't, neither; he always goes over to the Bull's Head arter his turn. You'll find 'im there."

Slam!

The door closed.

The gentleman in shirtsleeves was apparently fully occupied, and had no time to waste upon inquirers after a mere relief pianist.

"My hat!" said Tom Merry.

"Drawn blank!" grinned Manners. "Come on home, Monty! I suppose you're not going to look for Curlly in the Bull's Head, are you?"

"Why not?" said Lowther.

"Why not?" echoed Tom Merry. "It's a pub."

"Well, we're not going there to booze, I suppose?" said Lowther sarcastically. "No harm in looking into a place to see a chap, I suppose? I dare say he's in the reading-room."

"In the saloon-bar, you mean," growled Manners.

"If you think so, we'll look in the saloon-bar first," said Lowther pleasantly. "If he isn't there, we'll try the jug-department."

"Look here, Monty——"

"Hallo! Here he is!" exclaimed Lowther.

The door they had just left reopened, and Mr. Curll came out of the theatre. Evidently the doorkeeper had been careless in his statements, and Mr. Curll had not yet left the building; but his statement as to Mr. Curll's habits was correct enough, for the relief pianist started for the Bull's Head at once.

Monty Lowther ran in his way. He wanted very much to speak to Mr. Curll, but, reckless as he was growing, he did not care to enter a public-house. He was very glad to have spotted Mr. Curll outside instead of inside the Bull's Head.

"My young friend!" exclaimed Mr. Curll, as his eyes fell upon Monty Lowther. He spoke in the theatrical manner that was habitual to him. "Delighted to see you." Mr. Curll passed his hand across his forehead. His eyes were a little wild, and Monty Lowther could not help suspecting that he had been drinking already. But there was no aroma of spirits about Mr. Curll for once. He was fresh from his work in the theatre, and it had left him in a semi-dazed state, as frequently happens to unfortunate players who are compelled to stick to their instruments for two or three hours on end.

"Jolly good of you to give me a call," said Mr. Curll. "I would like to ask you home to supper, but I do not dwell in marble halls, my young friends. Top-floor back, and a Yarmouth warrior—that would not suit you young gentlemen. Will you excuse me one moment, while I step into this hotel to speak to a friend?"

"Ahem! Certainly."

Mr. Curll disappeared through the swing-doors of the Bull's Head. The "friend" he had gone in to speak to was probably the bar-keeper, and his remarks to his friend were doubtless limited to the two magic words, "Johnny Walker!"

"He will come out tipsy," said Manners uneasily. "He's a good sort in his way, Monty, but—but we can't be seen about with a boozy bounder, you know."

"His work pulls him down," said Lowther, keen to find excuses for his theatrical friend. "I dare say he simply has to get some stimulant after it."

"That's all rot!" said Tom Merry at once. "Pulled down or not, he's better without putting that filth down his throat. He would stand his work better if he didn't drink."

"Well, we're not here to give him temperance sermons, anyway."

"Blessed if I know what we're here for at all," said Tom crossly. "I know there's a row waiting for us at St. Jim's."

"Your own fault," said Lowther. "I want to talk to Curll, but you don't. I've advised you to hook it already."

"What do you want to talk to Curll about?"

"Oh, people and things," said Lowther vaguely.

"If you're thinking of that stagey rot again——"

"Here he comes," interrupted Lowther.

Mr. Curll emerged from the Bull's Head. His face, which had been pallid and worn, was flushed now, and his eyes had a fishy sparkle. The potent liquor he had swallowed had pulled him together, only to leave him in a still more jaded state when the reaction should set in. But Mr. Curll was in the habit of living only in the passing moment, and leaving the future to take care of itself.

Apparently he had forgotten his young friends, for he started off without looking at them; but Lowther stopped him. Mr. Curll smiled genially at once.

"Ah! What a pleasure to see you, Master Lowther," he remarked. "And you, too, my young friends. Are you out for the evening?"

"Yes, in a way," said Lowther. "The fact is, I want to speak to you, Mr. Curll, if you've got a little time to spare. Busy this evening?"

"I am free till nine o'clock," said Mr. Curll. "Then the relief goes on again at the Doric Hall, to play for another hour. Until then I am entirely at your service, young gentlemen. At this time I usually do some shopping for my supper."

"Come and have supper with us," said Lowther. "The bunshop is open till ten."

"With all my heart!"

Tom Merry and Manners glared at their chum. Monty Lowther was arranging an evening out with a vengeance. Lowther did not heed them. He led Mr. Curll away to the bunshop in the High Street, and the two juniors followed in a restive mood. They rather liked Mr. Curll, and they felt compassion for the unfortunate tenor who had fallen upon evil days, and they were interested in him. But bed-time at St. Jim's was half-past nine, and to stay out till bed-time meant serious trouble. And Lowther seemed to be arranging to stay out after bed-time, as a matter of fact. He appeared to have forgotten the very existence of St. Jim's. He was in a different world now—the stage world—and the school world had disappeared from his consciousness.

Tom Merry caught him by the arm as they entered the bunshop.

"Look here, Monty, how long is this going on?" he demanded.

"Oh, don't worry!" said Lowther.

He jerked his arm away, and followed Mr. Curll in. His chums followed him, and they sat down at one of the tables.

CHAPTER 6.

The Order of the Boot!

MR. CURLL was in an expansive mood.

He chatted incessantly at the supper-table. Monty Lowther ordered a substantial supper, and Mr. Curll's eyes glistened at the sight of it. The juniors could easily guess that the poor gentleman seldom had such excellent fare.

Mr. Curll enjoyed his supper, and his talk ran on almost without a break as he ate and drank. He had only one topic—himself. His early triumphs as a tenor in the celebrated Roser-Moser Company; how he had brought down crowded houses when he sang the tenor parts in "Tannhäuser" and "Tristan" and "Il Trovatore" and "Rigoletto," and so forth; how bad luck—he did not mention drink—had forced him from those high altitudes to lower levels, till he "went on the halls";

how even the halls had had enough of him, owing to further bad luck—still not mentioning drink; till at last he earned a hard living as a relief pianist in a cinema. It was a tragic story, and Mr. Curll almost shed tears over his own misfortunes. Doubtless, through the haze of years, his early triumphs appeared to him greater than actually they had been, and the juniors took his stories with a large grain of salt; but they sympathised with him all the same.

Supper lasted till a quarter to nine, when it was time for Mr. Curll to repair to the Doric Hall again. But he was enjoying himself so much that he was loth to go. It fell but seldom to Mr. Curll's lot to find interested hearers, who were willing to let him run on, without limit, on his favourite subject. He would willingly have prolonged the supper—and the talk—till midnight or later.

"You'll be late!" remarked Tom Merry, after Mr. Curll had noted the time, and started once more on his monologue.

Mr. Curll nodded and went on talking.

"Those times are gone!" he said, with a sigh. "Gone for ever! Where are the roses of yester-year, my young friends?"

"Give it up!" said Manners flippantly.

"But even now there are compensations," said Mr. Curll. "It is something to please the public, even as a relief pianist in a cinema. Did you hear them this evening? You noticed the hands I got—what?"

"The what?" asked Tom Merry, puzzled.

"The hands."

"The applause," explained Mr. Curll benignantly. "The clapping, you know. We call that 'hands' in the profession. I was playing simply a comic song, 'Here we are again,' yet the audience recognised the quality of my work."

The juniors could not help smiling.

They remembered the incident, and they knew that the "hands" Mr. Curll referred to had been for the picture on the screen, and for the picture only. But Mr. Curll had taken the applause entirely for his playing, which probably not one in ten of the audience had been listening to at all.

"You noticed it?" said Mr. Curll.

"Oh, yes, we noticed it," said Manners. "I clapped as loud as anybody."

"Nine o'clock," said Lowther. "You'll be late, Mr. Curll. You mustn't let us get you into trouble with your manager."

"My manager?" said Mr. Curll, with a sniff of contempt. "There was a time, young gentlemen, when managers came to me almost on their bended knees, and begged me to sing for them. Now I have to be careful not to offend the manager of a hole-and-corner cinema in a country town!"

"Thus are the mighty fallen!" murmured Manners.

"I suppose I must go," said Mr. Curll, rising.

"We'll trot down to the cinema with you," said Lowther, as they left the bunshop. "I had a lot of things to talk to you about, Mr. Curll, but—I haven't."

Mr. Curll had done all the talking, as a matter of fact, and Lowther had not been able to get in a word. The three juniors had acted the part of applauding chorus.

They walked down to the cinema together. Mr. Curll paused outside the Bull's Head.

"I have to speak to my friend for one moment before I go in," he said. "Excuse me just a minute!"

He disappeared through the swing doors again.

"For goodness' sake let's get off," said Manners. "Do you know that we sha'n't be in by bed-time."

"We can't go without saying good-bye to Curlly," said Lowther.

"Railton will rag us bald-headed."

"Let him!"

Mr. Curll was a good five minutes in the Bull's Head. He came out at last with a very flushed face and a somewhat unsteady step. The juniors looked at him rather uneasily. Mr. Curll did not appear to them to be in a state to undertake his duties at the piano.

The juniors took him to his door, which was opened by the man in shirtsleeves. The man gave an expressive grunt at the sight of Mr. Curll, who held on to the door-post and blinked at him.

"Screwed again!" said the gentleman in shirtsleeves.

"Are you addressing that insolent remark to me, Bates?" said Mr. Curll, with an assumption of great dignity.

Bates snorted.

"You'll get it," he said darkly. "Mr. Tatlow has been asking after you; you're late again. It'll be the sack this time!"

"You are insolent!" said Mr. Curll.

"You go in and see!" snorted Bates.

"Good-night, my young friends!" said Mr. Curll, shaking hands with the juniors. "Don't take any notice of this impertinent menial!"

"Ho!" grunted Bates.

"Good-night, old chap!" said Lowther. "We'll see you again. Good-night!"

Mr. Curll went in, and the door closed.

"Quarter-past nine," said Tom Merry. "Now for St. Jim's, and the biggest wigging of our lives!"

"Anybody would think we'd never been wigged before, to hear you talk," growled Monty Lowther. "Look here, I'm not going yet. I'm anxious about old Curll. The silly ass has got squiffy. He can't play the piano in that state, even for a cinema. I'm going to see what happens to him."

Monty Lowther walked quickly round the building, and entered the cinema before his chums could detain him. They hurried after him, just in time to see him disappear into the darkened hall.

"Well, my hat!" ejaculated Tom Merry, in dismay.

"The silly ass!" said Manners wrathfully. "Let's leave him here on his own, if he will play the giddy goat."

Tom Merry shook his head.

"In for a penny, in for a pound," he said. "We're booked for an awful row anyway, and we may as well see it through."

They paid their sixpences, and followed Lowther into the cinema.

From behind the green baize curtain that hid the piano from public view, there came a murmur of voices. The orchestra had had to go on playing till Mr. Curll arrived; and their wrath at having to wait for a mere relief pianist may be imagined. The murmur of voices indicated that there was trouble between Mr. Curll and the cinema manager.

But, after a pause, the piano started.

It started wildly.

Mr. Curll's fingers "wandered idly over the ivory keys." He produced weird discords that would have made a modern German composer green with envy. Had Mr. Curll been playing in a great London concert-hall, his performance might have been taken for the latest thing by Richard Strauss. For it was without form and void, and harsh and disagreeable to the ear, and evidently had neither beginning nor middle nor end, and was full of sound and fury signifying nothing.

But unfortunately for Mr. Curll, he was playing to a cinema audience, who had no ear whatever for the "higher music." That crash of discord brought loud hisses from various parts of the house. The fact was that Mr. Curll's head was swimming with the whisky he had consumed, and he did not even know what notes he was thumping.

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Manners, stopping his ears.

The music suddenly ceased.

The pictures went on, without a musical accompaniment. A murmur of voices was heard behind the baize curtain once more, and then silence.

"Come on!" said Lowther.

The juniors quitted the cinema.

Lowther hurried round the building to the side door, with his chums at his heels. They reached that door just in time to see it open, and Mr. Curll appear. Behind him was a fat man in evening-clothes, with a big diamond gleaming in his shirt-front, and a fat face purple with anger.

"Outside, you drunken waster!"

The managerial foot was planted behind Mr. Curll, and he staggered out and fell on the pavement. The door slammed behind him.

It was evidently the "sack" for the unfortunate Mr. Curll; the "sack" in the most drastic manner.

The juniors ran to pick him up.

Mr. Curll blinked at them dazedly.

"I will have his blood!" he said, in a thrilling whisper. "His blood, mind! Nothing but his blood will satisfy me!"

"You'll have his boot if you go back," said Tom Merry. "You won't get his blood; you'll get his boot, old chap. Better get off home!"

Mr. Curll lurched wildly, and threw an arm round Tom Merry's neck to support himself. His other arm affectionately embraced Lowther's neck.

"I feel a little upset," he said pathetically. "For weeks, young gentlemen, I have brought that man audiences. They came in crowds, simply to hear my playing. That asinine ruffian fancies they came to see his idiotic pictures! Ha! He will discover his mistake when I am no longer there!"

"Where do you live?" asked Tom.

"River Street, No. 4, top floor," said Mr. Curll.

The juniors piloted him through the darkened streets to his lodgings. It was a tumble-down lodging-house, with a common staircase, and an ancient smell about it. They helped Mr. Curll upstairs, and he fumbled in his pocket for a key, and opened a door, revealing a shabby and untidy room. Mr. Curll was past speech by this time. The juniors half carried, half led him in, and laid him on the bed.

"Goo'-night!" murmured Mr. Curll. "Pass the rosy, dear boys! After supper I'll give you the duke's song. Grooh! La donna e mobile—grooh!—qual pium' al vento—hic—hic—grooh!"

Mr. Curll went to sleep.

"Poor beast!" said Manners.

Tom Merry frowned.

"He isn't exactly a beast," he said. "Weak as water; that's what's the matter with him, and poor wretches like that will always end the same way, so long as people are allowed to sell them filthy liquor. He would be a decent man enough if the drink traffic were abolished. Let's get off; it makes me ill to see him!"

The three juniors quitted the lodging-house. They walked to the station for their bicycles. It was a quarter to ten when they mounted for the ride home to St. Jim's—a quarter of an hour after bed-time.

They rode to the school in silence. Even Monty Lowther was feeling a little serious now.

CHAPTER 7.
Paying the Piper!

TAGGLES, the porter, grunted expressively as he opened the gates for the Shell fellows. Ten o'clock was booming out from the old tower.

"Nice goings hon!" Taggles remarked.

"Ripping!" assented Lowther.

Another grunt from Taggles!

"Which you're to report yourself in Mr. Railton's study at once," he said.

"Any old thing," said Manners.

The juniors wheeled away their bikes and put them up, and walked to the School House. All the rest of the Lower School had long been in bed; even the Fifth had gone to bed at that hour, and most of the Sixth. Light was burning in the Housemaster's study, however.

"Now for it!" murmured Tom Merry, as they came down the passage.

"You can leave it to me," said Lowther. "It was all my fault."

"Oh, rot!"

Tom Merry tapped at Mr. Railton's door.

"Come in!" came the deep voice of the School House master.

The three juniors entered.

Mr. Railton had been chatting with Mr. Carrington in the study. The genial expression left his face, and he frowned severely as he turned his glance upon the three delinquents.

"Ah! You have returned!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, sir," said the juniors meekly.

"It is past ten o'clock," said Mr. Railton. "Kildare has informed me that he gave you a pass till eight o'clock. Your bed-time was half an hour ago. Have you any excuse to offer for your conduct?"

"Ahem!"

"I require to know how you have been occupied until this late hour," said Mr. Railton severely. "What have you been doing?"

"We—we've been to the cinema, sir."

"You stayed at the cinema until this hour?" exclaimed Mr. Railton.

"It was my fault, sir," said Monty Lowther. "These chaps wanted to come back with the others, but I wouldn't come, so they stayed with me. It's all my fault!"

"And why were you bent upon staying so late, Lowther?"

"I haven't any excuse, sir, excepting that I wanted to."

"Do you call that an excuse, Lowther?"

"Well, no, sir."

"You mean to tell me that you have deliberately broken the rules of the school, for no reason excepting that you wanted to?" demanded Mr. Railton angrily.

"Yes, sir."

"This may be frankness, Lowther, but it sounds to me remarkably like impudence. As for your companions, they had no right to stay with you. However, as you put the case, they are less to blame than you are. Merry and Manners, you will each take five hundred lines, and you will be detained for Saturday and Wednesday afternoons."

"Yes, sir."

It was a heavy sentence, especially the detention, which would interfere considerably with the junior football. But the juniors had expected severe punishment; they could not expect their transgression to be passed over.

"As for you, Lowther, you will also be detained for two half-holidays, you will take a thousand lines, and I shall cane you severely."

"Very well, sir."

Mr. Railton rose and picked up his cane.

Lowther held out his hand quietly. He had kicked over the traces, and he was not a fellow to complain of having to pay the piper after calling the tune.

Swish! Swish! Swish! Swish!

Four cuts from the cane, well laid on, made Monty Lowther fairly wriggle. He was gasping when Mr. Railton had finished with him.

"You may go to your dormitory," said the Housemaster.

"Good-night, sir!"

"Good-night!" said Mr. Railton, his face relaxing a little.

The Terrible Three quitted the study. Monty Lowther tucked his hands under his arms as he went down the passage. He was wriggling.

"Feel bad?" asked Manners.

"Ow, wow-wow!" was Lowther's reply.

"Well, I must say it serves you right, old scout," said Tom Merry. "You've got us into a precious pickle, too."

"Wow-wow-wow——"

"I wonder what Railton would say if he knew about Curlly?" murmured Manners. "Not quite a desirable job for us nice boys—seeing a boozy bounder home!"

They went up to the dormitory.

The Shell fellows were all fast asleep, but some of them woke up while the Terrible Three were undressing and turning in.

"You fellows come back?" asked Kangaroo.

"Looks like it."

"What on earth have you been doing, up to this time?" asked Talbot.

"Playing the giddy ox," replied Tom Merry.

"Blake told us you'd stayed at the cinema," remarked Bernard Glyn. "You don't mean to say you stuck it out till this time? Wasn't Railton waxy?"

"Wow-wow-wow!"

"Hallo! What's that row?"

"Oh, that's Lowther!" grinned Manners. "Sounds as if Railton was waxy, don't it?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Cheeky young beggars, staying out like this," said Grundy. "I wonder you haven't been flogged."

"Rotten favouritism!" growled Crooke. "I should have been flogged, I know that."

"You'd have deserved it, Crooke," said Tom Merry. "You'd have stayed out for some blackguardly reason, if you stayed out at all. But we haven't been smoking or betting money on geegees."

"Only your word for that!" sneered Crooke.

"And isn't that good enough?" asked Tom Merry, coming towards Crooke's bed in the dark.

"Oh, yes, quite!" stammered Crooke hastily, as the captain of the Shell loomed over him.

"Then shut up, you worm!"

The Terrible Three turned in. Monty Lowther mumbled for some time, but he fell asleep at last. Slumber descended once more on the Shell dormitory, and reigned until the rising-bell clanged out in the fresh autumn morning.

Tom Merry yawned and rubbed his eyes as he sat up in bed at the clang of the rising-bell. He was still sleepy. The fresh, morning sunlight was streaming in at the windows.

The Terrible Three were tired; but they were not slackers, and they turned out with the rest. Monty Lowther rubbed his hands as he turned out. He still had an ache in his palms.

"Bai Jove, heah are the boundahs!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, as the chums of the Shell came out into the quadrangle before breakfast. "Heah are the giddy wanderahs, deah boys."

"What on earth did you stay out for?" asked Blake. "We thought you were coming home after us."

"Lowther was playing the giddy ox, and we played it along with him," growled Manners. "Gated for two half-holidays, and five hundred lines each. Lowther ought to do all the lines!"

"Bai Jove! That's wathah hard cheese!"

That day was Saturday, and a half-holiday. There was a Form match, between the Shell and the Fourth, fixed for that afternoon. Tom Merry had to ask Talbot to skipper the Shell team in his place.

While the football match was being played the Terrible Three had the pleasure, or otherwise, of sitting in the deserted Form-room, grinding out Virgil "by the yard," as Tom Merry expressed it.

Tom Merry and Manners grumbled, as was only to be expected. They were detained till tea-time; by which time they had made a comfortable inroad upon their heavy impositions, which was their only comfort.

When they left the Form-room at last Tom Merry and Manners hurried away to learn the result of the Form match. They were somewhat consoled to learn that the Shell had won hands down.

Talbot of the Shell had captured the winning goal.

"It was an awf'ly neah thing, deah boys," Arthur Augustus D'Arcy told them. "I vewy neahly had a goal twice, and if they had come off, we should have beaten you hollow. Football is a vewy uncertain game."

"Awfully uncertain, as played by Adolphus Gustavus D'Arcy," agreed Blake. "If Gussy hadn't got in the way——"

"Weally, Blake——"

"In short, if we'd won we shouldn't have lost," said Blake. "You fellows coming to tea? Gussy's pater has shelled out at last, and there's a feed."

"Hear, hear!"

Tom Merry and Manners looked for Lowther, to take him to tea in Study No. 6. They looked for him in the study, but he was not there. They looked for him up and down and round about, but he was not to be found.

Finally they looked in the bikeshed, and found that his bicycle was gone.

Then they looked at one another.

"The silly ass!" said Tom Merry. "He's gone out."

"That blessed cinema again!" growled Manners.

"I'm getting fed-up," said Tom. "We'll jolly well bump him when he comes in, and knock a little sense into his head!"

And the chums of the Shell went to tea in Study No. 6. Monty Lowther had gone out without a word to them, evidently for the purpose of avoiding remonstrance and argument. They could not help wondering whether he would over-stay his time again. If he did, there was no doubt that Railton would take a very serious view of the matter, and that Lowther would find himself in hot water when he turned up at St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 8.

A Friend in Need!

TAP!

Monty Lowther knocked at the door of Mr. Curll's room, in the lodging-house in River Street in Wayland.

"Enter!" came Mr. Curll's voice.

Evidently he was at home, and it was just like Mr. Curll to say "Enter!" instead of "Come in!"

Monty Lowther entered.

Mr. Curll was busy.

There was a smell of cooking in the little room. A small oil-stove, sadly in want of cleaning, was burning smokily, and over it Mr. Curll was cooking a kipper in a greasy frying-pan.

He was in his shirtsleeves and slippers, and his hair was very untidy. A pipe was stuck in the corner of his mouth, and he was puffing away complacently.

Mr. Curll's smile became expansive as he beheld the St. Jim's junior.

"Welcome, my young friend!" he said. "Sit down!"

Lowther looked round for something to sit upon. There was only one chair, and upon that reposed a plate containing fried potatoes. Lowther decided to sit on the bed. As it was unmade, it would not disturb it. It appeared that Mr. Curll made his own bed, when it was made at all—which was probably seldom.

"You find me," said Mr. Curll, "engaged in domestic duties. I am, as you are aware, a bachelor. Result, I am compelled to cook my own kippers. Marriage is a lottery, my young friend; yet I do not deny that there would be a certain advantage in possessing an affectionate helpmate to cook the kippers. There was a time when duchesses glanced at me with tender eyes. You would hardly believe it now."

Lowther nodded assent. Certainly he hardly believed it. Mr. Curll assuredly did not look as if he had had intimate acquaintance with ducal circles.

"I beg you to excuse me for receiving you thus," went on Mr. Curll. "Necessity, alas, knows no law. The scent of kippers—and in a bed-room—is not pleasant. But what would you? We are but clay, after all, and the base demands of the inner man must be met. Even the gods on Olympus could not do without their nectar and what-do-you-call-it? There was a time——"

"Don't mind me," said Lowther, interrupting the threatened reminiscence of the time when Mr. Curll had dreamed that he dwelt in marble halls. "Get on with the cooking. I hope I'm not bothering you."

"Not at all. That's done now. If you will excuse me, I will eat. I have tasted nothing to-day, so far, and the inner man, you know——" Mr. Curll proceeded to attack the kipper with a pocket-knife.

"Quite so," assented Lowther. "I suppose you're finished at the Doric Hall now?"

"I have refused to appear there again," said Mr. Curll, with dignity. "After the brutal conduct of Mr. Tatlow I could not appear in his theatre again. Probably it means the ruin of the cinema. The public will soon discover that there is no longer a pianist of my quality playing the relief. That is Tatlow's fault. I cannot help it, neither do I pity him."

"Serve him right—what?" said Lowther, suppressing a grin.

"Exactly. He chose to assume that I was intoxicated last night," said Mr. Curll. "I admit that I had called to see a friend; but you were with me, Master Lowther, and you can bear witness to my condition."

"I can!" grinned Lowther.

"Yet that man—that Philistine—that Hun—sacked me without even notice!" said Mr. Curll. "I could take

"Lowthah, bai Jove." "Gussy, you ass——!" growled Lowther. "I have wun you down, deah boy," remarked D'Arcy beamingly. (*See Chapter* 15.)

the law to him, but I disdain to do so. The fact is, that my position at the Doric Hall has never been secure. The former relief pianist was a German. That man has been plotting against me to recover his post—of that I am assured. He has the manager's ear. He has succeeded at last. I have been flung forth on a trumpery excuse, a base pretext."

"Ahem!" murmured Lowther.

Friendly as he felt towards Mr. Curll, he could not help feeling that the manager of the Doric Hall had had ample reason for "booting" the pianist out of the cinema. But he could not very well say so to the unfortunate gentleman.

"But I shall secure another post quite easily," said Mr. Curll. "Do not be concerned about me. A pianist of my abilities will not beg for a post, especially now that the younger men are gone to the war. We are not 'too old at forty' in these days, you know. The war has done that much for us, at any rate."

"I was going to ask your advice," said Lowther. "You know all about the bizney. You are a cinema actor as well as a pianist."

Mr. Curll nodded.

"I'm awfully keen on acting," said Lowther. "Suppose —suppose I could get a long holiday from school—would there be any chance for me?"

"By gad!" said Mr. Curll.

"How do you do it?" asked Lowther.

Mr. Curll regarded him in astonishment. That a fellow from St. Jim's should want to share such a life as he—Mr. Curll—led was a surprise to him.

"There are actors and actors in the cinema business," said Mr. Curll. "You would have to know the profession inside out, Master Lowther. I may tell you that I am not regularly employed as a cinema actor. Occasionally a part is given to me—generally a small part, owing to the obtuseness and stupidity of managers generally. I pick up a guinea or two occasionally in that line. But unfortunately I have to live by playing the piano in the picture-shows. I am afraid there is no demand—ahem!—for cinema actors of your years, Master Lowther."

Lowther looked disappointed.

"But I might pick up a chance if I were in the business?" he asked.

"You might," said Mr. Curll dubiously.

"I suppose the best thing is to be among the people, and learn all the tips and keep an eye open for what's going?"

"Yes."

"Well," said Lowther, "I'm a pretty good pianist. I often play accompaniments for the chaps when we give concerts at the school, and stick in solos, and so on. Why shouldn't I be a relief pianist, same as you are, Mr. Curll?"

Mr. Curll grinned.

"You are young for the part," he said.

"But there are boy pianists—infant prodigies, you know."

"There certainly are," agreed Mr. Curll. "It is possible—I don't say it isn't. In fact, if you are bent upon the idea, I should be willing to use my influence for you."

Lowther wondered what "influence" could possibly be possessed by a seedy and boozy gentleman who had just been sacked and booted. But he did not say so.

"I have already heard of an opening for myself at Abbotsford," said Mr. Curll. "I have applied for the job. I may be able to use my influence for you there. But no running away from school, Master Lowther."

"Honest Injun," said Lowther. "I can get a holiday. My uncle will let me leave the school for a bit, if I put it to him nicely. He will make it right with the Head. If you could get me a chance I should be awfully obliged, Mr. Curll."

Mr. Curll waved his hand airily, and a fragment of kipper flew off the pocket-knife and narrowly missed Lowther's head.

"Rely upon me," said Mr. Curll. "But have you resources?"

"I've got some tin," said Lowther. "Besides, couldn't I live on my screw?"

"Are you aware of the rate of my remuneration?" asked Mr. Curll sadly. "You behold in me a pianist of unusual abilities—I might say, transcendent abilities. Yet at the Doric Hall my salary, sir, was one pound weekly."

"Well, I could live on a pound a week," said Lowther. "That seems a lot of money to me."

"Ahem! At your age—even if you secured a post—I fear you would not receive full wages," said Mr. Curll. "Some manager might give you a chance; but if you were paid twelve or fifteen shillings, you would be lucky."

"I don't care," said Lowther. "All I want is a chance."

"Very well; leave it to me," said Mr. Curll. "I will do my best for you. I will write to you from Abbotsford, anyway. By the way, Master Lowther, I am in something like a difficulty respecting my fare to Abbotsford. If you had a half-sovereign for which you have no special use for the moment——"

Lowther wondered whether Mr. Curll's influence was worth half-a-sovereign. However, he was in funds, and he handed the required coin to his friend.

"I shall not forget this," said Mr. Curll. "You might mention to Master D'Arcy, too, that I have not forgotten his little loan. I will settle this—ahem!—at the same time. I expect to be in funds shortly. Perhaps you would like to come with me?" added Mr. Curll, who, having finished his kipper and the fried potatoes, was putting on his boots.

"What's on?" asked Lowther.

"I am going to call at the Doric Hall and give the manager my personal opinion of him," explained Mr. Curll. "I have to call at the Bull's Head for a friend or two to accompany me. If you would care to come——"

"Thanks awfully! I've got to get back for call-over," said Lowther hastily. He got off the bed. "Good-bye, Mr. Curll. I shall be waiting for that letter from Abbotsford."

"You have my word, young friend. Depend upon my influence, if there is anything doing."

"Right-oh!"

Monty Lowther took his leave, and cycled back to St. Jim's in a thoughtful mood.

CHAPTER 9.

Monty Lowther's Chance.

TOM MERRY and Manners were waiting at the school gates.

They were anxious about their chum.

Having discussed the matter, they had resolved to take Monty Lowther in hand, and to bestow upon him a record bumping if he was late for locking-up. They agreed that it was the best thing to do under the circumstances.

It was close upon time for the gates to be locked, and they were scanning the road anxiously, when a cyclist came in sight.

"Lowther, by gum!" said Manners.

Taggles came out of his lodge, with a bunch of keys jingling in his hand. Monty Lowther reached the gates just in time, and wheeled his machine in. Taggles grunted and slammed the gates.

"Just in time, Monty!" said Tom.

"Yes; that was lucky," assented Lowther.

"Luckier than you think," said Manners. "We were going to snatch you baldheaded if you were late."

"Oh, rats!"

"I suppose you've been to see Curlly?"

"Yes."

"He's still sacked, I suppose?"

"He's got a new job," said Lowther; and then he paused. It occurred to him that it would not be judicious to tell his chums of his talk with Mr. Curll. Certainly they were not likely to sympathise with his ambition to become a cinema actor.

"Well, I'm glad of that," said Tom heartily. "I suppose he will be leaving Wayland now?"

"Leaving to-night, I think."

"Good!" said the two Shell fellows together.

Monty Lowther laughed. Tom Merry and Manners hailed Mr. Curll's departure with relief, in the belief that it would be the end of Lowther's connection with the cinema. Lowther was very careful to say nothing of the expected letter from Mr. Curll at Abbotsford.

"Had your tea?" asked Tom, as Lowther put up his bike in the shed.

"No. I suppose there's something in the study?"

"We had tea in No. 6—a ripping spread!" said Manners. "Gussy was doing things in style. You've missed it, you ass!"

"Oh, blow your fag spreads!" yawned Lowther.

"Eh? You used not to turn up your nose at fag spreads. What have you got in your silly head now?"

"Bow-wow!" was Lowther's reply.

After his interview with Mr. Curll, and the prospects it opened before him, a feed in the study seemed a matter of the slightest possible importance to Monty Lowther. What was a study feed to a fellow who was going to work in a cinema, and who, if the chance came his way, might get on as a film actor, and perhaps rival the celebrated Charlie Chaplin himself?

Lowther went up to the study, but not to a late tea. He sat down to write a letter to his uncle and guardian—a very carefully-worded letter. He posted it in the school letter-box before he remembered that he was hungry.

The next day was Sunday, and after morning service the Terrible Three sauntered out for their usual walk. Lowther, who usually had plenty to say—too much, some fellows said—was very silent and preoccupied.

He remained preoccupied for the rest of the day.

That unusual thoughtfulness stuck to him. He was just the same on Monday. Tom Merry knew that the stage and the cinema were running in his mind, but as Lowther said nothing more of visiting the picture-palace, he made no remark about it. He hoped that those fantastic ideas would die away of their own accord, and Lowther would be himself again.

On Tuesday a letter arrived for Lowther. He found it in the rack when the Shell came out after morning lessons, and he seized it eagerly, but a shade of disappointment came over his face as he saw that the postmark was not Abbotsford.

"That's your uncle's fist," said Manners. "What are you looking glum about? There may be a remittance in it."

"Not likely," said Lowther.

"Well, look. I want some new films for my camera, and I've run out of tin."

Lowther opened the letter, and read it. Then he smiled. Evidently his uncle's reply to his request was favourable.

"Well?" said Manners.

"No remittance."

"Then what are you looking so jolly pleased about?"

"Oh, my uncle's rather a brick, you know."

And Lowther put the letter in his pocket without any further explanation.

The coast was clear, so to speak—all depended now on Mr. Curll. Old Mr. Lowther had given his consent to Monty leaving St. Jim's for a time for a holiday with a friend. He had agreed to ask the Head's permission, as soon as Monty was ready to go. Needless to say, Monty had not told his uncle that the "friend" was Mr. Curll, of the cinema and the Bull's Head.

And the next day came a letter with the Abbotsford postmark, addressed in a scrawling hand, which looked as if it had been written by Mr. Curll after he had been paying his devotions to Bacchus.

Lowther took the letter out into the quad, to read it alone. He sat down under the elms, and perused it eagerly.

"Dear boy" (the letter ran),—"It's all serene. I'm at the Parthenon Picture Theatre, and the manager is a broth of a boy—an Irishman, with a heart of gold. The audience simply rose to me the first night. You should have heard them. A mean, sneaking, skulking, jealous rotter of a fellow in the orchestra says they were cheering the war pictures when they applauded my playing, but there was no mistake about it—they rose as one man to my bit. As it happens, a second relief is wanted, and I've used my influence as promised. Can you get over here Wednesday afternoon? You'll find me at the White Horse, opposite the Parthenon.—Yours for ever,

"HORATIO CURLL."

Lowther's eyes danced.

It was his chance at last. Mr. Curll's "influence" had turned up trumps after all. True, the job of "second relief" was not exactly gorgeous. But it was a beginning. And he could get leave from school for a fortnight. At the end of that time, who could tell how matters would have turned out. He might jump right into a tremendous success, and his uncle would be wise enough to let him leave St. Jim's and take up the profession of the cinema.

Leave St. Jim's! He did not quite like that idea either, when he came to think of it. He did not want to part with his old chums.

But, after all, he could see them often enough—all that could be arranged somehow. For the present, here was his chance, and he was going to take it.

He put the letter into his pocket, and fairly raced into the School House. Tom Merry called to him from the quad, but he did not even hear. He ran to the prefect's room, to use the telephone. He did not even wait to ask permission, a very necessary preliminary. Fortunately, the room was empty.

Lowther rang up his uncle immediately, and talked over the wires to him for a few minutes. Then he put down the receiver, satisfied. The old gentleman had promised to ring up St. Jim's and speak to the Head.

The dinner-bell was ringing as Lowther came out of the prefect's room. Tom Merry and Manners joined him in the passage.

"Wherefore that joyous smirk?" asked Manners.

"I'm going on a holiday."

"No holiday for us to-day," said Tom Merry; "we're detained."

"My uncle's getting me a holiday."

"Lucky bargee."

They went in to dinner. Monty Lowther ate hardly anything in his excitement. After dinner he waited about anxiously, expecting to be called into the Head's study. Tom Merry and Manners had to go into the Form-room. Lowther was not sorry that they were thus prevented from asking him questions, which he would have found difficult to answer.

A little later Toby, the page, came to tell him that he was wanted in the Head's study. Lowther repaired there with a beating heart.

Dr. Holmes gave him a kindly nod.

"Your uncle has requested me to allow you a couple of weeks away from school, Lowther," he said. "It is a most unusual request, but I shall not refuse. I have consulted your Form-master, and Mr. Linton gives a very good account of you. You may leave this afternoon."

"Thank you very much, sir!" said Lowther.

"I hope you will have a pleasant holiday, my boy."

"Thank you, sir."

Lowther quitted the study as if he were walking on air. Everything was going well. His uncle had concluded, probably, that he was going with one of his school friends. The Head had concluded, naturally, that his uncle knew where he was going. So, as a matter of fact, no questions had been put to him by either party.

Lowther had not, of course, volunteered an explanation to either party.

He could not help feeling that neither the Head nor his uncle would have approved of his visit to Mr. Curll, harmless as that unfortunate gentleman was.

Indeed, he felt a few twinges of conscience. He had not been guilty of any deception certainly. But he had left his uncle in the dark as to his real intentions. But he consoled himself with the reflection that there was no harm in what he meant to do. In whatever surroundings he found himself, he meant to act as if he had been at St. Jim's, and he would have nothing to reproach himself with.

He packed a little bag hurriedly, and came downstairs with it in his hand and with his coat over his arm. He hesitated in the passage. It went against the grain to leave without a good-bye to his old pals; yet he was keenly desirous of avoiding any questioning.

But he stepped into the Form-room, where Tom Merry and Manners were grinding away at Virgil.

"I'm off!" said Lowther, a little awkwardly.

"Sorry we can't see you off," said Tom Merry. "Best of luck, old chap! Remember me to your uncle."

"Same here!" said Manners.

Lowther coloured.

"I—I'm not going home," he said. "I'll tell you about it afterwards. Good-bye, my infants!"

"Good-bye, old scout!"

Lowther left the Form-room and the School House. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was in the doorway, and his eyeglass turned inquiringly upon Lowther.

"Bai Jove! Aren't you detained, deah boy?" he asked.

"I'm off for a holiday," said Lowther. "Ask Tom to look after my white rabbits, will you? I forgot."

"Yaas, wathah."

Lowther crossed the quadrangle with quick strides. He did not want to meet Mr. Railton before he left. He breathed more freely when he was outside the gates and tramping away down the lane to Rylcombe.

When he was safe in the train for Abbotsford he took out Mr. Curll's letter again, and read it through, and smiled with satisfaction. Fast as the train was, it was not fast enough for Monty Lowther: he counted the minutes till he reached Abbotsford—and his new life!

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CHAPTER 10.
A Change of Scene!

MONTY LOWTHER paused outside the White Horse, in Abbotsford, and hesitated long.

Public-houses, of course, were strictly out of bounds for St. Jim's fellows, and Lowther felt a natural repugnance to entering one.

But Mr. Curll had fixed the appointment at the White Horse, and if Lowther was to see him at all he had no choice in the matter.

He wondered whether Mr. Curll was living there. More probably he spent his leisure hours there, in the saloon-bar or the billiard-room. Lowther felt a sense of distaste as he thought of it. Certainly he would never want to spend his own leisure hours in such surroundings.

He stood outside the house, and looked round him, bag in hand. On the opposite side of the street was the Parthenon Picture Palace. Notwithstanding its imposing name, the Parthenon was not an imposing establishment.

Monty Lowther had somehow gathered an impression from Mr. Curll's letter that the Parthenon was the finest picture show in the place, but he could see now that such was certainly not the case.

The cinema was in a side-street, and it was a small building. The more prosperous picture-palaces were in the High Street, in the full glare of publicity. The Parthenon was on a humbler scale.

Lowther was not disposed to criticise, however. He had to make a beginning, and he could not expect to begin at the top of the tree. So long as he got his foot on the first rung of the ladder he would be satisfied.

The cinema was not open yet, but a porter in uniform and gold braid was lounging in the entrance, picking his teeth, and chatting with a thin youth, evidently the youth who called "Chocklits" during the intervals of the performance.

The porter was not so gorgeous and not so well-fed-looking as the porter at the Doric Hall, in Wayland. Everything about the Parthenon, in fact, was a little cheaper and dingier.

A hungry-looking man, with a violin-case, came along the street, and disappeared into the cinema hall. Lowther guessed that he was one of the orchestra.

Lowther was still looking across the street at the cinema hall, when he felt a tap on his shoulder. He looked round, and found himself face to face with Mr. Curll. The latter had just come out of the White Horse, and was looking very jovial.

"Here we are again!" exclaimed Mr. Curll, shaking hands heartily with his young friend. "It does my aged eyes good to see you!"

Mr. Curll had brought a cheery aroma of rum with him from the White Horse. Lowther tried not to notice it.

"I got your letter," he said. "I was awfully glad. I've got leave from school. It's jolly good of you to help me like this, Mr. Curll!"

Mr. Curll waved a fat hand airily.

"Not at all. Don't mench. It's a pleasure, my dear boy. But, my word, you're not going to see the manager in those trousers?"

Lowther looked down at his trousers.

"What's the matter with them?" he asked, in surprise.

As a matter of fact, Lowther was very careful with his clothes, and his trousers were well cut and nicely pressed.

Mr. Curll grinned.

"I was alluding to the clothes generally," he explained. "Etons, you know. You mustn't present yourself as a schoolboy. You'll have to change your clobber. I know just the place. Come with me."

Lowther walked down the street with Mr. Curll. He was glad of the tip. When he came to think of it, it would hardly have been judicious to apply for a "job" in Etons. The manager would certainly not have entertained the idea of engaging a schoolboy in Etons, and would probably, too, have suspected "side" in a public-school fellow. Mr. Curll led the way into the next street, and stopped at a secondhand clothes-shop.

"You'll get a change here," he remarked. "You can leave your own clobber to be called for; no time to go to my lodgings now."

"You don't live at the White Horse, then?" asked Lowther, greatly relieved.

"My quarters," said Mr. Curll, "are in Abbot Street, behind the cinema. They are not the quarters to which I should be delighted to welcome you. But what would you? In the old days, in the Roser-Moser Company——"

"Yes, yes," said Lowther. "But what about my clothes?"

"Come in here."

They entered the stuffy little shop, and a fat gentleman came out of a stuffy little parlour to attend to them. Mr. Curll stated his wishes, and they were shown into the parlour, where all sorts and conditions of garments were displayed before their eyes. They were not the kind of garments Lowther was used to, being of poor material and ill cut, but he realised that it would not do for a relief pianist to dress much better than others employed in better positions in the cinema. He selected a suit of brown clothes, and changed into them, and changed his high collar for a turned-down one, and his silk hat for a cap. Mr. Curll nodded approval of the transformation.

"That looks more businesslike," he remarked.

Monty Lowther paid twenty-five shillings for his new outfit, and left his own property in a bundle to be called for, the fat gentleman kindly lending him a bandbox for his topper, and taking charge of the bundle, the bandbox, and Lowther's bag.

Then he quitted the shop with Mr. Curll, and they directed their steps towards the Parthenon.

Monty Lowther's heart was beating quickly.

Mr. Curll lounged elegantly into the entrance, and nodded genially to the porter.

"Mr. Kelly about, Dobbs?" he asked.

"Hup in his office," said the porter, without the addition of "sir."

"Very good," said Mr. Curll, with dignity.

He walked on with Lowther.

They went into the hall of the cinema, where the lad in uniform was lounging. Mr. Curll gave him a nod.

"Hallo, Chocklits!"

"Hallo!" said Chocklits.

He stared at Lowther, somewhat disparagingly, the junior thought. Pianists generally did not seem to be considered great guns at the Parthenon.

Mr. Curll piloted his protege behind the curtain which hid the orchestra from the audience. A somewhat battered piano stood there, with some tattered music on it.

Then Mr. Curll looked a little anxiously at the junior.

"I have taken your word for it that you can play," he observed. "I've never heard you. Let's hear what you can do."

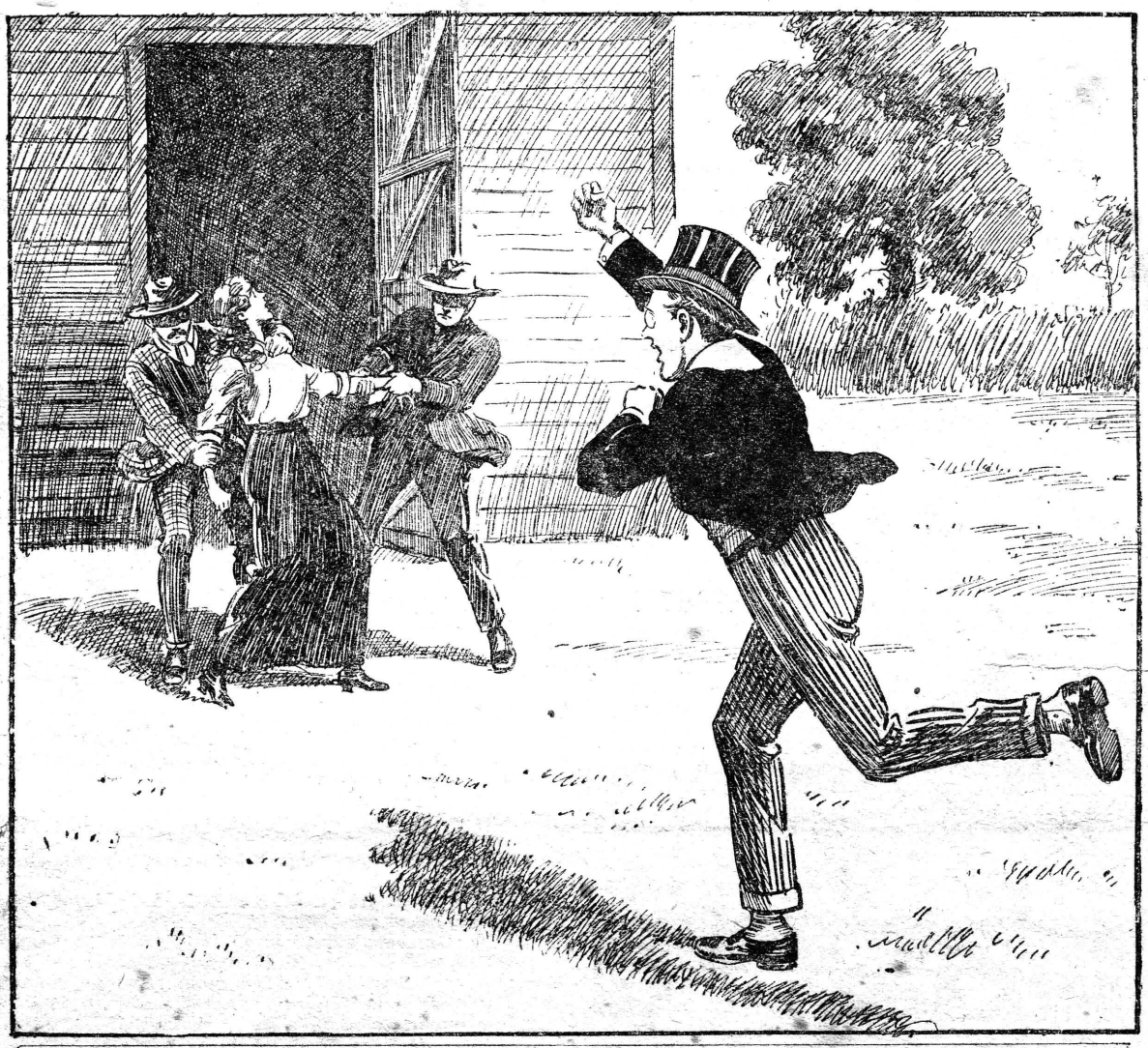
Lowther opened the piano, and sat down on the dingy stool.

"What shall I play?" he asked.

Lowther was a good pianist, and he played well from memory. At St. Jim's fellows sometimes came to the music-room when Lowther was playing there. He was not so keen on good music as his chum, Manners, but he was quick at picking up anything, and he could rattle it off with great facility.

"Play any of that," said Mr. Curll, with a wave of the hand towards the tattered music.

Lowther looked over it. He came upon the "Grand March" from "Tannhauser," "arranged for the piano," and put it on the desk. He played the simplified music through with ease, and Mr. Curll nodded satisfaction.



Just as the masked ruffians reached the barn with their helpless victim, Arthur Augustus arrived upon the scene. He did not stop to speak, but rushed into the fray, hitting out furiously. (*See Chapter* 1.)

"I can play a lot of things from memory, too," said Lowther.

"Good! Now, suppose there was a shipwreck on the screen, what would you play?" asked Mr. Curll.

Lowther plunged at once into the "Bay of Biscay," with heavy chords in the bass to give an impression of thunder. Then he ran on into stormy music from "William Tell."

"Good!" said Mr. Curll. "Now, suppose the picture changed to a charge of cavalry?"

Lowther struck up the "Ride of Valkyries."

"My word," said Mr. Curll in admiration, "you know the game! You've sat up and taken notice when you've been at the cinema—what? Now, suppose the next picture was a broker's man being chucked out of a window?"

Lowther played "Good-bye, Little Yellow Bird," and Mr. Curll roared with laughter.

"Ripping!" he exclaimed. "That would get the hands from the people in front, you bet your hat! You are a sharp kid! Now, suppose they showed a picture of Bernard Shaw?"

Lowther immediately played "Where Did You Get that Hat?"

Mr. Curll chuckled gleefully.

"Blessed if you don't beat me at my own game!" he exclaimed. "You'll do! Now come and see the manager."

Lowther, considerably elated by Mr. Curll's praise, rose from the music-stool, and followed Mr. Curll out of the hall.

CHAPTER 11.

A Great Man at Home.

MR. CURLL led the way up the stairs to the manager's office. He went with many grunts and considerable efforts, Lowther following him lightly. His frequent visits to the White Horse did not render Mr. Curll any the more fit for tackling steep stairs, and the manager's office seemed to be very high up. Mr. Curll paused on the first landing, and leaned on a window and breathed stertorously.

Lowther looked round, supposing that they had arrived.

"Not yet," said Mr. Curll. "I'm taking a rest. I don't like stairs. I'm not so young as I used to be. There's three more pair of stairs yet. By the way, when you see the manager you'll be careful with him."

"Careful with him?" repeated Lowther, puzzled.

"Yes; I mean extra civil and polite, you know."

"Of course," said Lowther, in wonder.

"Don't mention the public school, and—and put it out

of your head altogether. A relief pianist isn't expected to swank."

Lowther coloured.

"I suppose I'm not likely to swank," he said. "Besides, what have I to swank about?"

"Nothing," agreed Mr. Curll amiably. "But fellows often swank about nothing, you know. Here the manager is Lord High Panjandrum, and monarch of all he surveys. Nothing over him excepting the company. He's not a bad sort, but, of course, he has to be kow-towed to a bit."

"I see!" said Lowther slowly.

"You see, a relief pianist is considered rather small beer," said Mr. Curll confidentially.

"I suppose so," assented Lowther.

"I came here as relief," went on Mr. Curll, "but half the orchestra was sacked yesterday. He got drunk."

"He! Half the orchestra!" said Lowther, puzzled.

"The orchestra," explained Mr. Curll, "is a piano and a violin. The Parthenon is not a top-hole hall, you know. Piano with violin accompaniment most of the time, and when we're taking a rest—a much-needed rest—the relief comes on. You're going to be the relief. See?"

"I see!"

"I'll put you up to all your duties, and see you through. You wouldn't have much chance at your age; but so many of the men have gone into khaki that a kid has a chance if he can do the work. You look older in those clothes—don't mention that you're under seventeen."

"I won't mention it."

"You'll have to play from six to seven, steady," said Mr. Curll, "then you'll have to come on again for another hour at nine. It's only two hours work, but I warn you that it's a hard grind. After a steady hour at the piano, you feel your head in a regular maze—what with the noise and the bad light and the bad atmosphere and the buzzing pictures. 'Tain't what you'd call a healthy life. And there's a deadly draught in the orchestra, too—catches you on the legs. You'll find your head burning and your feet nearly frozen."

"Oh!" said Lowther. "But a draught can be stopped, I suppose?"

"I dare say it could."

"Why not ask the manager——"

Mr. Curll laughed.

"Ask him for the sack, do you mean?"

"Oh!" said Lowther again.

"You see, a relief pianist is supposed to be made of iron," said Mr. Curll. "He must be without any human feelings at all—he is simply an adjunct to the pictures like the lantern and the lantern-man. The pictures are the thing. 'Tain't much use grumbling. A man must live—and there's always some dirty German ready and willing to take your place!"

"I see!"

"Come on!" said Mr. Curll.

He made another effort, and negotiated another flight of stairs with Monty Lowther at his heels. Lowther was not feeling quite so enthusiastic now. Mr. Curll's description of the life of a cinema pianist was not highly encouraging.

On the next landing Mr. Curll paused to rest again.

"By the by," he remarked, "I'd better warn you against Twinger."

"Who's Twinger?" asked Lowther.

"The violinist. An utter skunk!" said Mr. Curll—"simply devoured with jealousy. He says that the hands are for the pictures, and not for my playing. And when it's unmistakable—simply unmistakable—that the people in front are clapping the music, the silly ass thinks they're applauding his scratchy violin! You'd hardly believe it—he thinks so!"

"By Jove, does he?"

"He does. There's a lot of jealousy and envy among orchestra men," said Mr. Curll, with a shake of the head. "What he does is simply an obbligato—a violin obbligato, you know. But the utter, crass imbecile thinks that he does the whole bizney, and that I simply accompany him—and he has the cheek to say that accompany him badly! That's the sort of cringing worm he is! Come on!"

Mr. Curll's next manful effort landed him at the manager's office.

Monty Lowther had pictured in his mind an office with desks and safes and leather-covered chairs, and so on. He found a small room with a chair and a table and a dingy desk and telephone. A fat man with a bald head in evening clothes, with a stained shirt-front and soiled cuffs, was seated at the table, speaking into the telephone. Mr. Curll and his companion waited till the great man put down the receiver.

Then the manager condescended to take notice of their existence.

"Well?" he rapped out.

It was remarkable to see the change that came over Mr. Curll in the presence of the great and august Mr. Kelly. All the consequence departed from his manner, and he looked almost as if he would crawl to Mr. Kelly's feet on his hands and knees.

"I have taken the liberty of bringing my young friend, sir," said Mr. Curll deferentially. "The new pianist, sir, whom you were so kind as to——"

"Come here!" said Mr. Kelly, beckoning to Lowther, and ruthlessly interrupting Mr. Curll.

Lowther advanced to the table.

Mr. Kelly was about to speak when the telephone-bell rang. He took up the receiver, and Lowther waited.

"Yes," said Mr. Kelly into the receiver. "Parthenon—yes. Oh, quite so! Tell Sir William that I shall call when next in London—certainly! Probably in a few days—I really cannot say with certainty; Sir William knows that I am a busy man. What? What? Oh, decidedly! I shall certainly be present at the dinner at the Ritz as his lordship expects me. Very well! Tell his lordship to ring me up at seven, otherwise I am afraid I cannot attend to the matter to-day. Good-bye!"

Mr. Kelly hung up the receiver.

He seemed for some moments buried in thought, and then he made an entry in a little pocket-book. Lowther,

somewhat impressed by this sudden discovery of Mr. Kelly's noble and titled acquaintances in London, waited for the great man to become aware of his existence again.

"What? What?" said Mr. Kelly, looking at him at last. "Who are you? Oh, I remember, the new pianist. Name?"

"Lowther, sir."

"You are very young for the post," said Mr. Kelly, frowning.

"I hope I shall be satisfactory, sir."

"I hope you will," said Mr. Kelly, his tone implying that he doubted it. "I am engaging this young man—Looter, did you say your name was?"

"Lowther, sir."

"Lowther, on your recommendation, Curll. Looter—Lumper—what is your name?—you are engaged for a week, and we shall see what you can do. You will receive a salary of ten shillings, paid weekly. You may go."

The telephone-bell rang again, and Mr. Kelly became once more oblivious of Monty Lowther's existence. In a somewhat astonished state, Lowther followed Mr. Curll from the office. The door having closed behind them, Mr. Curll closed one eye in a peculiar way at Lowther and led the way downstairs.

CHAPTER 12.
Lowther's New Job.

"THIS is the band-room," said Mr. Curll, as he led Lowther into a murky apartment on the ground floor, close to the orchestra. "You can wait here till your turn comes, if you like, and look round you. I shall have to be going on soon."

As the "band" consisted only of Mr. Curll and Twinger the violinist, the band-room was doubtless large enough to accommodate the band. But it was a dingy little room with one small window that looked out on a paved court. A heavy atmosphere of stale tobacco made Lowther cough a little. Mr. Curll lighted a cigarette.

"What do you think of the manager?" he asked.

"He seems a very busy man," said Lowther. "I should hardly have thought from his looks that he had such nobby acquaintances in London."

Mr. Curll chuckled loud and long, somewhat to the junior's surprise.

"You don't know him yet," grinned Mr. Curll. "As for being busy, he can't be very busy with only one little hole-and-corner cinema to look after. As for London, he goes there once in a blue moon, and puts up at a fourth-rate hotel and sees nobody."

Lowther stared.

"But Sir William——" he said.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And his lordship——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I don't quite see the joke," said Lowther, perplexed. "He couldn't talk about them on the telephone unless they were real people, I suppose."

"Couldn't he?" chuckled Mr. Curll. "You see, our manager lives chiefly on swank. He gets about two-pound-ten a week for running this show."

"My hat!"

"Not exactly a screw for dining at the Ritz and meeting his lordship—what?"

"I suppose not."

"It's all swank!" explained Mr. Curll, further enlightening Lowther's ignorance. "He has a dodge for the bell to ring whenever he has a caller in the office—he doesn't have a caller there more than three times a week—and he impresses them by gassing into the telephone."

"Great Scott!"

Lowther stared at the grinning Mr. Curll in astonishment.

"But didn't you say that a relief pianist was a nobody—or less than a nobody?" he asked.

"Quite so!"

"Then why should he want to impress me with his silly rot?"

"My dear chap, he would impress the caretaker's cat with his silly rot if he could!" chuckled Mr. Curll. "Whether you are nobody or somebody, he would like you to believe that he dines with Sir William and his lordship at the Ritz. It's his weakness, you see. Don't let on you know. If he thought anybody suspected, he would boot that anybody on his neck like lightning!"

"Well, of all the silly asses!" chuckled Lowther. "The man must be a duffer!"

"I believe this country is populated chiefly by duffers," said Mr. Curll. "Shush! Here comes that worm!"

"That worm" was Mr. Twinger, the violinist. Evidently, there was no confidence between the pianist and the violinist. They exchanged the briefest of nods, and Mr. Twinger sat down and began plucking at the strings of his fiddle.

A little later the band went in, and Mr. Curll was heard strumming. Monty Lowther remained at the door, looking into the orchestra. The people were coming in now, and there was a shuffling of feet in the hall. Soon afterwards the lights went down, and the pictures began to play on the screen.

Lowther's heart was beating fast.

At six he was to take Mr. Curll's place on the piano-stool, and play for a whole hour while Mr. Curll and Mr. Twinger were resting—or, more probably, refreshing themselves at the White Horse opposite.

He would be screened from the view of the audience; and he knew, from his own experience, that the "people in front" paid little heed to the music.

But it was exciting, all the same.

He thought of St. Jim's, and wondered what Tom Merry and Manners would think, if they could see him. They would be having tea in the study when he was going on as "relief" at the Parthenon. He thought of the cosy study and the cheery faces of his chums, and he glanced at his dingy surroundings, at the wizened face of the fiddler, the bald spot on Mr. Curll's head as it bobbed at the piano; the whirring, dazzling succession of pictures on the screen. It was a change, with a vengeance; but he would not admit that it was a change for the worse. It was the beginning of a new life, and some day he would be a cinema actor!

That outcome certainly seemed a good way off at the present moment. There did not seem much connection between relief playing at the Parthenon and acting for the film companies. But he repeated that it was a beginning; he was getting into the "cinema swim," anyway.

The thumping of the piano, the wheezing of the fiddle, died off, and Mr. Curll and Mr. Twinger came out. Mr. Curll patted his young friend on the shoulder.

"Butt in!" he said encouragingly.

"Right-ho!" said Lowther, as coolly as he could.

He went to the piano.

He had determined not to look at the audience; always a good rule under such circumstances. But, in spite of himself, he could not resist a glance over the baize curtain.

A darkened hall, with a glimmering sea of faces, met his gaze.

Had that sea of faces stared at him, his nerve might have been shaken, but no one was even looking in his direction. Probably a large part of the audience did not even notice a change from the orchestra to the relief pianist. Certainly nobody cared anything about it.

Lowther was of less consequence in that crowded hall than the lad who was moving among the seats with the eternal yelp of "Chocklits—'lits—'lits! Chocklits!"

That knowledge nerved him.

He sat down on the stool, and ran his fingers up and down the keys. The piano had seen its best days, and seen the last of them, long since.

But it was still playable, though several notes gave forth weird sounds, and one at least gave forth no sound at all.

The shadowy hall darkened still more, and the pictures began to play on the screen. From his seat at the piano, Lowther had to screw his neck to look upward at the screen and watch the pictures pass.

He was so close to them that they dazed and dazzled him.

A "drama" was starting, and the first scene was a bridge over a mill-stream, and a girl who leaned on the bridge, and a villain in a black moustache who approached with stealthy footsteps.

Dazzled by the rapid play of the cinema, Lowther forgot to touch the keys, and for several moments there was silence.

He became aware of a shirt-front and a purple face and a furious gesture somewhere in the gloom, and realised that Mr. Kelly was gesticulating at him.

It recalled him to himself, and he played.

His eyes were so dazzled that he could not look at the pictures for a few minutes, and he played anything that came into his head.

But he had a sure touch, and he played well though almost unconsciously; and as his head became clearer he realised that he was playing Mendelssohn's Spring Song, which had not even been in his mind when he sat down.

Very quickly he dropped into place, as it were, and raised his eyes to the pictures again, and watched them as he played. He had no music before him; he depended wholly on his memory.

The scene had changed to a rolling ship on a turbid sea, and Lowther, instinctively rather than from calculation, for the action was too quick for thought, turned on, "A Life on the Ocean Wave." As the waves rose higher round the plunging ship, he switched on the "Bay of Biscay." Then the picture changed with startling suddenness to an Eastern scene, and Monty Lowther turned on the "Indian Love Lyrics."

He was gratified by hearing a murmuring voice from the other side of the baize curtain:

"Don't that music seem to soot the pictures, Ted!"

Lowther grinned a little. That innocent member of the audience apparently did not guess that the music was specially played for the picture.

Pictures succeeded one another with dazzling swiftness on the screen, and to each as it appeared Lowther turned on suitable music. He was picking up the "game" with wonderful quickness.

When his hour was up, in a pause of the pictures, he rose from the stool at a beckoning sign from Mr. Curll.

His legs were a little unsteady as he went out, and he felt dazed. He had to pull himself together. Mr. Curll patted him on the shoulder.

"Well done, kid!"

"All right?" asked Lowther.

"Right as rain; Kelly's pleased!"

"Is he?"

"You bet! He said to me, 'That's all right.' Fact!" said Mr. Curll impressively.

Lowther looked as impressed as he could. As a matter of fact, he did not think very much of Mr. Kelly; but as that gentleman was his manager, he knew that he ought to be pleased by a word of praise from him. So he looked as pleased as he could.

"You're going on now?" he asked.

"Yes. That worm Twinger hasn't turned up yet," said Mr. Curll. "He's always late. He'll get sacked for it. Ta-ta!"

Mr. Curll went to the piano, and started, as the pictures came on again. A few minutes later Mr. Twinger joined him, and the wheeze of the violin was added once more to the droning of the piano.

Monty Lowther went out into the open air. His head was swimming; the music was buzzing in it, and the pictures seemed still to dance before his eyes. He drew in deep breaths of fresh air with satisfaction, though it was only the fresh air of a side street in a town.

He had acquitted himself well. His manager had been pleased to praise him. When he came in a little later, the great man condescended to nod to him.

"I noticed your playing," he said. A god on high Olympus, condescending to take notice of the existence of a mere mortal, would have had the same manner as Mr. Kelly at that moment.

"Yes, sir," said Lowther, not thinking of anything else to say.

"The job's yours as long as you want it," said Mr. Kelly graciously.

"You're very kind, sir."

"You don't drink?"

"Drink!" gasped Lowther. "No."

"Stick to that, and you've got a good job," said Mr. Kelly.

Then he went away, and the new relief pianist was left to congratulate himself.

CHAPTER 13.
Looking for Lowther.

"I WONDER where old Monty is!"

Tom Merry made that remark, in the study at St. Jim's, a few days later.

Manners, who was carefully placing a new supply of butter in the soap-dish ready for tea, looked up.

"Queer that he doesn't write," he said.

"Jolly queer," said Tom. "He hadn't much time to tell us where he was going. But he might drop us a line to say; a picture postcard, at least."

"Out of sight, out of mind," growled Manners.

Tom shook his head.

"Monty isn't like that," he said. "He hasn't forgotten his old pals. But I wonder where he is, and why he doesn't write?"

An eyeglass gleamed in at the doorway, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth followed it in.

"Heah we are, deah boys," he remarked. "Any news of Lowthah?"

"Not yet," said Tom.

"Bai Jove! He must be havin' a wippin' time, if he can't find time to w'ite," said D'Arcy. "Where did you say he was gone?"

"I didn't say anywhere; I don't know."

"That's wathah cuwious, isn't it?"

"Tea's ready!" remarked Manners.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was looking serious. He turned his eyeglass from Tom Merry to Manners, and back again.

"Vewy cuwious indeed," he repeated.

"Go hon!" said Blake, as he took his seat at the table. "What the dickens does it matter? Pass the jam!"

"I have been thinkin'."

"Oh, draw it mild!" urged Blake.

"Pway don't be an ass, Blake. I have been thinkin' about Lowthah," said Arthur Augustus firmly. "My ideah is that he has wun away again."

"What rot!" said Tom Merry. But he started a little.

"Pway do not chawactewise my wemarks as wot, Tom Mewwy. I do not wegard it as polite. You wemembah that Lowthah wan away once to be a sillay actah, and the Head fetched him back by the yah. This time he has been wathah deep, that's all. My ideah is that Lowthah has gone lookin' for twouble."

"He's only got a fortnight off. He'll be back next week."

"Pwobably he will not come back."

Toby the page put his head in at the door.

"Letter for Master Merry."

"Oh, good!" said Tom, and he added, as he took the letter, "Lowther's fist. Here's news of the bounder!"

Tom opened the letter hastily.

He read it, and a perplexed look came over his face.

"Well?" said all the juniors together.

Arthur Augustus shook his head with a wise air, as much as to say that he knew what he knew.

"I'll read it out," said Tom.

And he read out the letter from Lowther. It bore no address, and it ran:

"Dear Tom,—Just a line to let you and Manners know that I'm getting on first-rate. I'll tell you later where I am and what I'm doing. Everything in the garden is lovely, and I'm having a good time. I may not come back at the end of the fortnight, but keep that dark for a bit, till we see how things go. I hope you are all serene.—Yours ever,

MONTY.

"P.S.—I hope you are looking after my white rabbits."

"Well, that's a jolly queer letter," said Blake. "What the deuce is the fellow up to?"

"Pewwaps I may be permitted to wemark that I told you so," said Arthur Augustus triumphantly. "Lowthah has bolted."

"Bow-wow!"

"And he don't mean to come back if he can help it," persisted Arthur Augustus. "He has got on the stage again."

"Rats!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"What's the address on the letter?" asked Digby.

"There isn't one."

"That's odd! Looks as if he doesn't want to be found. You can't write back to him."

"I suppose not," said Tom, wrinkling his brows. "I suppose we could write to his uncle's house for the letter to be forwarded. His uncle must know where he is."

"Better not, deah boy!"

"Why not, ass?"

"I wefuse to be called an ass. My impwession is that his uncle does not know where he is," said Arthur Augustus firmly: "He has pulled the wool ovah the eyes of that unsuspectin' old gentleman."

"My hat!" said Manners, with a whistle. "If Monty is up to some little game we should give him away no end by writing to him at his uncle's house. Better keep off the grass, I think."

"Yaas, wathah."

"By the way, what's the postmark on the envelope?" asked Blake.

Tom Merry glanced at it.

"Abbotsford!"

"A good step from here," said Blake. "We're playing Abbotsford School at footer on Saturday. We shall be over there then. What can Lowther be doing in Abbotsford? 'Tain't a place for a holiday. There's a khaki camp there, certainly, and a football ground, and ——"

"And cinemas," said Arthur Augustus sagely. "Lowthah has taken the bit between his teeth, deah boys, as he did before, but he has been wathah deepah this time."

"Oh, rats!" said Tom.

"If you say wats to me, Tom Mewwy——"

"Rats, and many of them!" said Tom cheerily. "I don't know what Monty's up to, but he's not playing the giddy ox."

"Perhaps he's rushed to the rescue of a young lady captured by masked ruffians," suggested Manners. "He may have learned how to do it from Gussy."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Mannahs, you uttah ass!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus indignantly.

The swell of St. Jim's had never been allowed to forget that unlucky adventure.

"They've got that film on at Wayland now," remarked Blake. "Old Curll's in it. I went over specially to see if Gussy came out in it, but they'd cut his bit. It was a pity; Gussy would have brought down the house."

"Weally, Blake——"

During tea the juniors discussed Monty Lowther and his probable doings. Certainly, however, with all their surmises, they did not guess what he was actually doing.

After tea was over, and the chums of Study No. 6 were gone, Tom Merry and Manners looked at one another curiously.

"Monty can't be playing the giddy ox in that way, Tom!" Manners remarked, in a tentative sort of way.

"Blessed if I know," said Tom. "He says something about not coming back at the end of his holiday. I don't quite like that."

"The postmark shows he's in Abbotsford——"

"Exactly, and we're going there on Saturday to play Yorke's team."

"We'll look round for the ass."

"And if we find him there we'll talk to him like Dutch uncles," said Tom Merry.

When Saturday came the St. Jim's junior eleven went over in their brake to Abbotsford School. It was one of their regular fixtures, and always a good match. Monty Lowther ought to have been in the eleven, but Tom Merry, Kangaroo, Dane, Talbot, Blake, Herries, D'Arcy, Figgins, Kerr, Wynn, and Redfern made up a strong team.

As a matter of fact, Monty Lowther vanished from the minds of his friends when they reached Abbotsford School. Football required all their attention. Yorke and his men were in great form.

It was a great match, and Tom Merry & Co. played up well. A goal to either side in the first half, then a goal to Abbotsford, and until within ten minutes of the close Abbotsford remained ahead. Then a splendid

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goal from Talbot equalised the score, and almost on the whistle Tom Merry put in the leather again.

"Three to two!" chuckled Blake as they came off. "Hurrah for us! This is what comes of Shell chaps standing out of the team. Leave a few more out next time, Tommy."

"Yaas, wathah, and we'll wipe up the gwound with the next lot," grinned Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Tom Merry laughed.

"We're going to look round a bit before going home," he remarked. "We'll clear off from here, and the brake can wait at the station. We'll go on a cinema crawl."

"Good egg! And if we find Lowther hanging round a cinema we'll scrag him, and yank him into the brake," said Blake.

"That's the idea."

"I am quite suah that he is heah, deah boys. In case of doubt you can always wely on a fellah of tact and judgment."

"Bow-wow!"

Manners had come over with the footballers, and he joined in the "cinema crawl." As Tom Merry was standing treat at the cinemas the footballers had no objection to putting off their return to St. Jim's to the latest possible moment, and visiting one cinema after another.

There were four cinemas in Abbotsford. The St. Jim's party started with the big one in the High Street, and then went to the next biggest, and then to the next, and wound up with the Parthenon, which was the least imposing of the four.

So far they had seen nothing of Lowther.

The postmark on his letter indicated that he was spending his holiday in Abbotsford. The fact that he did not give his address hinted that he wished to keep it concealed. So Tom Merry and Manners could not help thinking that there were possibly some grounds for Arthur Augustus' surmise. In a few days more Lowther's leave would be up, and if he did not return to St. Jim's the results might be serious. The Head was not likely to take a lenient view again of such an escapade as staying away without leave.

But nothing was seen of Monty Lowther.

If he was hanging about the Abbotsford cinemas, the extensive "crawl" of the St. Jim's juniors had failed to reveal his presence.

But as they sat there in the Parthenon Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gave a sudden start. The picture on the screen showed a spring scene—a hillside clad in verdure and rippling streams—and at that moment a piano was supplying the music. Although the juniors did not know it, it was the hour of the "relief" at the Parthenon, and the pianist hidden behind the baize curtain at the front was playing Mendelssohn's Spring Song, with rippling facility.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus.

"Hallo, what's biting you?" asked Manners.

"Nothin' is bitin' me, Mannahs, and I wegard the question as widiculous. You may have noticed that somebody there is playin' the Spwing Song. Monty Lowthah was always playin' that, and he always played it too quick. It is bein' played too quick now. That stwuck me."

"Perhaps Lowther's playing it!" grinned Blake, little guessing how near the truth his remark was.

"Time we got home," said Tom Merry. "Come on! We've drawn all the cinemas blank."

And the juniors walked out and returned to their brake, and were soon bowling home along the dusky roads to St. Jim's. But Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was looking very thoughtful—very thoughtful indeed.

Arthur Augustus prided himself upon being a fellow of tact and judgment, and upon seeing further into a millstone than most fellows. And Arthur Augustus had his suspicions now—strong suspicions. In fact, Arthur Augustus, like the celebrated Mrs. Snagsby, felt that he "saw it all."

CHAPTER 14.

Something Like Work!

"LOOTER!"

Mr. Kelly, who prided himself upon forgetting the names of his employees—that being one variation of his "swank"—was calling for Lowther. It was Tuesday, and Monty Lowther was in a dingy little apartment that went by the name of the band-room.

Lowther was in a thoughtful mood.

He had, as a matter of fact, known that Tom Merry & Co. were at the cinema an Saturday. As he sat at the piano, he had heard Arthur Augustus' sage remarks concerning the Spring Song.

He had kept well down behind the curtain, fearful lest his old chums should spot him there, though in the deep dusk of the cinema hall there was little risk of that.

Their voices had touched a chord in his breast, bringing back St. Jim's very clearly to his thoughts.

He had now been nearly a fortnight at the Parthenon, and he was wondering very seriously whether it was worth while "sticking it out."

He lodged with Mr. Curll in a cheap little place behind the cinema, and his quarters were rather a change after St. Jim's.

Lowther, however, was quite prepared to rough it, in pursuit of his ambition. He was in the "cinema swim": but he had to realise that he was about as far as ever from becoming a cinema actor.

Was he going back to St. Jim's when the fortnight was up?

He hardly knew.

At first, he had decided not. Now he was more doubtful. The life of a relief pianist was not "all lavender." The work was hard and unhealthy, and seemed to lead to nowhere. For a poor musician with his bread to earn it was all very well. But for Lowther, with St. Jim's open to him, it was no great "catch."

Yet he was loth to give up what he had considered his chance.

During his stay with Mr. Curll, he had had a good influence over that gentleman. Mr. Curll was ashamed to allow the junior to see him intoxicated, and his visits to the White Horse had been much less frequent. But temperance did not seem to agree with the one-time great tenor of the Roser-Moser Company. He had several outbreaks, and each time Lowther expected to see him "sacked" by the cinema manager.

This special afternoon Lowther had lost sight of Mr. Curll, and he guessed that the unreliable gentleman was in his old haunts. It was time for Mr. Curll to take his place at the piano for the early pictures. Mr. Twinger had come in, and was ready with his violin. Mr. Curll had not appeared. Then the voice of the manager was heard calling for the relief pianist.

"Looter! Where's Looter?"

Monty Lowther hurried up.

"Oh, here you are!" said Mr. Kelly, whose red face was purple with angry excitement now. "Where's that villain Curll—what?"

"I haven't seen him for some time, sir," said Lowther.

Mr. Kelly raved.

"The drunken brute! The pictures are going on, and he's not here. Looter—I mean Lumper—could you take his place with Twinger? Are you up to it?"

"I think so," said Lowther.

"Well, get on, then!"

Lowther was only too glad to do his friend a good turn by taking his place; he hoped that it might save Mr. Curll from the "boot." He hurried to the piano and joined Mr. Twinger. Hastily he glanced over the music, and started in concert with the violin.

Mr. Kelly listened anxiously.

But his fat face soon cleared. Lowther, boy as he was, was in fact a more capable player than Mr. Curll, and he filled the place better than the unfortunate Mr. Curll filled it.

He played on till six o'clock, when Mr. Twinger retired to rest. It was now time for the "relief" to come on, which meant that Lowther had to go on playing, as there was no one to take his place.

He had already played for two hours. He went grinding on, dazzled by the pictures that came and went, his head in a buzz with the incessant music. How he was to get through the next hour he hardly knew.

But he got through it.

He fervently hoped that Mr. Curll would have turned up as usual by seven. He felt that he could not keep it up longer than that.

At seven he looked round anxiously. Mr. Twinger came in and resumed his place; it was the "orchestra" again now. Lowther's head was almost in a whirl. Mr. Curll had not appeared.

"Where's Curll?" he whispered to the violinist.

Twinger grinned.

"Boozing, most likely," he replied.

"Hasn't he turned up?" asked Lowther, in dismay.

"I haven't seen him."

"Oh, crumbs!"

"I'm waiting for you, young 'un."

"I can't stick it out," said Lowther. "This is enough to drive a fellow off his chump."

"You can't chuck it," said Twinger. "It's the sack if you do."

At that moment the "sack" would have appeared like a blessing to Lowther, whose head was aching and throbbing. But he went on. He realised that it was "up" to him.

About half an hour later Mr. Curll came sneaking in, and Lowther relinquished the piano-stool to him, and limped out. He staggered as he walked, and his surroundings swam before his eyes. Mr. Kelly clapped him on the shoulder.

"The job's yours!" he said.

Lowther blinked at him.

"I'm giving you Curll's place," explained Mr. Kelly. "You're a kid, but you're reliable. You get a pound a week."

Lowther shook his head.

"I don't want to take Mr. Curll's job, sir," he said. "What is Curll going to do?"

The manager stared at him.

To have his lordly will opposed by an underling—and an underling to whom he was granting a great favour—took his breath away.

"What!" he ejaculated.

"I'd rather stick to my own job, sir," said Lowther, as meekly as he could. "I'm satisfied."

"By gad!" said the manager.

He was too astonished to say more: and Monty Lowther went on his way, and escaped into the fresh air.

For a long time Lowther simply stood and breathed, incapable of thought or movement. What he had been through in the last three hours and a half had fairly knocked him out. But at last he pulled himself together, and reflected.

A chance had come his way!

Instead of "relief" pianist, he could take the job of principal pianist. It was a great rise in his new profession—a greater step, indeed, than he could realise with his limited knowledge of the business.

It was, at least, the second rung of the ladder.

But he could not take it. To take Mr. Curll's place, after Mr. Curll had obtained his job for him at the Parthenon, was a little too "thick." It was not what he would have called playing the game.

He shook his head at the thought.

The junior was still thinking it out, when the youth known as "Chocklits" came to tell him that he was wanted. It was time for the "relief" again. Lowther went back to the piano. He passed Mr. Curll, and noticed that that gentleman gave him a very dark look, which startled him.

When Lowther's work was finished, he waited outside the cinema for Mr. Curll. There was a surprise for him when that gentleman came out. As Lowther came towards him, Mr. Curll struck an attitude.

"Viper!" he said.

Monty Lowther jumped.

CHAPTER 15.

Sacked!

"VIPER!" repeated Mr. Curll.

"Wha-a-at!"

"I have taken a viper to my bosom, and warmed him, and he has stung me!" said Mr. Curll, more in sorrow than in anger.

Lowther stared at him.

"Have you been drinking again?" he asked.

"Scorpion!" said Mr. Curll.

"What are you driving at?" demanded Lowther indignantly. "What the dickens do you mean by calling me those names?"

"Who," said Mr. Curll—"who used his influence to get you a job? Who introduced you to the manager, and secured you a berth—a handsome berth—in this cinema?"

"You did," said Lowther.

"And how have you rewarded me?"

"I haven't rewarded you at all," said the puzzled Lowther.

"You have rewarded me," said Mr. Curll, "with a stab in the back. You have acted like a Prussian. You are a viper! You are a scorpion! Ha! I shall shake the dust of this place from my shoes, and I shall go forth knowing that a scorpion has supplanted me!"

Lowther understood at last.

"You ass——" he began.

"Mr. Kelly has spoken to me," said Mr. Curll, with a dignified wave of his hand. "He has told me that you are to take my place to-morrow, and that I can stay on as relief. I have refused to do so. Fallen as he may be in the world's esteem, Horatio Curll has his pride! Scorpion!"

"Look here——"

"Scorpion!" roared Mr. Curll.

"You silly ass!" shrieked Lowther. "Do you think I'm going to bag your job? I told Kelly I wouldn't take it."

Mr. Curll started.

"You told him—what?" he ejaculated.

"I'm not taking your job," said Lowther. "As a matter of fact, I'm getting fed up with the whole bizney. You turn up to-morrow as usual, and keep sober, and it will blow over."

"Come to my arms!" exclaimed Mr. Curll dramatically.

Lowther dodged him. He had no wish to be embraced by the effusive Mr. Curll, to whom clung lovingly the aroma of the saloon bar of the White Horse.

"Oh, chuck it!" said Lowther. "It will be all right. Even if you're sacked, I won't take your job, and Kelly will very likely give you another chance."

"My noble young friend," exclaimed Mr. Curll, quite placated now, "I beg your pardon for calling you a scorpion. Scorpions, alas, are only too common in my profession. It is not safe to do anybody a good turn, lest he should turn and rend you. Come on! We've got to get the kippers for supper," added Mr. Curll, suddenly dropping from the dramatic to the commonplace.

Mr. Curll was friendly, not to say affectionate, over the kippers that evening. The fact that Lowther wasn't a scorpion, and had refused to "bag" his job behind his back, filled him with astonishment and admiration. Mr. Curll's experience in his own profession had probably been a hard one.

But both the pianists were looking forward somewhat uneasily to the morrow. It was probable that the manager would give Mr. Curll another chance, rather than be left without half his orchestra, if Lowther definitely refused to replace him. But he might sack the pair of them—there was no telling. Mr. Curll was anxious at the prospect, and bitterly regretted his last visit to the White Horse.

Lowther, too, was thinking that the morrow was the last day of his leave from St. Jim's.

If he stayed away longer from the school he would be a truant; it would be his previous exploit over again. His uncle would be angry; the Head would probably refuse to take him back, and he would be committed to his new life for good and all.

It was what he wanted, in a way, yet it was a grave crisis in his life. He hardly knew what he wanted, and whether he would not be pleased if Mr. Kelly gave him the order of the boot from the Parthenon.

The next morning he made Mr. Curll go for a walk and see the khaki camp near Abbotsford, thus skilfully keeping him away from his usual haunts.

When they turned up at the cinema in the afternoon Mr. Curll was quite sober, and exceedingly thirsty.

As they entered the cinema, Mr. Curll uttered a sudden exclamation.

"Master D'Arcy, by gad!"

Monty Lowther halted in dismay. Looking like a perfect picture of elegance, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth stood in the dingy vestibule. He had been chatting with the porter, and the porter's manner indicated that a tip had passed. Dobbs made a gesture towards the two pianists, and Arthur Augustus' eyeglass turned upon them.

"Lowthah, bai Jove!"

"Gussy, you ass!" growled Lowther.

Arthur Augustus beamed.

"I have wun you down, deah boy," he remarked. "I had a vewy stwong suspish, you know, and I wan ovah heah this aftahnoon to make suah. I am afwaid it is wathah sewious for the School House. There's a House match, you know, and I have had to stand out of the team to come lookin' for you. If we are licked——"

"Oh, the School House won't be licked, if you're out of the team!" said Lowther. "You may have saved the match for them like this!"

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"And don't mention at St. Jim's that you've seen me here," growled Lowther. "I'm not coming back."

"Your holiday is up to-day, deah boy."

"Oh, rats!"

"I shall insist upon your comin' back with me," said Arthur Augustus firmly. "If you wefuse, I shall use force!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I see nothin' whatevah to cackle at, Lowthah. I wegard you as bein' undah my pwotection, and I am not goin' to allow you to play the giddy ox!"

"Oh, run away and play!" said Lowther. "Come on, Curll!"

"Weally, you ass, don't walk away while I am talkin' to you!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus indignantly. "Lowthah, bai Jove!"

But Lowther was gone.

People were coming into the cinema now. Mr. Twinger was in his place, and Mr. Curll went to the piano. Then Mr. Kelly's voice was heard.

"Curll!"

"Sir!"

"What are you doing there, Curll?"

"Sir, I am about to do my duty here," said Mr. Curll with dignity.

"Get out!"

"Sir!"

"Looter!" said Mr. Kelly, looking round.

"Hallo!" said Lowther. He was growing a little tired of being addressed as Looter.

"Looter—I mean, Lumper—take your place!"

Lowther looked at the manager. Certainly Mr. Kelly had a right to sack Mr. Curll if he chose; but he certainly hadn't a right to insist upon Lowther taking his friend's job, and acting like a "scorpion," as Mr. Curll expressed it.

"Excuse me, sir," said Lowther politely, "I have no desire to take Mr. Curll's place."

The manager became purple.

"Go to your place at once!" he rapped out.

Lowther did not move.

There was an awful pause. The porter was peering through a doorway awestruck. "Chocklits" was looking round a corner, breathless. Mr. Twinger was gazing on with wide-open eyes. The lantern-man had come out of some shadowy corner, and was staring. That a "relief" pianist should dispute the will of the great man who "ran" the cinema was incredible, unbelievable, impossible. But it was happening. It was time for the skies to fall!

Mr. Kelly recovered his breath.

"You refuse?" he gasped.

"I feel bound to do so, sir," said Lowther.

Mr. Kelly waved his hand.

"Go! You're sacked! Go!"

Lowther grinned. He thought of the elegant Arthur Augustus in the vestibule; of the airy study at St. Jim's; the cheery faces of his old chums; the wide playing-fields and the old elms; the House match that was even then going on on Little Side, and he grinned. Never had his dingy surroundings seemed so dingy to his eyes.

"Certainly, sir!" he replied. "Good-afternoon!"

Probably the great man had expected an appeal for mercy. If so, he was disappointed. Lowther walked away cheerily.

"Don't worry, old scout. I was going, anyway," he whispered to Mr. Curll, as he passed.

Mr. Curll nodded, and took his seat on the piano-stool. The manager did not say him nay this time. Somebody had to play for the pictures, so Mr. Curll had another chance. Lowther hoped that he would make the most of it, and leave the White Horse alone.

He sauntered out. Mr. Kelly, with a purple face, followed him to the vestibule.

"Go to Mr. Smith for your wages, and get out of my theatre!" he rapped.

Lowther smiled at him.

"Never mind the ten bob," he said cheerily. "You can give it to the waiter for a tip next time you dine at the Ritz with his lordship. Remember me to Sir William when you see him again."

Leaving the great man quite speechless, Lowther walked out. In the vestibule he greeted Arthur Augustus with a slap on the back that made him stagger.

"Yow-wow!" roared D'Arcy. "Oh, you wuff ass! Yawooh!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Come on!"

"Gweat Scott! Leggo! Bai Jove!"

Monty Lowther seized the elegant junior, and waltzed him out of the cinema into the street. Arthur Augustus' shining topper fell off, and his tie came out, and he gasped for breath.

"Yow-wow!" roared D'Arcy. "Oh, you wuff ass!"

"Come on!" said Lowther exuberantly. "I'm going home. I'm fed-up with cinemas! Let's get back!"

"You uttah ass!" gasped Arthur Augustus, clutching up his topper. "Howevah, I will excuse you if you are comin' back. I am glad I have not had to use force, Lowthah."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A quarter of an hour later Monty Lowther, with his bag in hand, caught the train, with Arthur Augustus, for Rylcombe.

* * * * * * * *

"Goal!"

The House match was near its close.

Tom Merry had put the ball in, and there was a roar from the School House crowd on Little Side.

And loudest of all among the shouting voices was a voice Tom Merry knew well, and he looked round and waved his hand to Monty Lowther, who was standing by the ropes with Arthur Augustus.

The whistle went, and the footballers came off. Tom Merry slapped Lowther on the shoulder.

"So you've come back, you duffer?"

"Looks like it!" grinned Lowther.

"I found him and bwought him back," said Arthur Augustus loftily. "Fortunately, Lowthah decided to come quietly."

"Fortunately for Gussy," explained Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a celebration in Tom Merry's study of Monty Lowther's return, and Monty related his adventures with great gusto to a crowded tea-party. But the knowledge of Lowther's cinema career was confined to Tom Merry & Co. It was probable that the Head would have taken a very different view of it.

But all was well that ended well, and Monty Lowther was very glad to be back in his old quarters. His brief career in the cinema was at an end, and he did not regret it very much.

THE END.

(Next Wednesday's grand, long, complete story of St. Jim's is entitled "GUSSY AND THE GIRL!" Order early.)

UNDER THE DRAGON.

A great new story of thrilling adventure in the Far East.

BY

PETER BAYNE.

The previous instalments told how:—

NORRIS BRENT, on returning to England with his Chinese servant YEN HOW, is greeted by his unworthy cousin, GUY MELVILLE.

Despite the fact that he had during a journey through a desert stolen the last drop of water, and left them to perish, Guy Melville pretends to be pleased at seeing them again. He informs his cousin that, owing to the death of an uncle, he is now owner of the estate Eagle's Cliff, and offers him a position thereon, which is accepted.

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 secure world-wide power.

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

Brent finds a ruby of great value, which, after it has been stolen by Guy Melville, Ming Yung gains possession of.

Ming Yung, in a fit of temper, uses his marvellous invention to destroy a yacht belonging to one of Melville's guests, and is consequently forced to make a hurried return to China with his ward.

Brent and Yen How follow the fugitives to China, where they meet Guy Melville and Karl Marrok, who have followed the Chinaman to recover the ruby.

Brent enters Ming Yung's residence; but, being discovered, he is forced to hide, and, as a safeguard against treachery, detains Ho Beng, who has given the alarm, in hiding with him.

(Now go on with the story.)

The Voice Through the Keyhole—A Narrow Escape—Yen How Goes Shopping.

In the solitude of the dungeonlike room that he was in Norris Brent silently pondered over his position. Owing to the darkness, he could scarcely see Ho Beng, who, sulky and furious, refused to utter a word.

No sound from outside penetrated the thick walls. This struck Brent as being curious. He knew that if Ming Yung had returned home, the absence of his secretary would at once engage the attention of the yellow wizard, and that Ho Beng would be looked for in every direction.

"That being so," the lad reflected, "I should have thought that someone would have been here long before now. Hallo! Here is somebody!"

The soft tread of feet came from the corridor. Ho Beng gave a start, and leaned forward, his eyes sparkling with a crafty light. Next moment the footsteps paused outside the door.

"Are you that side, young master?" murmured a voice through the keyhole. "My belong Yen How."

Surprised, and glad at heart, Brent quickly admitted his comrade, while the discomfited Ho Beng cowered back into a corner, and hung his head.

"This is a stroke of luck!" said Brent delightedly. "Never expected to see you again so soon. How did you manage to locate me?"

Yen How pointed to an iron-barred aperture high up in the wall.

"When you come in," he said, "I was lying on the roof of a little summer-house outside there, wondering what was to become of us both, for the barking of the dogs had made the Chinese suspicious, and they were searching everywhere. Then my hear you speak to Ho Beng. That told me where you were, and, as soon as everything was quiet again, my make my way to this place."

"Good man!" Brent remarked. "Has Ming Yung returned yet?"

Yen How gravely shook his head.

"He no come back this side," he answered. "Only a few Chinese return. More better we had followed him down the river."

Brent, dismayed and astonished, asked the other for an explanation of his meaning. This was soon forthcoming.

It appeared that Yen How, posing as a Chinese beggar, had entered into conversation with the old watchman in the compound. From him he gathered that Ming Yung and Silver Pearl were on their way to Canton, from which town they were to journey to a place on the coast, not far from Hong Kong, where the yellow wizard had a residence high up in the mountains.

"It is known as the Tower of Silence," said Yen How, "and most people are afraid to go near it, for Ming Yung does his magic there."

The look in Brent's face expressed the liveliest interest.

"This is information worth having," he remarked. "Now we know where Ming Yung carries on his scientific experiments when he is in his own land. He is no doubt going to the Tower of Silence to develop the power of the violet ray, and commit another fiendish crime against humanity. Well, let us hope that we shall be able to come between him and his purpose."

Yen How gave vent to a comical laugh.

"We do what we can," he said, "but you do much better to think of Ming Yung no more. He always escape you in the end."

"We'll see," laughed Norris Brent. "In the meantime our best plan will be to leave this place, and——"

A quick exclamation from the other interrupted him, and he was almost knocked off his feet as Ho Beng rushed past him. A moment later, before either he or his comrade could intervene, the cunning secretary had flung open the door and sprung out into the passage.

Both Brent and Yen How immediately darted after the fugitive, but their pursuit was useless, for Ho Beng, favoured by the darkness and the start he had obtained, was speedily lost to sight.

The necessity for prompt flight was now an urgent one. Expecting every minute to hear the sounds of the alarm raised by Ho Beng, the comrades hastened from the house.

As they reached the compound the excited cries of several men fell on their ears. Lights flashed, dogs barked, and the clanging of the gates they were making for warned the fugitives that escape was cut off in that direction.

"This way!" said Yen How, turning back into the shadow of the wall. "Once in the gardens we may reach the open country without being seen."

Scaling a high wall, they dropped into some bushes, ran down a grassy slope, and came to a bridge spanning an ornamental lake.

At this moment Brent caught sight of someone entering the tower wherein Ming Yung had installed his wireless telegraphy apparatus.

Followed by his companion, Brent ran towards the tower, the door of which Ho Beng had neglected to close in his haste. Already he was seated at the transmitting instrument as the comrades came upon him.

Hearing them, he glanced round, and then, leaping to his feet, opened his lips to utter a shout that would have brought the Chinese swarming to his rescue. But Brent effectually silenced him with an upper-cut that crashed home on his chin and sent him senseless to the floor.

"Keep watch!" said Brent to Yen How. "I've something more to do yet."

Picking up a heavy steel bar, he started to wreck the telegraphic machinery, and not until he was satisfied that it was irreparably damaged did he desist from his work of destruction.

"That'll do," he said, flinging the bar aside. "It'll be a long time before any more wireless messages are sent from here. Now for the open again!"

As he and Yen How sprang down the steps from the doorway a gigantic Chinaman, whirling a long sword above his head, ran round a corner of the building, and hurled himself at them.

The bright blade of his weapon flashed and whistled in the air as he struck savagely at Brent, who, dodging the blow, darted in and cleverly tripped up his huge assailant.

Before the fallen giant could regain his feet the comrades were racing on across the garden. They were not alone. Several Chinese were now pursuing them, and they were suddenly threatened by a fresh danger.

From the bushes that covered the banks of the ornamental lake Ho Beng, closely followed by three or four more yellow men, sprang out into the open.

Seeing that the fugitives were heading for the bridge, Ho Beng, shouting excitedly to his followers, ran on at redoubled speed. His object was to close the gateway of the bridge and so baffle the comrades and make their capture a certainty.

He was at the desired point a moment before them, but in his eagerness he bungled the task he had in view, and Yen How, seizing him round the waist, swung him up and hurled him into the lake.

Splash! Ho Beng struck the water in a sitting position that made him a ludicrous figure, and sank out of sight. The lake was not very deep, however, and he soon reappeared, mad with rage and fright, and puffing like a grampus.

"Ha, ha!" cried Yen How, as he and Brent sped across the bridge. "My wish you could see yourself, Ho Beng. You look silly fool, light enough, my word! Velly good for you to stop there and never come out again!"

Beyond the lake the gardens extended for a considerable distance. Trees and tropical plants of many varieties grew in it, and amongst these the comrades were hidden from the searching gaze of their enemies, who spread out, and hunted vainly in every direction.

Their good fortune not deserting them, the fugitives reached the open country, where they had little fear of Ho Beng and his associates overtaking them.

The river, whose winding course they had once previously followed, gleamed before them in the starlight. It was a sure guide for the long and perilous journey that they were now faced with.

Keen though his disappointment was at the unexpected set-back he had received, Norris Brent was not discouraged. On the contrary, he was all the more determined to achieve the stern and settled purpose that had been ever in his mind since the night when Ming Yung had showed himself to be an enemy of the human race.

To bring the yellow wizard to justice was his aim. It was a bold and daring enterprise for a mere lad to undertake, but Brent had complete faith and confidence in himself, and as he had proved himself to be more than a match for his powerful antagonist in the past, so he believed that he would be in the future.

The prospect of meeting Silver Pearl again, moreover, was an added incentive to effort. Puzzled and perplexed though Brent was when he remembered how constrained and distant Silver Pearl had become in her manner towards him, he could never bring himself to believe that this was because she thought differently of him than she had at one time.

Throughout the night he and Yen How pushed steadily on without a halt. At daybreak they broke their journey for a much-needed rest, but were on foot again before the sun was high, and a few hours later were near the village that they had passed through only a day or two before.

"It's about time we had some grub," said Brent, suddenly waking up to the fact that he was uncommonly hungry. "Think we can get anything from the people here? The look and feel of good, hard money ought to make them friendly to us, even though we are strangers."

"Tell you what it is," Yen How rejoined. "More better me go alone. My belong Chinee, and they never suspect me. But let them see you, and velly likely they kick up big row and cause mischief."

"Very well," said Brent, handing the other some Mexican dollars. "Take this with you, and buy the best food you can procure. Don't suppose it will be anything better than cooked rice and fish, but that is tasty enough to fellows who've not eaten anything for nearly a couple of days. I'll wait here for you."

Making his way to the village, Yen How walked through the narrow, dirty streets, halting now and again to inspect the merchandise exposed for sale in the shop windows and on the stalls lining the side of the road.

It was but seldom that a stranger was seen in the place, and Yen How speedily became the cynosure of every eye, a mixed crowd of bearded old men and shaven-headed children following at his heels.

For some time Yen How was unable to find a shop whose appearance satisfied him. Then he entered one where everything in the eatable line, from a native point of view, was obtainable. Three enormously fat Chinese, bowing, smiling, and wringing their hands, dashed out from a dark recess to serve him.

It took Yen How some time to make his purchases, for the portly merchants apparently expected him to buy the whole of their stock-in-trade, and piled the counter with all kinds of comestibles. As it was, he purchased enough rice, fish, and corn-cakes to last him and Brent for three weeks.

"How much this little lot?" he inquired, when he was ready to depart. "You tell me quick; my want to go!"

The yellow trio conferred together in whispered tones, and then one of them, again smiling, bowing, and wringing his hands, stated the amount of Yen How's indebtedness to the firm.

"Sixty dollars, my lord!" he said in a high, whining voice. "And that is almost cost price. Sixty dollars!"

Yen How stared aghast at the man. Then his anger rose. Thrusting his head well over the treble line of dried fish that hung in graceful festoons from around his neck, he gave vocal expression to his wrath.

"You pimply-faced robber!" he exclaimed. "Sixty dollars you tell me? Then my tell you that you lie! My pay you six dollars, and not a cent more, my word, no! Sixty dollars! You like to finger them! S-c-cat! Toughs like you make me tired!"

As he counted out six dollars and laid them on the table, Yen How perceived that the plundering shopmen exchanged meaning glances. Then all three of them grabbed hold of him, and let free a united scream for help that was heard all over the village.

Yen How backed away, but a fierce tug at his pigtail brought him up sharp, and as this prized appendage to his scalp threatened to be dragged out by the roots, he was compelled to advance with a run to the counter.

His eye, catching sight of a large canister of red pepper, a thought flashed across his mind that brought a smile of wicked glee to his lips.

Seizing the canister, he knocked off the lid, and, with a sweeping movement of his arm, dashed the contents into the faces of his tormentors.

Instantly he was released, and the three fat Chinamen, blinded by the pepper in their eyes, forgot all about Yen How, and commenced a violent war-dance on their own account.

"My leave you to it!" scoffed Yen How, grinning triumphantly. "That pepper velly good thing to make you dance and sing. My word! Suppose you go stage-side manager-man pay you sixty dollars a week for such a funny performance."

Leaving the shop, burdened heavily with his purchases, Yen How strode majestically down the street. The crowd made way before him, for he still retained possession of the pepper-canister, and no one had the slightest desire to become closely acquainted with it.

Returning to the grove where he had parted from Brent, he told him of his experience. His companion roared with laughter.

"It was a smart thing to do, Yen How, and helped you out of a nasty fix. The robbers only had what they deserved, for the things were worth no more than what you gave for them, and they meant to swindle you."

In the cool and seclusion of the grove they enjoyed a hearty meal. Then they resumed their journey, travelling on until

As Brent and Yen How reached the entrance on their way out from the theatre they were seized by the four detectives who had been watching them. "It's useless to protest," said the one in command. (*See page* 26.)

sunset, when they camped for the night in a dry cave that looked out over a wild and desolate region.

The river, whose course they had followed, flowed through this inhospitable tract of country, but there was no junk procurable for them to make use of, and so they were faced with the necessity of crossing the desert on foot.

They slept soundly for a few hours, and then made a fresh start as the moon rose over the mountains in the distance.

Paying the Penalty—The Travellers—Under Arrest—Over the Mountains.

In a native hut that was the only human abode for many miles around, a white man lay on a bed of sickness. His face, upon which fell the light from a candle burning in a horn-lantern, was pale and emaciated to a degree.

The room and its contents were of the poorest and meanest description. Beyond a rickety table, and the rough couch of the suffering man, there was scarcely an article of furniture. In the far corner, an old Chinaman, feeble with age, and worn from long years of arduous and unremitting toil, was crouching over a smouldering wood-fire, whose smoke ineffectually escaped through a hole in the roof.

The night winds went howling mournfully past the hovel. They sounded a dirge of death to Guy Melville, for so the sick man was, and he stared up at the smoke-blackened rafters above him with a look of unutterable misery and woe in his eyes.

He was dying, and he knew it, and the thought of how different everything might have been but for his own wickedness and folly, filled the cup of his bitterness to overflowing. He, the master of Eagle's Nest, rich and fortunate so as to be envied by most men, was doomed to die in this wretched habitation without a single friend to watch kindly over his last moments on earth.

Remorse and unavailing regret were heavy upon him. He had sinned, and this was his punishment. Hatred of his young cousin, and a blind, unreasoning avarice that he had made no attempt to control, had brought him to this terrible pass.

He closed his eyes, and still before his vision there moved the red ruby, the wonderful gem to secure which he had been ready to sell his immortal soul. It mocked him now. In his bitter need, it was worthless as a common pebble. He groaned aloud as he remembered all the sacrifices of right, health, and contentment of mind and spirit that he had made for it.

Then he thought of his cousin. With cruel, merciless hate, he had hunted Norris Brent to the verge of the grave. The lad had never done him harm. Yet from the first there had always been a gulf between them that grew wider and wider as the years went by.

"Would that I could see him before the end and plead for his forgiveness," Melville murmured. "He would not refuse to give it to me. Brave and generous he always was, so different from me."

Time dragged slowly on. Now and again the Chinaman threw more fuel on the fire, and once he brought a basin containing some kind of thin, vegetable soup to his guest, but Melville impatiently waved it away.

The old fellow returned to his seat before the fire. He had not been there long when a loud knock sounded at the door, which was immediately afterwards thrown open. Two travellers stood on the threshold, and looked into the hut. Then one of them spoke.

"Can you give us lodging for the night?" he inquired. "We should be up and away by daybreak, and would pay you well."

Before the Chinaman had time to answer, a loud cry burst from Guy Melville's lips.

"Norris!" he exclaimed. "Is it really you, my cousin?"

Stepping quickly into the hut, Norris Brent crossed to the couch, and looked eagerly down into Melville's upturned face. Amazement and pity held him speechless for a moment. In making his way to this lonely hovel with Yen How, he had prepared to meet the greatest surprise of his life.

"Guy!" he said at last. "This is an extraordinary meeting. It grieves me to the heart to see you lying here, but I'm more than glad to meet you again, for I've never been easy in my mind in wondering whether you managed to reach the bank safely that day you were carried away by the river."

A wan, haggard smile parted Melville's lips.

"It would have been far better for me," he said, in bitter

self-scorn, "had you left me to drown. Then I should have been spared this, at any rate. You came to China with a nobler object than I did. It was to get back the red ruby that Ming Yung stole from me after I had stolen it from you, that I came here."

Brent gave a start of surprise. He had long suspected his cousin of having robbed him of the ruby, but the possibility of the yellow wizard having secured possession of it had not occurred to him.

"This is news to me," he said. "Are you sure that Ming Yung has it?"

"Positive!" Melville replied. "He has it right enough, unless Marrok has got it by this time, for that fellow was keener after it even than myself."

"I don't fancy Marrok would succeed where you failed," said Brent; "and it's more than probable that his journey with Ming Yung will be a lost one. Ming Yung would scarcely risk the loss of such a valuable stone by carrying it about with him when he could leave it in a perfectly safe place at home."

"It may be," Melville remarked; "and if I could be sure that Karl Marrok would never set eyes on the ruby I should die in peace."

His hand suddenly tightened its grasp round that of his cousin.

"There's one thing more, Norris," he whispered. "Will you forgive me for all the wrong I've done you?"

"Of course I do, if there is anything to forgive," Brent answered, tears of generous pity and heartfelt sorrow in his eyes. "But you were strongly tempted, and you fell, as I might have done in your case."

Guy Melville smiled and shook his head.

"No," he said; "you would never have acted so."

He did not speak again, but dozed off into a deep sleep, and while he was in that sleep death came peacefully to him. For all the wrong he did in life he had paid the penalty, by being cut off in the best of his days, far from home, in a foreign land.

Yet comfort and ease of mind had been given to him at the last; and Norris Brent, looking down into the still, white face of the dead man, experienced a solemn joy at knowing that before the call of death had sounded his cousin had become reconciled to him.

The next morning Guy Melville's mortal remains were committed to their last resting-place, and at the head of the grave Brent and Yen How planted a simple wooden cross that they had fashioned themselves overnight.

When this sad duty was performed, and the Chinese owner of the hut had been made happy by the present of a small sum of money, the comrades continued their journey. On the following day they entered Canton. It was necessary to stay here for a while to refit, so they put up at a native hotel near the harbour front, a clean, quiet place that Yen How had been recommended to by a reliable guide.

It was late in the evening before they had finished their shopping, but after returning to the hotel they went out again to visit a Chinese theatre. Unknown to them, they were followed by a man who had been keeping a close watch on their movements for the greater part of the day.

This individual was a member of the Chinese secret police. After seeing the comrades take their seats, he went away, to return in a short time accompanied by three other men, belonging, like himself, to the native detective force.

The performance was an interesting one, and both Brent and Yen How thoroughly enjoyed it, remaining to the end. As they reached the entrance on their way out, they were seized by the four detectives who had been watching them.

"It's useless to protest," said the one in command, speaking in excellent English, as Brent angrily demanded to know the meaning of the outrage. "You're under arrest, and will be taken to prison, so I advise you to come without making a scene that would only draw down upon you a lot of public ridicule."

Looking round, Brent saw that he and those with him were surrounded by a jostling crowd of intensely interested spectators, and he not only realised the truth of the words spoken by the detective, but also how futile any attempt at resistance and escape would be.

"You seem to be ignorant of the fact," he said, "that I am a British subject, and therefore you have no power over me."

The detective smiled mockingly.

"Had you remained at your hotel," he replied, "I could not have touched you, for it is in the British settlement. But here you are on Chinese soil, and amenable to Chinese law, and so there can be no question of my right to arrest you."

"But what law have I broken," Brent persisted, "and by whose authority do you arrest me and my friend?"

"Ming Yung sent the order for you both to be taken into custody," was the brusquely given reply. "That is all I can tell you. Come along! We are wasting time here."

As the Chinese detectives led them away, Brent turned his head and looked at Yen How with a bitter smile on his lips.

"Ming Yung again!" he said. "We might have guessed that he had warned his agents in Canton to be on the look-out for us. He never leaves anything to chance."

After traversing several streets of the city, the comrades were taken into a large and gloomy prison, where the unfortunate inmates were herded together in large cages, with iron bars in front, like cattle. This indignity Brent and Yen How were not subjected to. But the cell into which they were thrust was a dreadful hole, without ventilation of any sort, and the foul atmosphere was awful to breathe in.

Shut up in their prison, they despairingly resigned themselves to the worst. How long they sat in dejected silence they never knew, but at last the door opened, and their jailor, a stout, heavily-built Chinaman, with a villainous countenance, looked in on them.

After a brief scrutiny, he stepped inside the cell, closed the door behind him, and set down his lantern on the floor. Then, with a cunning smile at Brent, he showed the open palm of his hand for a moment.

"What does he want?" inquired Brent of his companion. "Ask him."

"He show you that he is ready to have his palm greased," replied Yen How, with a knowing grin, for he understood the meaning of the outstretched hand. "My talkee with him a little while."

He and the jailor conversed rapidly together in the Cantonese dialect for several minutes, and then Yen How communicated the drift of the conversation to Brent, who had found it rather difficult to follow.

"This fellow want plenty money," said Yen How, "and then he say he let us go. He think more better for you to pay up, because he has heard that to-morrow we both have our heads chopped off. My think he speak true."

"How much money does he want?"

"Three hundred Mexican dollars," Yen How replied. "Two hundred for you, and one hundred for me. My tell him that too much, but he make answer that he either get that or nothing at all, and then off will come our heads!"

"There are your three hundred dollars," said Brent. "Now it's for you to make good your offer, and when you've done so I'll add another fifty to the sum."

The eyes of the jailor glittered with delighted avarice. Saying something to Yen How, he noiselessly left the cell, returning a few minutes afterwards with a large screwdriver. Winking solemnly at Brent, he at once proceeded to loosen the screws of the old and rusty lock-plates on the cell door, and soon the plates were loose enough to remove.

"Ha, ha!" laughed Brent, shaking his sides with mirth. "This is the craftiest piece of business I've heard about for a long time. You tell your friend, Yen How, that he's a dashed clever chap, and that I'll never forget him."

Upon these words being interpreted to the jailor, he beamed with pride and delight until his face presented a more villainous aspect than ever. Then, extinguishing the light of his lantern, he whispered to the comrades to follow him.

By a roundabout way he conducted them beyond the confines of the prison, accepted the extra fifty dollars that Brent handed to him, and then turned on his heel and vanished.

Almost unable to realise their amazing fortune, the comrades hastened back to their hotel. They did not sleep much, and were up before daybreak, realising that Canton had grown too hot to hold them. Going down to the harbour, they booked their passage on a paddle-steamer to a town two hundred miles farther down the coast.

During the voyage, not wishing to attract undue notice, they remained most of the time in their cabin. They reached their destination in the middle of the night, and went ashore at once. At a village outside the town, Brent engaged the services of a guide and a couple of saddle-mules, strong, sturdy animals, capable of travelling great distances at a uniform speed that would wear down the fastest horse in time.

For three days the little company were crossing a wild and savage country. Narrow passes led through mountains thousands of feet in height, and frequently the path followed by the surefooted mules ran along the edge of some terrible gorge whose rocky bed no human eye had ever looked upon.

One night, drawing rein in a vast amphitheatre that Nature had fashioned out of the solid rocks, the travellers looked up the soaring slope of the mountain ahead of them to where a brilliant light shone with almost dazzling radiance.

"Where does that light come from?" asked Brent.

"The Tower of Silence," answered the guide. "This is where I must leave you."

(Another grand long instalment of this fine serial story next Wednesday. Order your copy early.)

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 403.

A Cash Prize for Every Contributor to this Page.

Our Weekly Prize Page.

LOOK OUT FOR YOUR WINNING STORYETTE.

A USEFUL CONTRIVANCE.

Binks: "I was in the theatre last night, and when I came out I found my diamond scarf-pin had been stolen."

Inspector: "How can it be identified, sir?"

Binks: "It had a patent thief-safety-chain attachment."—Sent in by R. H. Johnson, Hillsboro', Sheffield.

ANOTHER ATROCITY.

Her son was going to the front, and she was, therefore, filled with pride as she harangued a knot of friends in the village street.

"Garge always did his duty by me, he has, and now he's going to do his duty by his King and country," she said. "I feel right-down sorry for them poor Germans when I think of him going into battle with his rifle in his hand, and 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary' on his lips!"

"Poor Germans, indeed!" exclaimed one of her friends. "Pity's wasted on them. Perhaps you haven't heard of their cruelties?"

"And perhaps you haven't heard Garge sing!" was the startling reply.—Sent in by I. M. Cameron, Herne Bay, Kent.

LOWERED HIS PRIDE.

"What a fine head your boy has!" said the admiring friend.

"Yes," said the proud father. "He's a chip of the old block—ain't you, my boy?"

"Yes, father," innocently replied the youngster. "Teacher said yesterday that I was a young blockhead!"—Sent in by E. Hoare, Southsea.

A GROSS INJUSTICE.

"Oh, no," soliloquised little Johnny bitterly, "there ain't any favourites in this house—oh, dear, no! If I bite my finger-nails, I get a rap over the knuckles; but if the baby eats his whole foot, they think it's cute!"—Sent in by Miss G. Boden, Silverdale, Lancs.

A SMART CATCH.

"You're wanted round the corner, mister!" said the innocent-looking youngster to P.-c. 01. "There's about a dozen men trying to burst open the jeweller's shop. One's breaking it open with a big chopper, and——"

"Chopper?" gasped the arm of the law, as he clung to the lamp-post and tried hard to steady his trembling knees. "D-did you say ch-chopper, my lad?"

"Yes, mister; and they've broken the shop window, and are taking out all the clocks and watches, and——"

"Enough!" cried Robert. "You shall be rewarded for this, my son. Run and fetch some more policemen to my assistance, and we'll capture the whole gang!"

The urchin ran down the street until he had placed several yards between himself and the gallant policeman, and then he turned and shouted:

"Yah, old bluebottle! Why don't you go and help the firemen put the fire out?"—Sent in by F. Bartrup, Bow, E.

EFFICIENCY.

An English tourist, travelling in Germany before the war, was much impressed by what he saw of the German Army manœuvres.

As he was watching some evolutions the axle of a motor ambulance broke. Instantly the men in charge leaped out, ran into the village near by, returned with a new axle, and fixed it in place of the broken one.

"There's efficiency!" said the tourist to his friends. "There's German efficiency for you!"

The tourist, however, was not so favourably impressed when he returned to his hotel in the village and found the axle of his own car was missing.—Sent in by Robert Strang, Edinburgh.

SOLD!

Officer (to new servant): "Well, Dooley, did you get those boots soled for me this morning?"

Private Dooley (producing a few coppers): "Yes, sir; and a mighty fine bargain they've got, too. This is all I could get for them!"—Sent in by S. Sykes, Dewsbury.

A "CLASSICAL" OCCUPATION.

Magistrate: "What is your occupation? I mean—what do you do for a living?"

Prisoner (loftily): "Oh, I'm engaged in antiquarian research!"

Magistrate (somewhat impressed): "Indeed! What particular branch?"

Prisoner: "Oh—er—er—of course, if you must know—the rag-and-bone line!"—Sent in by H. W. Walker, Streatham, S.W.

AND HE WAS.

"Smart Boy Wanted," was the notice that hung outside the busy warehouse.

It hadn't been there for long before a little fellow, red-headed and freckled, calmly lifted it down and walked inside.

"Did you hang this outside, sir?" he asked the manager.

"Yes," was the stern reply. "What did you pull it down for?"

The boy looked at him for a few moments, pity for the man's ignorance plainly expressed on his face. Then he spoke, and his answer was short, but to the point:

"Because I'm him!"—Sent in by P. Richmond, Evesham.

TOO WELL KNOWN.

A cantankerous old gentleman advertised for a coachman, but failed to get an answer.

"I cannot understand it at all," he said, a week or two later, to an acquaintance.

"You advertised for a man who was well acquainted with the neighbourhood, didn't you?" asked his friend.

"Yes," assented the cantankerous one.

"That accounts for it," asserted the other. "Anyone who knew the neighbourhood would be sure to know you, too!"—Sent in by A. Mallett, Toronto, Canada.

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.

THIS WEEK'S CHAT

Whom to Write to — — — — —

EDITOR "THE GEM" LIBRARY.
THE FLEETWAY HOUSE, FARRINGDON ST. LONDON, E.C.

OUR ·· THREE ·· COMPANION ·· PAPERS!

"THE MAGNET" LIBRARY — EVERY MONDAY
THE "PENNY POPULAR" — EVERY FRIDAY.
CHUCKLES. — ½d. — EVERY SATURDAY.

For Next Wednesday:

"GUSSY AND THE GIRL!"
By Martin Clifford.

From the expressive title of next Wednesday's grand, long, complete story of the stalwarts of St. Jim's, it will be gathered that the great Augustus once again loses his heart to a member of the fair sex. Indeed, so infatuated does the noble aristocrat become with a young lady porter from a local store, that he neglects footer and everything else in order to favour the fair damsel with his attentions, besides blossoming forth into poetry. Needless to say, D'Arcy's schoolfellows are determined to keep a fatherly eye upon him, lest he should contemplate elopement or something equally silly; and at length that wonderful schoolboy impersonator, Kerr of the New House, carries out a gigantic "jape" which effectively severs the existing attachment between

"GUSSY AND THE GIRL!"

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 15th.
An Epoch in Our History.

On the above date, Number One of that grand little schoolboy journal, "The Greyfriars Herald," price one halfpenny, will definitely appear, to be followed in due course by its companion paper, "Tom Merry's Weekly."

The success of the latter magazine depends solely upon the reception which my chums accord the "Herald." If they will only back it up might and main, "Tom Merry's Weekly" will speedily become an established fact; if not—well, the issue is too terrible to contemplate.

For the ridiculously low price of one halfpenny, a feast of good things in provided in "The Greyfriars Herald," and every British boy and girl should make a special point of becoming a reader from Number One. Hustle around then, Gemites, and spread the good news far and wide; so that when "The Greyfriars Herald," Number One, makes its appearance, it will also make its disappearance in record time into the homes of thousands and thousands of my vast vanguard of loyal reader chums.

A SECOND-LIEUTENANT SPEAKS OUT.
"Wholesome as Any Six-Shilling Boys' Book!"

I have received such a host of splendid letters recently from all over the world that I could fill an issue of the "Gem" with them, and still have a tremendous overflow. The following is a typical spontaneous letter of approval from a second-lieutenant in the British Army:

"Nottingham.

"Dear Mr. Editor,—When a boy, I was a constant reader of the 'Gem' Library, taking it in from number one, until a day came when I was called abroad to take up my apprenticeship with a firm in Holland. Naturally, I was unable to get my favourite paper week by week over there, but some kind friends sent it to me at periods, and I followed with relish the doings of Tom Merry & Co. Now I have returned, and am holding a commission in his Majesty's Army. Last week, being taken seriously ill, I called for my old friend the 'Gem,' and heartily appreciated 'Mason's Last Match.'

"Now, you may wonder why I am writing to you, so I may say in explanation that I was annoyed to read of the poor creatures who, utterly lacking in decency and tact, had written letters running down the 'Gem.' In my belief, your delightful paper is as well-written and wholesome as any six-shilling boys' book by the foremost author; and if I am spared I shall, after my duty is done, be pleased for my own offspring to delight in your splendid book.

"Should you care to make use of this letter, you may.

"With best wishes for the success of the 'Gem' Library and 'Tom Merry's Weekly,' your new venture.—I remain, yours sincerely, E. H. G. (Second-Lieutenant)."

"INDIGNANT" BECOMES "REPENTANT."

The following expression of apology has come to hand from one of the boys who abused the "Gem" Library in the past:

"Highbury.

"Dear Editor,—Last time I wrote to you I used slanderous words against the 'Gem' Library and its Editor, but I am writing this time to tell you what a cad I think I was to do such a thing. I don't know how to make up for my rotten, caddish behaviour, so will you please let me know on the 'Gem' Chat page what I had better do?

"I signed myself in my last caddish letter 'Indignant.' I should like this letter published in the 'Gem,' because I should like people to know that I feel such a cad.—I remain, yours sincerely, 'REPENTANT.'"

My advice to "Repentant" is short and simple. If he wishes to undo the harm he has done, he should set himself out to secure as many new readers of the 'Gem' as possible. I would repeat to him the words of Shelley: "Do not look on what you have done in the past to harm, but on what you can now do to help." I am heartily glad "Repentant" has written, for it would grieve me to feel that he was a boy of the Malpas breed, that made Old England's shame.

THE FALSE AND THE TRUE.

Speaking of Master W. Malpas, I am reminded to mention to my readers, particularly those living in and around Oxford, that Master W. Malpass—two s's, you'll notice—is *not* the fellow who has slandered the "Gem." The boy with the extra "s" to his name, who resides at 11, Alfred Terrace, Chipping Norton, has been rendered uncomfortable by the attitude of some of his immediate neighbours. This is not as it should be, for Master Malpass is one of my most loyal readers. Take notice then, Oxonians and others, that W. Malpass plays the game, and W. Malpas doesn't—unless it's hop-skotch or marbles!

OUR ROLL OF DISHONOUR.
Further Additions to the List of Libellers.

JOHN MOORE (President of Belfast Anti-Gem League),
WILLIAM CRAIG (London, E.),
W. MELVIN (Tottenham),
W. SAUNDERS (Rotherham),
L. PINN (Manchester),
L. STOUT (Wolverhampton),
J. DAVIES (Paddington).

REPLIES IN BRIEF.

Maurice Smith (Leiston).—Many thanks for your loyal letter. You have doubtless seen my comments on the Cherry-Merry encounter.

C. A. S. D. (Southsea).—Redfern of the New House is the only Southsea character at St. Jim's. Thanks for helping to jump on Master Malpas. There won't be much of that youth left soon, I'm thinking.

(*Continued on page iii of cover.*)

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A ... E FOR LOYAL GEMITES.

... of late that I am quite unable to reply to my numerous friends save ... are they will understand the position, and grant me their indulgence.
YOUR EDITOR.

by the f...

"A Bush... (Bushey).
A. L. R. (Devon).
"A Telegraph Messenger" (Birmingham).
"A Loyal Girl Gemite" (Sheffield).
"A Gemite."
"A Constant Girl Reader" (Sussex).
"A Constant and Staunch Reader."
"An Italian Reader."
"A Toronto Girl Reader" (Toronto).
"An Irish Chum" (Wilts).
"A Dumfriesian."

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"A Scotch Reader" (...
"A Friendly Faultfinder" (Greenwich).

Buffham, H. (Lincoln).
"Bournemouth Chum."
Bernard (Northampton).
Banks, R. D. (Canada).
Barrell, Mervyn (Bristol).
Blakeway, Ross (South Africa).
Beament, W. (South Africa).
"Billie" (Birmingham).
Bernstein, Bernard (Merthyr).
Buck, A. H. (Catford).
B. I. (Croydon).
Burridge, Alfred (South Australia).
"Blue Eyes" (Montreal).
B. B. (N.S.W., Australia).
Burton, K. (Portsmouth).
Brett, Arthur (Spalding).
Buchanan, Roy G. (Huddersfield).
B. S. and A. E. (Lowestoft).

C. B.
"Constant Reader."
Costley, J. (Gateshead-on-Tyne).
Cheshire, W. (Birmingham).
Collis, Bert (Highbury, London).
"Catnik" and "Bibunk" (Canada).
"Cadet" (Hampstead).
Crowther, T. (Birmingham).
"Cymru" (Cardiff).
C. A. P. (Bushey).
"Chatterbox" (Rothesay).
Croft, W. (Birmingham).
C. R. (Yorkshire).

Dakeyne, Harry (Trent).
Davis, George (Kent).
Douglas, Harry (Sheffield).
Drysdale, A.
Dove, L. (Clapham Junction).
Day, Ernest (Sheffield).
Dribbin, H. (Manchester).
Darnell, W. (Essex).
Driver, Ernest A. (Lambeth).
Dickin, G. (Bucks).
Dickins, L. D. (Sheffield).
D. V. A.
Donde, Maurice (London).

E. V. H. (Copnor).
E. E. (Luton).

Fleming, A. J. (Bournemouth).
"Figgy" (Swadlincote).
Finbow, S. G. (Canada).
Fazakerley, Annie (Lancaster).
"Fair Play" (Manchester).
Frank (Pudsey).

Green, N. F. (Oxon).
Green, B. (Surrey).
Gorst, J. (Notts).
G. B. (Portsmouth).
Griffiths, Thomas (Tamworth).
G. C. A. B. (Birmingham).
"General Stiff" (Wallop).
Grover, T. (Brighton).
Greenhall, Cecil (Burnley).
"Glibe."
"'Gem' and 'Magnet.'" (Birmingham).
G. M. (Cheshire).
G. W. N. (Sydney).
G. A. J. (Stoke-on-Trent).
Humphries, Henry (Balham).
Harrison, J. (Manchester).
Hayward, Rhoda (Surrey).
Hasler, F. (Romford).
Hutchin, J. (Cardiff).
Hart, J. (Manchester).
Hughes, Samuel (Birmingham).
Hobbs, W. (Cardiff).
H. J. L. (Brighton).
Herman, J. (South Africa).
"Hopefull" (Southport).
Hobell, W. (Leicester).
"Heliotrope."
Hammond (Walworth).
"Half Italian."
Haynes, L. J. (Cheshire).

I. J. K. (Somerset).
Insley, H. (Smethwick).

James, E. W. (Southsea).
Jacobs, W.
J. F. (Surrey).
Jayne, Price J. (Surrey).
Johnson, Robert H. (Sheffield).
King, Harold (Essex).
"Kentish Gemite."
Kit, Crosby (Manchester).
"K. N." (London).
Kendow (Berkshire).
Kenyon, William (Great Harwood).
"Kiddy" (Folkestone).
Kelly, Desmond (Dublin).
Kogg, S.
Kelly, A. (near Liverpool).
Kemp, W. G.

Lee, Cyril (Yorkshire).
Linsley, A. E. (Yorkshire).
Leader, S. B. (Poplar).
L. S. T. (Bristol).
Lacock, Maynard (South Africa).
"Loyal Reader" (Hull).
Lyons, Ronald (Forest Gate).
"Loyal Girl Chum" (Usk).
Lawler, A. Winnifride (Birkenhead).
Lovell, Olive (Manchester).
Lidyard, H. (Bristol).
L. F. R. (Hants).

Moller, Freda (Liverpool).
Muscatt, Henry (Belfast).
Malcolm, Alex. (Townhill).
Morris, B. (Birmingham).
"Mollie" (Middlesex).
M. C. and F. W. (Leeds).
Murray, Archie (Canada).
McCracken, G. (Dublin).
Mason, S. (Manchester).
"Merry" (Edinburgh).
Mell, R. (Leicestershire).
Moore, G. M. (Manor Park).
McGeorge, J. (Edinburgh).
Moorman, E. (Lechdale).
McCoy, J. (Liverpool).
Magee, J. (Ireland).
"Monty Lowther" (Darlington).
Moore, E. F., & Co. (Wigan).
M. E. E. (Bolton).
Morris, G. (Liverpool).
Michel, Harold (Portsmouth).
Marriott, W. (Yorkshire).
Matthews, G. W. (Australia).
Marlin, H. (Australia).
Mitchell, R., & Co. (Limerick).
Matthews, Ernest.
Murray, J.
Mills, E. G. (Cornwall).
May, L. F. (B.E.F., France).
"Micky" (Essex).
M. V. J. R. (Holy Lock).
Martin, F. (Kingston).
Murphy, H. P.
"Mustard."
Matthews, Robert (Cosham).
McNamara, Edith (South Africa).
Mitchell, T. (N. London).
Moore, Nora (Douglas).
McF. (Ireland).
Margan, A. (Shepherd's Bush).
Marshall, Joan (King's Lynn).
Mair, S. (Aberfoyle).
Murray, J. (Liverpool).
McDonald, H. (Sunderland).

Northam, N. (New Cross).
"Nada the Schoolgirl" (Manchester).
Norton (Brighton).
Norris, G. (Kennington).
Newberry, Lance-Cpl. B. (Tavistock).
Nelson (Lancashire).
Neale, H. (Camberwell).
Newton, W. (Leeds).
Nash, Charles (London).
Norton, Frederick (Forest Hill).
"Naughty Lass."
"New Zealand" (Northcote).
Nors, Leslie (Sunderland).

Olds, Reginald (Bristol).
Owen, Robert (California).
"One of Your Staunch Readers."
Olive (Shepherd's Bush).
Ossett, B. L. E. (Yorkshire).
Owen, Margaret (Birmingham).
"One Among Many" (Yorkshire).
"Obedient Reader" (Swindon).
Owens, D. (South Wales).
O'Donoghue, Kathleen.
"Old Boy."
"Oxoudou."

Pearce, Violet (Chatham).
Parkes, Albert (Worcester).
Phillips, William (Mile End).
"Prefer the Old Firm" (Mile End).
P. T. C. H. (West Hartlepool).
Pidgeon, Dorothy (Surrey).

(Continued on page iv. of cover.)

"PaLa" (Glasgow).
"Porky" (Surrey).
Pritchard, S. (Binley).
P. C. W. (New Southgate).
Porter, B. (Lower Edmonton).
Phillips, Violet (Southampton).
Purvis, Jas. (North Shields).
Perry, J., and Pratt, J. (co. Cavan).
Purkiss, F. J. (Mill Hill).
P. C. H. (Plumstead).
Private, 2253 (Aberdeen).
Parsons, Louie (Brighton).
P. P. P. (Dumfriesshire).
Poole, Arthur (Bristol).
P. W. (Chester).
Pimlott and Fyans (Miles Platting).
Place, Ralph (Yorkshire).
Pearson, H. (Australia).
Perry, E. (London).

Quinn, John (Glasgow).
Quinn, Nellie (Staffs).

Russell, Harry (Wishaw).
Roberts, Ada (Burnley).
Robertson, C. D. (Kilmagolm).
Robb, Joan (Holland Park).
Robert, Harry (Liverpool).
Rosman, E. L. (Leyton).
Ramsay, F. (Kent).
Rose, L. E. (Kensal Rise).
R. R. (Glasgow).
Rummell, E. (Duke of Cambridge's Own, 5th Middlesex).
"Rolo" (Barr Lane Stanley).
Roux, E.
Raylings, R. (Montreal).
Riley, Harry (Nottingham).
Roberts, A. (Northampton).
"Rex" (near Wakefield).
R. W. R. (Hitchin).
Richards, M. (Sydney).
Roberts, Gladys (Malvern).
Rowan, Edward (Yorks).
Robinson, May (Burnley).
Rogers, Arthur (West End Lane).
Ross, Peggy (Croydon).
Roberts, Ada (Burnley).
Roberts, G. (London).
Roberts, Leonard (Manchester).
R. E. (London).
Robison, S. (South Shields).
Robinson, W. (South Australia).
R. G. A.
Riddle, A. (N.S.W., Australia).
"Reub" and "Mafo" (Berkshire)
Rex, Renee.

Smythe, Jack (Auckland).
Smith, Owen, and Chum (London).
Studholme, Marie (Parkgate).
"Salopian" (Manchester).
Screase, Eric L. (Croydon).
"Sea Scout."
Sayle, George (Blackheath).
Strickland, Clarence (Montreal).
Staines, H. T. (near Preston).
Smets, F.
Sufficet, S. B. (Worthing).
Stuart, F. (Dalston).
Sutton, J. A. H. (Ashby-de-la-Zouche).
S. T. R. N.
Shepherd, H. (Paisley).
S. L. M. (Manchester).
Stanley, C. (France).
"Satisfied Reader" (Shepshed).
"Soulier" (Chelsea).
"Shamrock" (Ireland).
"Schoolgirl" (Blackheath).
S. M. (Swansea).
"Snowy" (Sydney).
Shepherd, D. (Paisley).
Smith, Farrant (Brockley).
Steels, Norman (Doncaster).
"Snooks" (Manchester).
Surry, Stanley (Melbourne).
Spencer, Pte. E. V. (British Expeditionary Force).
Struck, H. (Sydney).
Skinner, S. (Dulwich).
Syms, F. L., and Chum (Southampton).
S. C. O. (Sydney).
Short.

Soer, C. D.
Spencer, May (Ealing).
Shaw, Neel (Sheffield).
Stone, M. (Dorchester).
Scott, J. (Liverpool).
Stevens, Robert.
Swinton, Eric (Duned[illegible]
Spencer, C[illegible] Charles (Cam[illegible]
Smith, L. (Walthamstow).
"Son of a Gordon Highlander."
Shakespeare, Henry (St. Albans).
S. G. F. (Hull).
Stone, G. (Lower Edmonton).
Stetson, W. (Paddington).
Sargent, Ethel (Nottingham).
Stratton, A. M. (Glasgow).
Stewart, Robert (Australia).

Taylor, Private P. ([illegible]).
T. T. (Normandy).
"Two Gemite Chums" ([illegible]mouth).
"Taffy."
"Two Girl Chums" ([illegible]).
T. C. (Glasgow).
T. G. V. (Greenwich).
"Three Legs of Man" ([illegible]).
"Two Tomboys" ([illegible]).
"Two Chums" (Bar[illegible]).
"Two Admirers" (S[illegible]).
Thompson, Charles ([illegible]).
"Two Regular Reade[illegible] (Surrey).
"Two Bookworms" ([illegible]).
"Two Disgusted West [illegible] Readers."
"Two Loyal Dublin [illegible]ders."
"Two Loyal Readers."
Tanzar, Barnett (Whi[illegible]).
"Two Loyal Gemites" ([illegible]).

Up